

THE VOSGES MOUNTAINS

(Bruyeres, Biffontaine, Lost Battalion)

Welcome to the war in France. And what a welcome it was. The Vosges Mountains are a series of hills covered with evergreen trees, most eight to twelve inches in diameter. There were trails weaving through most of the forests and roads traversing some.

It was October and beginning to get chilly, and much of the time it rained or drizzled. Much of the time, also, we were uninformed, at least at the rifleman level, of our specific mission and exactly where we were in relation to the rest of the unit and the enemy. Squad leaders guided us as best they could under the circumstances.

The squad leaders were normally sergeants, but because of the high rate of turnover resulting from casualties, squads were often led by PFC's. Similarly, at all levels within the company, those of lower rank temporarily had to take over. Being about the youngest at nineteen and not particularly wanting the responsibility, I was content to let others lead.

When the 100th moved into the thick forest on the first day of action in France, Company A was in reserve, out of harm's way. When we were committed, we moved into position, encountered some artillery fire, pulled back some to get out of it, and started to dig in.

It was late afternoon when artillery again hit our platoon. Shell after shell screamed in, some hitting the trees and bursting above us. I wondered if I should simply move out away from the shelling, but shells were landing all around. It is times like this that one gets religious and prays for safety. To say it is frightening doesn't describe it enough. You have to fight for control that you don't panic or shet in your pants. You hug the ground in your hole and try to make yourself a smaller target.

All kinds of thoughts go through your head. "I volunteered for this? No wonder they said it was stupid. I hope the damn shelling stops. We sure picked the wrong place. I hope the next one lands somewhere else. I wish I was somewhere else. I wonder if anybody got it."

The close ones make you cringe and you feel the spray of dirt and debris. You smell the burned powder. "Acrid" is the word usually used to describe it. You don't see the flashes of the explosions because you're head down in your hole or slit trench. And the piercing sound of each shell as it screams in just adds to your terror.

Though it seemed much longer, it was probably just a few minutes. It's over for now, and I'm okay. (Lucky Number 7.)

I looked up and saw Ko Fukuda, the platoon sergeant, at the next hole. He seemed to be helping someone who was hit, so I went over to help him. He says, "I'm hit, too!"

At that, I noticed that he was bleeding from his right shoulder. I put a bandage on his wound as best I could, and all the time he was bandaging the other fellow. There is similar activity all around and the medics are busy. As soon as we can, we clear out to another area.

This was our first day on the line in France, and although I never knew the exact count, about half the platoon was wounded in that barrage, close to twenty men. I didn't know if any were killed. With the replacements we had been getting, we had been almost up to full strength. Such as it was, I hadn't gotten to know any of them. For some of the wounded, it was their first day on the line.

We are walking through the forest, sometimes on trails, sometimes on roads. What's left of a small automobile lies flattened on the road. One or more tanks must have run over it. Much of the time we are just moving, not actually on the attack.

At night sometimes you can see a light here and there in the valley below, maybe even hear voices echoing up, but we don't even think of shooting. For one thing, we don't know how far away the light actually is; there are too many trees in between, anyway. And shooting might only give away our position and draw artillery fire. But we try to relax and get some sleep, taking turns doing guard duty in one or two-hour shifts. The ground in your slit trench is damp and cold, but you try to get as comfortable as you can, lying down bundled up in your jacket, a blanket, or sleeping bag, rifle nearby.

Every night the supply guys bring up C or K rations and water, ammo for those who need it. Sometimes they even manage to bring up a hot meal and coffee, a real treat. If you need to take a crap, you just dig a hole, squat and do your business, and cover it up. If you're going to smoke, you make real sure the flame is shielded when you light up, and you cup your hands over the cigarette when you draw on it so that the glow does not reveal your position or presence.

After that artillery barrage on the first day, the one that reduced our platoon to half strength, I am one of the remaining "old-timers" and am now one of the squad leaders. As such, I have inherited a Tommy gun, actually a 45-caliber Thompson submachine gun similar to those used by Prohibition-era gangsters in the movies, as my weapon. Some previous user had removed the butt stock or handle, a common practice to make it lighter and easier to carry. The downside was that this also made it more difficult to control and hence much more inaccurate to shoot, as I was to find later.

Between the forested hills there were open fields of various widths. As we came down a hillside, there was a burst of Jerry machine gun fire to one side.

In this terrain you were always on edge because the forest and undergrowth cut visibility and you never knew when or from where you might get shot at. Even if you are not being shot at directly, machine gun fire from close by is also terrifying. The sharp crack of small arms fire is very scaring in the confined, forested setting, as the sound is amplified. I sometimes wonder which is worse: facing an artillery barrage or machine gun fire from directly in front.

