

317/G

1st Sgt Percy M. Smith

JANUARY 21, 1945

I saluted, "The men are assembled, sir." It was January 20, 1945.

Lieutenant Damkowitch glanced from a map he had been studying, "Are all platoons represented?" he asked.

"Yes sir."

Stubbly bearded platoon leaders, overcoat collars turned up, shuffled around in the shell torn barn. The farmhouse had been destroyed during the German blitz into Luxemburg. The barn offered scant protection from the biting wind.

"Men," said Lieutenant Damkowitch little puffs of vapor curling around his mouth, "Men, here's the 'big picture'." He held up the map and pointed, "Here we are in the open area. Over here is the hill. Beyond the hill is the town. That's our objective, the town. The Colonel is sending 'Easy' Company around the hill to attack on the flank. The balance of the 2nd Battalion, with 'Fox' Company leading will climb the hill and mount

a frontal attack." Lieutenant Damkowitch paused, "Any questions?"

The men shuffled around. One of the Platoon leaders spoke, "That hill, is there anything in the wooded area?"

Lieutenant Damkowitch held up an aerial photograph, "The observation plane dropped down close to get this. Two men in 'Fox' Company are former forest rangers. They've examined the photograph and agree the foliage has been disturbed. It may be a mine field. The two former forest rangers volunteered to guide the Battalion so there won't be a problem there."

A voice spoke, "What's the line of march, sir?"

"'Fox' Company will lead followed by Battalion, then 'George' and 'How' Companies. 'Easy' Company will flank the hill. They're to make a racket and create confusion, at the same time we'll attack from the hill."

"Thank goodness, we won't hit the mine field first," a voice murmured.

Lieutenant Damkowitch continued, "The Colonel says he doesn't expect any opposition. Just walk in and take the town. He's already ordered the kitchen train to bring hot chow as soon as we secure the town. No sweat."

"What's the name of the town, sir?"

"Derbach, or something that sounds like that."

Lieutenant Damkowitch looked around, "Men, that's it.

After 'Fox' and Battalion we'll follow. Okay? Dismissed."

At dusk the supply jeep brought up "K" rations, ammunition and a sack of mail. Several soldiers received delayed Christmas presents.

At 22:00 a jeep lumbered over snow drifts and rolled to a halt near "George" Company command post. Colonel Boyston climbed out. He dismissed the driver and announced that he would accompany the troops on foot. One of the traits that endeared him to the soldiers was that wherever he ordered the men, he went too. To Colonel Boyston no obstacle was impossible or even difficult. He radiated confidence, leadership and boundless enthusiasm..

"Hi Mike! Hi Smitty!" he grinned as he wriggled into the dugout. He shucked off his gloves and extended his hands toward the little stove filled with burning shell cases.

"Gad! What luxury," he exclaimed, "Mike, I've talked with the two soldiers in 'Fox' Company, the ex-forest rangers, they've examined the aerial photographs and have found evidence the land has been disturbed, possibly a mine field."

"Oh Golly," exclaimed Lieutenant Damkowitch, "A mine field. How are we --?"

"No problem, Mike. McPeters, that's one of the forest rangers, climbed up the hill this afternoon for a look see. He and the other ranger have marked a trail. They'll lead us through the mine field."

"Good. I'm leery of mine fields."

"No sweat, Mike," grinned Colonel Boyston, "'Easy' Company will create a 'ruckus' on the flank and the balance of the Battalion will hit them from the hill. Hot chow in town, how's that?"

The frozen shelter half covering the entrance to the dugout rattled. Colonel Boyston cried out, "Hey, Tex, squeeze in. Look what these guys found, a stove."

Lieutenant MeHaffey was the Forward Observer with the 880th Field Artillery supporting the attack. His wise cracking and good humor made him popular with the men. He was from Texas and he let everybody know it. To anybody he met he would say, "Just call me Tex." Two enlisted specialists accompanied the Artillery Forward Observer to assist with the radio.

Tex spoke, "Colonel, we just arrived, sir. Where do we fit in?"

"You'll be with me at Battalion, Tex," responded the Colonel, "Let's hit the trail. 'Fox' Company is due," he said glancing at his watch.

The soldiers climbed out of the dugout and stood shivering and stomping as elements of "Fox" Company "slogged" past.

A detachment from Battalion Headquarters was stringing telephone wire. Two soldiers, with packs and slung rifles, struggled with a heavy reel of wire. They pulled, strained and stumbled as the wire unwound behind them.