Fear is a constant companion. Sometimes you are more frightened than at other times. Strangely, too, sometimes you don't really realize you were scared until later. I suppose, as they say in the Army, it depends on the situation and the terrain.

It stood to reason that Jerries would be somewhere near the base of the opposite hill, waiting to cut down anyone venturing into the open space between. The usual strategy, when fired upon by machine guns, was to try and spot where it was coming from and to call in support fire from artilleries, mortars, or tanks, whichever was available.

This time, at least for us, there was no further fire from across, and we crossed the open space and into the woods of the next hill. What was happening with other companies we didn't know. We do know there has been fighting.

We are now walking through the town of Bruyeres. Others in the 442nd have liberated it, and we were just passing through on the way to another forested hill. The street we are on appears deserted. At least we do not see any townspeople anywhere. There is some damage, but it's nothing compared to Anzio.

As we get to the base of a wooded hill about a half mile or so past the town, there is some commotion ahead. Soon I could hear someone crying, crying very loudly, "Mama!Mama!"

We walked up to a foxhole where the crying was coming from and found a Jerry soldier, a young boy whom I guessed was no more than fifteen. Also squatting in the hole, rifle held between his knees, head facing down and trembling in fright, was an elderly man of about sixty. He was so stiff with fear that it was difficult to pull him out of the hole.

At the top of the hill, one of our guys, bleeding from a head wound but on his feet and walking, was being escorted back. We formed a skirmish line, a couple of yards between men, and started down the hill.

Shortly the lieutenant, Richard Hamasaki, on my left, says,

"Jerries. You see the Jerries on the trail about thirty yards in front?"

I looked, saw the line of Jerries walking in single file, and nodded.

"Pass the word along! Get ready!"

Spud Munemori was on my right and I turned towards him,

"Spud, Jerries, right in front about thirty yards. Pass the word."

He hears me, but,

"Where? Where?"

And I pointed. Then I looked back toward the Jerries and saw the last one in line kneeling, rifle shouldered and aimed at me! In a flash the thought goes through my mind,

"I'm going to get shot!"

At the same time, instinctively, I dove behind a tree. It was downhill, so as soon as I hit the ground behind the tree, the momentum tilted my helmet forward over my eyes such that momentarily I could not see ahead.

There is no shot. (Lucky Number 8.)

The other guys were still walking ahead, and I thought,

"Shet, I can't stay down if the others are up!"

So I got up, still half thinking I might get shot, but there was no shooting from them or us. When I hit the ground, the Jerry that had a bead on me must have alerted his buddies and they had all taken off.

What looked like a roadway girdling the hillside appeared a little further down. The lieutenant stopped us there. There was a drainage swale-like depression at the end of the road where it then dropped off ten feet or so. I dropped into the depression and peered into the woods below. Again about thirty yards below, I spotted a group of five or six Jerries standing just to one side of a foxhole. I don't remember if I told the lieutenant or not. I think I did.

Since I knew my Tommy gun wasn't very accurate, I called Spud, who had a BAR, to join me and pointed out the Jerries to him. They had not seen us. We both lined up our weapons and I aimed, saying,

"Shoot when you're ready!"

We both fired at about the same time and kept firing. In no time our quarry was gone. I couldn't tell if we got any of them. I could see white nicks appearing on the trees in front of us as bullets hit them. There were no bodies lying on the ground, and I wondered,

"We couldn't have missed them all! I wonder if any fell into the hole."

I was thinking that maybe we should have someone pump a rifle grenade into the hole when the lieutenant said,

"Okay, you two damn fools. Come back here before you get shot. We got to move out."

So we never got to know if we had gotten any of them.

As it turned out, that was the only time all through the war that I had a clear shot at Jerries. If I had had a rifle instead of a buttless Tommy gun -- oh, well!

I was not one of those to whom things happened, and in retrospect, I'm glad I wasn't. Some guys had many opportunities to kill Jerries, others little or none. When I was on a patrol or when it was our turn to be in front, most of the time nothing happened. Despite the attacks and counterattacks in the various battles, our squad was rarely involved directly in pitched battles with the enemy.

What the circumstances were I do not recall, but a half dozen of us, led by an officer, were walking on a trail through the forest. I was not especially concerned because it was a little before the front lines. The lieutenant, in the lead, spotted a Jerry walking toward us on the same trail. On his signal we took cover behind the trees and underbrush alongside the trail. As the Jerry, walking slowly, came abreast of us, we simply stepped out and had a prisoner whom we disarmed.