Sergeant McAllister eyed the toiling men, "That's stupid," he snorted, "Those reels of wire are too heavy. They ought to be divided so the men could carry them."

"What did you say, soldier?" asked Colonel Boyston.

"I -- I was talking to Sergeant Smith, sir."

"I know, but I asked you what you said. Speak up."

Flustered Sergeant McAllister stuttered and stammered, "I said, I -- I -- I said--the reels of wire, I said they're too large. If the reels were half the size they'd be easier to carry. That's all I said, sir."

"That's what I thought I heard," said Colonel Boyston, "And it's a damn good idea. From now on that's the way we'll do it." He turned to his aide Lieutenant Coputo, "Make a note to tell the communications people to divide the wire reels."

He turned to Sergeant McAllister, "What's your rank, soldier?"

"Sergeant, sir."

"Mike, promote this man to Staff Sergeant."

"Yes sir," responded Lieutenant Damkowitch, "Smith, see to it."

The air was crisp and cold, the moonlight bright. Lieutenant Damkowitch raised his arm and I shouted, "Let's go! Gee Co!"

The soldiers fell in on each side of the trail.

The men fashioned mufflers from a section of blanket. It was wound around the face leaving only the eyes visible. Whispy icicles formed around the nostrils and mouth.

"Move out!" cried Lieutenant Damkowitch. It was 03:00. Snow crunched under combat boots. "George" Company was on the move.

An Infantry Rifle Company is composed of 187 men and officers. Seldom was "George" Company full strength and 147 soldiers trudged the trail toward the hill.

Dawn was breaking as the weary soldiers reached the foot of the hill. A turn in the trail brought the soldiers face to face with a German machine gun emplacement. The gun crew were dead. The sprawled bodies were frozen and partially covered with snow.

The troops entered the forest and toiled up the hill. The rigorous climb caused the men to ~~per~~aspire. The water in their canteens was frozen. To quench their thirst they ate snow. The column moved slowly as advance elements maneuvered steep ridges. Soldiers pulled each other up and over steep embankments. The equipment was passed from hand to hand across ravines and other obstacles. At every pause stinging, pricking sensations warned of freezing feet.

Whistling, "whumping" sounds of artillery shells were heard. Sergeant McAllister cocked his head and

listened, "It's okay," he said, "It's ours, it's outgoing mail."

A series of muffled explosions halted the column.

"That's land mines," observed Sergeant McAllister, "I'll bet the men carrying that reel of wire stumbled."

A message came back the file of soldiers, "Mine field up front, send stretcher bearers."

The Germans had developed a deadly land mine. When the trip wire was struck it bounced waist high and exploded. It was dubbed the "Bouncin' Betty" by the soldiers.

The leading elements of "Fox" Company bore the brunt of the mine field disaster. It was havoc. The Medics moved from wounded to wounded. The faces of the men on stretchers were sickly gray.

The column shuffled forward. A sentry warned as the men approached the mine field, "Stay on the marked trail and you'll be safe." Fearful glances at the crumpled bodies and severed limbs insured that each soldier stepped in the footprints of the man ahead.

The Second Battalion passed through the mine field and started climbing the hill. Without warning the German artillery retaliated. Screaming shells crashed on the hill or burst in the trees. Soldiers scurried for cover amid whistling, whining shell fragments. The line of march was littered with torn bodies. The air was filled with cries of, "Medic! Medic!"

I was frantically digging at the base of a large tree as a Medic hurried by carrying a satchel of First Aid supplies. He spied me and yelled, "You guys with your guns, you're going to get us all killed." He turned and hurried to a crying soldier, "There, there," he said soothingly, "Nothing can hurt you now, you're out of this stupid war." I was petrified by the whizzing, "whumping" noise. The Medic knelt beside the wounded soldier. I tried to scream a warning but nothing came out. There was a blinding flash followed by an explosion. Whistling shell fragments tore the tree. I peered out <sup>and</sup> where the two men were was a blackened, jagged hole. The Medic's white helmet with it's red cross rolled across the trail. I vomited.

The German guns traversed and searched. They were systematically shooting back and forth and up and down. A lull and lieutenant Damkowitch bounded to his feet yelling, "Get moving! Get moving! Let's get out of here. Come on, sing out, let's hear it!" Shouting, "Hey! Hey!" the soldiers pressed across an open area. Slipping and stumbling another plateau was reached. For a short distance a level strip of terrain and ahead the densely wooded peak of the hill. Crackling rifle fire signified "Easy" Company was attacking. In the distance automatic weapons chattered. Could we make it on time? We entered the woods and climbed toward the peak.



The German guns found us as we toiled over the wooded hill. Exploding shells burst in flashes of flame framed in black smoke. Thunderous, ear-splitting blasts churned up geysers of dirt, tree limbs and debris. An acrid smokey odor permeated the atmosphere. The soldiers dashed for cover. Some crouched in the ravine, others buried face down in the snow. "Wump! wump! wump! screaming shells filled the air. Lethal, whining shell fragments rained on the terrified soldiers. After each explosion puffs of smoke swirled in the air. Dead, dying and wounded soldiers littered the line of march. Shrill cries of, "Medic! Medic!" A wounded soldier was calling for his mama. Over the clamor he cried in plaintive tones, "Mama! Mama!"

Suddenly there was a lull, the bursting shells moved to another sector. The medics, carrying first aid equipment, scurried to attend the wounded. I cautiously peered from my place of refuge, a slight depression in the ground. The soldier crying, "Mama!" was a few feet from me. It was Private Alfred Miller. He lay on his back, helmet missing and his face streaked by smoke. His legs had been ripped from his body and his overcoat was soaked with blood. I stared at the dying soldier. His bleary eyes flickered. He saw me kneeling and cried, "Mama! Oh mama, thank God you came."

Private Miller, a new replacement, had been Court Martialed for disciplinary reasons and transferred to Company "G".

Eagerly he grasped for my arm. He missed but succeeded in clutching my overcoat sleeve. His voice became shrill and pleading, "Mama, mama, please don't leave me and sister again."

I attempted to free myself but his grip on my sleeve tightened, "Mama, don't leave me, please." The dying soldier became a frightened little boy. I heard my voice saying, "There, there, take it easy."

"Oh mama," he whimpered, "Why did you leave us? Sister cried 'n cried 'cause she was hungry." He added like a little man, "But I found something for me and sister in garbage cans. That man said he wasn't our daddy. He was mean to us. We cried but you didn't come back. A lady came and said me and sister would have to go to the orphan home."

The shelling returned. I was gripped with fear as whistling, whumping shells screamed and burst in tree tops. I burrowed in the ground. The air was filled with whizzing and whining shell fragments. I quaked in terror as shell fragments ripped my pack and overcoat. Ice oozed from my punctured canteen.

Another lull. Private Miller was babbling, "Mama, mama," he cried, "Me and sister won't have to go to the orphan home now will we? Will we, huh?"

I swallowed a lump in my throat, "No, you won't have to go anywhere -- ever."

Private Miller's voice grew weak, "Mama, I'm sleepy. Good night sister, good night mama."

I was freeing my overcoat sleeve with my trench knife when Lieutenant Damkowitch waved his arm and yelled, "Let's go, "G" co, move it!"

Abruptly the shelling shifted to another sector. Lieutenant Damkowitch scrambled to his feet. He thrust an arm through the sling of his carbine and flung his gloved hand in the air. "Hey, Smitty," he called out as little frosty wisps of vapor puffed from his mouth, "Smitty, the column isn't moving. I'm going forward to check with Battalion."

"Good idea," I responded stamping my feet and waving my arms, "Yeah, let's get moving, it's freezing."

With his carbine hanging from his shoulder Lieutenant Damkowitch slogged through the snow toward the Battalion Command post. Telephone lines lay along the line of march making the trail easy to follow. The snow had been flattened by the boots of the soldiers that had gone ahead.

The "crump! crump! crump!" and smothered explosions were further away. I continued to wave my arms and stamp my feet in the snow. Presently Lieutenant Damkowitch came slipping and sliding back down the trail. He propped his carbine against a tree and rubbed his hands, "Smitty, Battalion command post is a few hundred yards up the trail. I talked to Colonel Boyston he -- "

"Yeah, but what's the hold up?" I interjected, "We got to keep moving before the shelling comes back to us."

"Yeah, I know," replied Lieutenant Damkowitch,

"But there's been a change in plans."

"What?"

"A change of plans," he explained, "Originally 'Easy' Company was to skirt the hill and attack the town on the flank." I nodded my head. "The balance of the Battalion, with 'Fox' Company in the lead was to climb this hill and make a frontal attack on the town."

"And now that's not the plan?"

"No, 'Easy' Company bogged down, they hit heavy resistance. A radio message reported heavy casualties and that Captain Jenkins had been killed. Then it cut off in mid-sentence. Looks bad."