Later, back with the platoon, we moved down from the forest to the edge of the open space ahead. C Company had already entered and occupied some of the houses in the very small town of Biffontaine. Part of the platoon moved into a house near the edge of the forest. Our squad was posted about a hundred yards further along a path that curved back into the forest. We were to guard against any counterattack from this direction and started to dig in. Some previous action must have occurred at this particular spot because we recovered a couple of Jerry rifles there. One of the rifles looked quite different. It appeared to be a semiauto, something we were not aware they had.

Just at dusk, mortar shells rustled in on our position. Artillery shells will scream and screech in. Mortar shells come in much more quietly. As we lay in our holes, an antiaircraft gun firing some tracers also opened fire over our position. I stayed down in my slit trench as the tracers lighted up the area in alternating flashes. Mortar shells were still coming in, also, and I wondered if this was the prelude to a counterattack by infantry. When the mortar and cannon fire let up, I heard a cry of,

"Medic, medic!"

That was Victor Akimoto in the next hole! I scurried over to him and was getting a bandage ready when a mortar shell landed a few yards away. Even though I wasn't looking in that direction, I saw the flash of the explosion. Dirt and debris hit me, but that was all. I wasn't hurt. (Lucky Number 9.) There was no sign of Jerries approaching, and others came to help me and we got Victor out of there and into the farmhouse. There were no further incidents during the night.

The next morning we watched as a number of wounded, some walking on their own, others, like Victor Akimoto, carried on stretchers by German prisoners of war, set out for the rear. Shortly afterward we heard that in the forest, they had been surrounded and captured by the Germans, except for the last two, who saw what was happening ahead and escaped into the woods. One of these was a medic whom I was to meet up with a few days later.

Sadly, we heard some time later that Victor Akimoto had died in a German hospital. He was a likable kotonk, a real quality guy. Word was that he had been a sergeant in another outfit but had been busted from rank for telling someone off and had joined the 100th.

Back in the farmhouse near Biffontaine, three of us were drinking coffee when a mortar shell hit very close to the doorway. Dave Nagao, who was most in line with the doorway, was wounded through his hand and in his side. As we were trying to help him, he asked if he was going to die. We assured him that he would be all right. The other two of us were unscathed. (Lucky Number 10.)

All through the war, the medics, as the first aid men were called, did a super job, often moving up and risking getting shot or wounded themselves to help

anyone who had been hit. There was a white circle with a red cross painted on their helmets, and they also wore white arm bands with a red cross to identify themselves as noncombatants. They carried no arms, only first aid supplies. They were real heroes!

Days and nights blended one into the other, and it is difficult to remember what we were doing much of the time. We were either in position watching for enemy attack, probing the front a little, or simply moving to the front or to the rear.

Word came down that we were being relieved to get some rest from front line duty, and we moved back some distance to an area called Belmont.

Oddly, while I remember some names and faces, except for those few, I don't recall my companions much of the time in the Vosges. Even for the short time that I was the squad leader, I only remember the few.

One of those I remember well was Spud Munemori. When the rest was cut short and the battalion was ordered back into the lines tomorrow to go to the aid of a 36th Division battalion that had been cut off and isolated, he came to me and said,

"I'm not going back up! I don't care what they do to me, I'm not going back up!"

Somewhat surprised and not really knowing what to say, I let him talk it out.

Very early the next morning, we gathered our stuff in the dark, assembled, and set off. It was so dark that we had one hand on the pack of the man in front to keep the line intact until visibility improved. As if nothing had been said the night before, Spud was right there in line with the rest of us, much to my relief.

We had moved up the road and into the front and by early evening had dug in for the night. Where we got them I don't recall, but we used small logs to cover our slit trenches to give us added protection from tree bursts, i.e., shells hitting and exploding in the trees.

Mortar shells started landing and we headed for our holes. I was on my hands and knees and was just about to crawl into my partially log-covered slit trench when a shell exploded close behind me and somebody hit me with a sledge hammer, or so I thought. The force of the hit knocked me into the hole face down. I knew I was hit. It was the worst pain that I had ever experienced. I thought my left leg had been blown off at the hip and I yelled out loud,

"Oh, no. Damn it! Damn it! God damn it! Damn it! Damn it!"

And I kept on cursing and pounding the ground with my hands in despair. The initial pain had now subsided, but I had to know. With my right leg I felt for my left one, and it was there. There was no feeling in it, but it was there, and I thought,

"It's fine, I still have my left leg. It wasn't blown off!"

About this time someone came to my aid; I don't know who. The shelling had stopped. They got me out of the hole and cut away the pants leg as I asked,

"How bad is it? How bad is it?"