"Sure does," I agreed.

Lieutenant Damkowitch waved his arms and clapped his gloves together, "The Colonel thinks 'Easy' Company has been annihilated and is calling a conference. I'm going back. As soon as 'Fox and How' Companies report the Colonel will give us orders."

"Okay, Mike," my teeth were chattering, "As long as we get moving, this is murder."

Lieutenant Damkowitch turned to leave. He grabbed his carbine then he paused, "Say, Smitty, get a strength report. Bring it to me at the Colonel's command post."

"Yes sir," I replied, "I'll get Sergeant McAllister on it right away."

Lieutenant Damkowitch crouched, he was about to

leave. Did I hear something or was it a premonition? I clutched Lieutenant Damkowitch's arm, "Hold up, Mike. Down, get down." There was a low rumbling in the distance, it grew louder. The thunder rolled in like the surf, louder and louder. The projectile was from a heavy artillery piece or possibly from a railroad mounted gun. The eerie "whooshing-whumping" sound could be heard for seconds that seemed an eternity.

I yelled, "Down! Down! Heads down!" The shell exploded on one of the peaks with a deafening, ear splitting roar. The crash was like a head on collision of two thundering locomotives. The ground trembled. Shell fragments whizzed and whined. The air was filled with debris, tree limbs, dirt and smoke. Terrified we burrowed in a depression in the ground. Shell fragments whistled as they ricocheted in the trees. Another "whooshing-whumping" screeching sound heralded another huge shell. The shell exploded in a burst of flame and smoke on the peak occupied by the Colonel and his staff. We were hurled sprawling in the snow by the force of the blast. Burning trees crackled. I stumbled around dazed and confused. My body trembled. I couldn't control my agitation. I fell to the ground and rolled to a fallen tree and burrowed against it. Lieutenant Damkowitch huddled behind a boulder. Smoke blackened our faces.

The wooded hill was being reduced to smoking, shredded tree trunks. The exploding shells shifted to another sector. Lieutenant Damkowitch was unsteady as he pulled himself to one knee and shook his head like a downed prize fighter. I raised my head and gazed back down the line of march. The German guns had created havoc. Slain soldiers littered the path through the woods. The bodies, laying helter-skelter, resembled bags of crumpled laundry. Cautiously soldiers began to stir about. Without panic or confusion the able aided the wounded. The medics, in white helmets and painted red cross, circulated administering first aid. Tedious training was paying off.

"Hey, Mike," I called, "You all right?"

He looked at me with a blank stare and then his glazed eyes cleared. Sanity returned.

"Gee, yeah," he stood and shook his head, "Yes, I'm okay, just shook up. How about you?"

"I'm okay I think."

Lieutenant Damkowitch looked around and then stared up the trail. Dense black smoke and flames swirled high in the air. Burning trees crackled.

"The Colonel," he blurted. His eyes were apprehensive, "That last shell, it landed close to the Colonel's command post." He looked around and found his carbine. A shell fragment had gouged the stock.

"Com'on," he yelled, "Let's get going." I spied Sergeant McAllister making his way toward us. I waved my arm, "Hey, McAllister, come on. We're going to Battalion." Lieutenant Damkowitch jogged on ahead. I held back until Sergeant McAllister caught up. His face was red and wisps of vapor curled from his mouth as he said, "What's up?"

"That last round," I responded, "Mike thinks it might have landed on the Colonel's command post. Let's get going."

We made a turn on the trail and saw Lieutenant Damkowitch. He was staring at the shambles of Battalion headquarters. Flames danced and crackled as they licked burning trees. The air was filled with the acrid odor of burning flesh. The bodies of soldiers and equipment were scattered over the ground. Parts of bodies dangled from tree limbs. Wounded members of the Headquarters staff wandered around dazed and incoherent. A soldier was holding his intestines, another was looking at his arm laying on the ground. Colonel Boyston was reclining in a half sitting position at the base of a tree. An arm was missing and he was bleeding from multiple wounds. The Colonel's aide, Lieutenant Coupto, was stumbling around confused and bewildered. The artillery forward observer stood with his back against a boulder. His hand clutched a radio micro-



phone with a dangling, shredded cord. The bodies of both radio operators were sprawled over the smashed transmitter. The stunned artillery forward observer was calling for strikes the battery would never hear. He saw us and a silly grin appeared on his lips. He cracked, "It's a helluva life ain't it?" He coughed and spit blood, "One thing for sure -- you can't get out of it alive." The silly grin evaporated. He expired and fell forward on his face.

Lieutenant Damkowitch knelt by the Colonel's side. Colonel Boyston's voice was husky, "Don't worry about me," he croaked, "I'm beyond help. Mike, you and Smitty go forward and contact Captain Williams, 'Fox' Company, he's the senior officer." He was speaking with difficulty, "Tell him to continue the attack." His head drooped. We stared incredulously. He raised his head and blood trickled from his mouth. He gurgled, "Damnit! that's an order. Get moving." Colonel Boyston beckoned to Lieutenant Coupto. He spit out a mouthful of blood and told him a message to deliver to his family. Colonel Boyston's eyes grew filmy then closed. He expired in the arms of the bitterly weeping Lieutenant Coupto.

Lieutenant Damkowitch stood straight, shoulders back and heels together. To Colonel Boyston's final order his right hand came up in a salute. Lieutenant Damkowitch's eyes were brimming, he was fond of the Colonel. The Colonel's boundless enthusiasm inspired confidence. He was loved and respected by the officers and men of his Command.

Lieutenant Damkowitch sniffed, swallowed then said, "Com'on Smitty, you and McAllister, let's go forward and contact Captain Williams, 'Fox' Company.

The winding trail grew steep. The advancing soldiers had cut toe holds in the hill. Puffing and red-faced we toiled past bodies of "Fox" Company soldiers to the summit. Elements of "Fox" Company were regrouping in the flat area. White helmeted medics with hypodermic syringes were administering shots and applying bandages.

"'Fox' Company has been hit hard too," observed Sergeant McAllister looking around.

"Yeah," I agreed, "Maybe we can get out of the woods before the shelling starts again."

Sergeant McAllister glanced up at the overcast sky with wraiths of swirling fog in the air. "This weather will hold up the artillery," he prophesied. "The Krauts don't shoot if they can't see."

"For once the weather is in our favor," said Lieutenant Damkowitch, "They are probably moving their

Infantry to meet us when we come out of the woods." He added as an afterthought, "Oh say, McAllister, the strength report. What we got left?"

Sergeant McAllister pulled off a glove and fished around in his overcoat pocket. He withdrew several slips of paper. "We were understrength at the start, only had 147 men," he explained as he straightened the papers. "Each platoon reported the actual number men that they could account for. Let's see, as of now our total strength is 61."

"Dear God," I murmured as I mentally subtracted, "We've had 86 casualties. That's more than half of what we started with, nearly 60% lost."

"Some may have got lost and will straggle back," said Sergeant McAllister, "This is all we could account for at the time. The 4th Platoon was hit the hardest. They only had 6 men left. A shell landed on the 4th Platoon and demolished their mortar and most of the men. They have the light machine gun."

Lieutenant Damkowitch led the way and we followed. Soldiers were deployed along the trail. Some were digging while others rested and munched frozen "K" rations. Lieutenant Damkowitch sang out, "This 'Fox' Company?"

"Yes sir," a Sergeant responded, "the Third Platoon, that is, what's left of it."

"Captain Williams, where is he?"

"He went forward, sir," the Sergeant replied, "He took two scouts and went forward. Then the shells came in." He shook his head, "Don't know, it looks bad."

"We'll take a look," said Lieutenant Damkowitch.

A medic was attaching a tag to Captain Williams's overcoat when we arrived. He was sitting on a log in a draw, babbling and incoherent. Blood trickled from his ears. His weapon and helmet were missing. Lieutenant Damkowitch started to speak then hesitated. The Captain's eyes rolled and saliva dribbled from his mouth.

"It's no use, sir," the medic said, "It's concussion. He's in a bad way. We'll get him to the rear as soon as we can."

Lieutenant Damkowitch silently patted the weary medic on the arm and turned to Sergeant McAllister.

"McAllister, we've got to have instructions. Can you raise Regiment on the radio?"

"Yes sir, I think so. We've got to go back to Company Headquarters," he replied, "The radio wasn't damaged and I left it with Private Corden."

"Corden is the only man strong enough to carry the radio over these hills," I added, "He's built like a bull."

"Com'on, let's get 'cracking', barked Lieutenant Damkowitch as he started back down the trail.

I glanced at my watch, it was 16:10, (ten minutes past 4 P.M.) and darkness was setting in.

We struggled back down the trail past the wreckage of the Second Battalion. The soldiers were digging-in and entrenching tools 'whacked and thumped' against the frozen soil.