I don't remember what they said, but I concluded I would be all right. And now I recognized Richard Chinen, the medic who escaped capture only a few days earlier, as one of those helping me.

The fellow who would now have to take over as squad leader kept saying something like,

"I don't know what to do!"

"Oh, you'll be all right. And can you hold this for me until I get back?"

It was the tiny pistol I had found in Italy, which I still carried. I guess I should have kept it with me because I found out later that he gave it to someone else to hold, and I never saw it again, not that it mattered much.

This was October 28, 1944. I was not there, of course, but two days later the 100th and the 442nd rescued "The Lost Battalion." The 36th Division presented the units with a plaque for this effort and each member received a postcard copy of the plaque.

There was also someone else who was wounded. We were put on stretchers secured over the hood of a jeep and evacuated without incident to a field hospital, then to another.

There were of course other wounded men. When they were ready to work on me, a nurse told me to count backwards from ten and gave me a shot of something. As I started the count, I could see one of the doctors wearing surgical gloves groping with his thumb and forefinger in the thigh wound of a patient on the next table. The wound was bloody and it made a slurping sound as the doctor felt for the bullet or shrapnel that caused the wound. I thought, "That's what they'll be doing with me, I guess." I hadn't counted but a few numbers before the anesthetic sedative put me out.

When I came out of it, the first thing I felt and said was,
"I'm hungry."

This before I opened my eyes. An attendant nearby brought me some sliced canned peaches. Delicious!

There was a bandage on the front of my left thigh and some kind of dressing on the original wound.

They had x-rayed the wounded area and determined that the best way to remove the piece of shrapnel was to operate from the front, as it had penetrated almost all the way through my thigh. It had entered from the lower part of my ass into the thigh. The doctor who came to check and replace the bandage a few days later said,

"You're a fortunate young man. The shrapnel chipped off a small piece of the hip bone but otherwise did not damage anything vital."

He showed me an x-ray film and pointed out the chipped part of the hip bone. He also gave me the piece of shrapnel, the size of a marble that they had taken out of my leg.

Yes, I had been wounded, but it was mostly a flesh wound, the kind that heals without complications. (Lucky Number 11.) One or two inches over one way and it would have hit my asshole or taken out my pecker and balls or some vital nerves or bones and left me crippled or handicapped. One of a soldier's worst fears, besides the fear of getting killed, is being hit in the head or face and being disfigured or getting hit in the sex organs and losing his manhood.

Some combat soldiers went through the whole war without ever being wounded and are considered to have been very lucky by the unknowing. But consider this: If they never got wounded, it also means that they went through every battle, that they were on the lines much longer than others, and this can be a very harrowing experience which is extremely stressful and hard on the nerves. For those who are wounded, depending on the severity, it could mean you're out of the war for good or for months or weeks, away from the wear and tear, the stress and strain, the fear and fatigue of being in combat.

For the several months that I was in the hospital and recuperating, I was never with any of our guys. I didn't know what was happening in the unit.

The Stars and Stripes, the overseas newspaper printed for GI's by the military, carried information about the progress of the war. It also carried Bill Mauldin's cartoons of Willie and Joe, who were revered by the front line troops.

Whether it was in the hospital or somewhere else, I don't know, but we did once in a while catch Axis Sally, the Nazis' propagandist, on the radio. We did not, however, catch the programs she directed at the 100th-442nd.

While being transported by train along with many other wounded from a field hospital to a convalescent one, we were visited by a strikingly beautiful blonde woman I recognized as Madeleine Carroll, the movie actress, some of whose movies I had seen. Because of the nature of my wound, I was lying on my stomach, and as she passed by she patted me and smiled,

"One of those, eh?"

She moved on before I could think to say anything. I knew that she was one of, if not the first, the big stars to give up Hollywood and volunteer to help with the wounded overseas.

At the convalescent hospital I was confined to bed for the first two weeks or so. Nurses on duty periodically helped us with sponge baths. Attendants brought urinals when you needed to take a piss. Remarkably, because of my wound near the asshole, nature temporarily shut down the bodily system such that I had no urge to take a crap for many, many days. I used to worry about how I was going to, but when finally I had to, the wound had sufficiently healed that it was not a problem. Since I was not yet able to get out of bed, a bedpan was brought, a screen provided, it took a while, and I guess I stunk up the place for a while.

When they finally uncovered my wounded leg, I was dismayed to see that it had atrophied to half the thickness of my other leg. I was concerned that it was a permanent condition. There was no pain and I could move by supporting myself on the bed. It wasn't long before I could walk around, and happily, the wounded leg was returning to normal size.