Private Corden, a rough, bulky, powerful man had gently covered the radio with a blanket. Sergeant McAllister and Private Corden were friends and Corden frequently boasted that he could carry the radio and McAllister. Sergeant McAllister barked, "Hey, Corden break out the radio and turn it on. The Lieutenant wants to send a message."

Private Corden grinned at his friend and said, "Okay, Sarge." He pulled the blanket from the radio and handed Sergeant McAllister the microphone. I noticed a covering on the microphone. So did Lieutenant Damkowitch.

"What's that on the microphone?" he demanded.

Private Corden mumbled, "It's a rubber, sir."

"A what?"

"A rubber, sir."

"What the --."

I spoke up, "Sir, it's a prophylactic, you know, they prevent venereal disease."

"Yeah, I know what they are," said Lieutenant

Damkowitch, "But why is it on the microphone?"

"Sir, it was Corden's idea," responded Sergeant McAllister, "You see, in this cold moisture forms when you talk. The vapor makes icicles and freezes the microphone."

In a flood of understanding Lieutenant Damkowitch exclaimed, "And if the microphone stays dry it won't freeze, right?"

"Yes sir."

"Where did Corden find a package of -- ura, ura, -- rubbers here?"

"They were in his overcoat pocket. You know, in the States, everytime you go on pass you are issued a box of rubbers. They're poked at you if you are just going home to see your folks. Most soldiers take them and put them in a coat pocket. Sometimes they sit in the balcony of a theatre and blow them up like balloons and toss them in the audience."

Sergeant McAllister turned his attention to the radio. He twisted the dials and called, "George Six to Big Six, George Six to Big Six."

Lieutenant Damkowitch addressed Private Corden, "Soldier, what's your rank?"

"Private, sir."

"As of now it's Sergeant. Smith, see to it."

"Yes sir."

Sergeant McAllister looked up at Lieutenant Damkowitch, "We've made contact, it's Regiment, sir." He held out the microphone, "Sir, press the switch to talk, release it to listen."

Lieutenant Damkowitch nodded as he took the rubber covered microphone and pressed the switch. He reported that the Second Battalion had been hit hard. There were numerous casualties including the Colonel and most of his staff. Before he released the microphone switch Lieutenant Damkowitch requested instructions.

The instructions were to hold fast until darkness then fall back to our original position. Other units had been dispatched to pass through our unit and continue the attack. Small 'hedge-hopping' observation planes had spotted the German battery and counter fire would commence with the attack. Regiment reported there had been no contacts with other units of the Second Battalion. We were instructed to pass the word that First Aid jeeps and equipment would meet us at the base of the hill. Lieutenant Damkowitch was on the verge of saying, "Roger, over and out," when a voice cut in and asked how we were able to establish radio contact and the other units could not.

"I'll have to explain it in person," Lieutenant Damkowitch responded, "You'd think I was shell shocked if I told you now. Over and out."

The air rang with "thunk! thunk! thunking!" sounds as the soldiers hacked the frozen earth with entrenching tools. The act of digging "fox holes" relieved tensions.

Sergeant McAllister cocked his head skyward and observed, "The shelling is over for now. The Krauts don't shoot unless they can see and they sure can't see in this fog."

It was late afternoon. All around soldiers were opening "K" rations and munching the frozen food. I pulled out a concentrated chocolate bar and hacked off a hunk with my trench knife.

The task of collecting the wounded commenced. The medics had some stretchers, others were improvised. The walking wounded guided the blinded. The slain were left for the Graves Registration and Burial detail.

Tacitly the soldiers were helping one another. I worked my way back down the trail telling the men that another unit would pass through our lines and relieve us. Two soldiers were loading a comrade on a stretcher. "Hi Sarge," the wounded soldier cried out, "When are we getting out of here?" I recognized Private Beuler, "Hi Beuler, soon I hope. You hit bad?"

"I don't think so, Sarge," he said, "It's my legs. The medics patched me up and gave me a shot. I don't feel a thing."

One of the soldiers was breaking open his pack to



get his blanket. A small package fell out. It was a delayed Christmas gift, he didn't have time to open it. Private Beuler spied the package and cried out, "Hey, gimme my present. It's from my girl."

I looked at the men preparing to lift the stretcher. One said, "Oh hell, Sarge, let him have his gift, it aint that heavy." The other man added, "Yeah, we don't mind."

"Okay," I replied, "Here Beuler take the package." Blood was seeping through his blanket.

"Thanks Sarge," he said taking the package, "It's from my girl. As soon as the war's over we're getting married."

"That's great," I smiled.

"Sarge, I'll see that you get an invitation to my wedding."

"Thanks, I'll come too."

"Say," his voice was animated, "maybe they'll send me to the same hospital where my brother is."

"It happens sometimes," I agreed. "I hope so." The bloody spot grew larger on the blanket.

"Hold on, it's freezing. I'll get you another blanket." I pulled a blanket from the pack of a body laying beside the trail and covered him.

The two soldiers slung their rifles, hefted the stretcher and joined the line of stretcher bearers trudging back down the trail.

The surviving officers of "Fox" and "How" Companies converged on Lieutenant Damkowitch. He briefed them on the instructions from Regiment. It was the consensus to immediately evacuate the stretcher cases to be followed by the walking wounded. The balance of the Battalion would withdraw in reverse order of the approach march; "How" Company, "George" Company, Battalion and "Fox" Company. Word was passed down the column that if German patrols, probing the forest, were encountered not to return their fire.

The other officers were looking to Lieutenant Damkowitch for leadership. He appeared at ease in the confusion, a natural leader. He called out, "Hey, Smith. You and McAllister, over here." We joined him near the trail, "'How' and 'George' Companies are moving," he said, "Smith, you and McAllister stay and check the men. Sergeant Rayburn of 'Fox' Company is bringing up the rear of their group. When he clears the check point you follow."

"Yes sir."

"Be careful," he admonished, "Be on the lookout for German patrols. They'll try to draw fire, don't return it."

"Yes sir."

He turned and scrambled back down the trail.

The frigid chill factor penetrated to our bones. We stomped our feet and waved our arms. The withdrawal

moved at a snail's pace. It was past midnight when Sergeant Rayburn shuffled up to the check point. The muffler over his mouth and nose was covered with tiny icicles. His teeth chattered as he mumbled, "Let's get the hell out of here."

I turned to Sergeant McAllister, "Com'on, let's go."

"Hold on a minute," he replied.

"What's up?"

"I want to leave a calling card."

A full moon peeped between the clouds and reflected against the snow. Sergeant McAllister withdrew wire-cutters and clipped several lengths of telephone wire strewn along the trail. I watched as he unfastened the two hand grenades dangling from his overcoat lapels. Across the trail he fastened a length of wire between two trees.

"They'll spot that," I observed, "It's waist high."

"Yeah, that's what they're supposed to do," he replied, "If they walk around that wire maybe they'll stumble on this one," he said as he fastened another length of wire to a sapling low to the ground. He made a grenade fast to another sapling with a piece of friction tape. He ran the loose end of the wire through the ring of the grenade pin and made it fast. He did the same thing on the other side of the trail.

"The Krauts gave us a hard time," he said, "I felt

I should do something to show my appreciation."

I nodded in approval. As we climbed down the trail I was moved to say, "McAllister, you're a devious son-of-a-bitch."

Sergeant McAllister replied, "If I ever find out what 'devious' means I might get sore."

The freezing, bitter cold was intensified by the chill factor. My thoughts turned to home and Florida. I mused, "And to think that I'd complained of the heat. Never again."

At night everything seemed different. A smokey fog hung in the air. Moonlight filtered through the clouds and was reflected by the snow. Ripped, torn trees stood like phantom spectres. Abandoned stretchers dotted the line of march. Enroute the wounded had perished.

Sergeant McAllister grabbed my arm, "There they are. German patrols."

I cocked my head and listened. There it was, the unmistakable sound of German automatic weapons, bursts that sounded like ripping canvas.

"That's Kraut 'burp' guns," said Sergeant McAllister, "They've lost contact with us and they're probing trying to draw our fire."

"They don't know how hard we were hit," I said.

In the distance the 'ripping canvas' bursts continued.

"If they locate our trail," said Sergeant McAllister,

"And poke around they may stumble over the grenades."

As we pushed down the trail we came upon another abandoned stretcher. In the moonlight I recognized Private Beuler. His expression was so peaceful he appeared to be sleeping. Little flakes of snow were collecting on his face. The unopened Christmas package lay in the crook of his arm. I recalled hearing that a sensation of warmth and an overpowering desire to sleep precedes death by freezing. I stooped and covered his face with his stiff, blood drenched blanket.

The trail led back through the mined field. Cautiously we trod on the telephone lines blazing the safe path through the mine field. Despite the extreme care "bouncin' betty" mines had been detonated by stretcher bearers that lost their footing and had stumbled off the narrow trail.

"What a damn shame!" muttered Sergeant McAllister looking around at the carnage, "and so close to safety," he shook his head.

As we approached the base of the hill I thought, "What a disastrous day -- and the hell of it was -- we never had a chance to fight back."

The First Aid jeeps were loading the last of the wounded as we arrived at the base of the hill. Exhausted and puffing we plodded to our former positions.

Around the area the soldiers were clearing the snow from the fox holes and spreading tent shelter halves

across the openings.

I turned to Sergeant McAllister, "McAllister, the Morning Report, I've got to submit a Morning Report. Send runners to each platoon and get a list of the soldiers actually present. The balance I'll list as 'missing in action'. As the lost straggle in I'll pick 'em up as 'returned to duty' on the next Morning Report."

Sergeant McAllister nodded, "Okay, I'll get right on it."

I pulled the tent shelter half aside and climbed into the dugout. The stove had been removed during our absence. Lieutenant Damkowitch was on his knees. He was lighting a makeshift lamp. A sock protruding from the neck of a gasoline filled bottle. The smoking lamp cast dancing reflections on the walls of the dugout. Lieutenant Damkowitch's eyes were red, he'd been crying. His face and scraggly beard were streaked with tears and dirt. His bloodshot eyes watched as I struggled out of the straps holding my pack. The door covering creaked and cracked as I rummaged for my blanket. Sergeant McAllister wormed himself into the dugout.

"Did you get the list from the platoons?" I asked.

"Yeah," he replied pulling off a glove with his teeth. He fished around in his overcoat pocket and produced some slips of paper.

"It was a bad day," he commented as he handed me the platoon rosters.

I totaled the slips of paper. "I make it 36," I announced, "Of course some may have got lost and will straggle in. We'll take another head count later."

"36 men left!" exploded Lieutenant Damkowitch, "Oh my God," he moaned, "To think we started with 147 men and now we have 36. Oh God," he sobbed, "We've lost 111 men." His mood changed and he cursed and beat the dirt walls of the dugout with his fists. Over and over he wailed, "Oh, why couldn't I have led the men back safely?"

"Mike, you did your best," I sympathized, "The artillery, they surprised us, caught us flat-footed. There wasn't anything anybody could do."

He calmed down and blew his nose on his pocket handkerchief, "You know," he said sniffing and wiping his nose, "We're almost sure to go to Heaven."

"Who? Us?"

"Yeah," he said, "We've already been to Hell!"

"I always thought Hell was hot," murmured Sergeant McAllister, "But if Hell is anything like we had today -- no, I mean yesterday, count me out, I've had enough."

"Smith, how is our average holding up?" asked Lieutenant Damkowitch, "You know, what's our chances?"

I unfastened my field case and rustled through papers listing our replacements and casualties. I did some adding and subtracting then announced, "Our average is

still about a week. In other words if you've been in Company "G" over a week you've beat the average."

Averaging the length of time at the front had become a macabre ritual, we had lived so closely with death we had become fascinated by it.

Sergeant McAllister muttered, "Better not start reading continued stories."

Outside was noisy confusion. "What's the commotion?" asked Lieutenant Damkowitch.

Sergeant McAllister peered out the dugout opening, "Hot damn," he exclaimed, "The kitchen jeep is here. Hot chow."

We grabbed our canteen cup and joined the line. One cook reached into a thermal can and withdrew two pancakes, another cook plopped on a glob of jelly and the third cook ladeled steaming coffee from a thermal can. In the dugout, out of the bitter cold, we wolfed down the food.

I spread my ripped overcoat across my feet and huddled in a corner. Lieutenant Damkowitch squirmed and pulled his wool cap over his eyes. Sergeant McAllister was snoring.

I twisted on my side and fell into a troubled sleep fraught with nightmares. I was running and couldn't find my way -- I drilled the troops -- I shouted commands -- I saw Elizabeth but I couldn't reach her. I cried out

↓  
my mother



but she didn't hear me --. I cried and babbled.

Lieutenant Damkowitch roused his head, "Smitty! hey, Smitty, you all right?"

In a daze I prattled on, "-- Colonel Boyston isn't going home -- this damn war, when is it going to end? -- Miller's mama came for him.

I heard a voice from the distance, "Smitty! Smitty" What the hell are you talking about?"

"Just what I said -- Miller found his mama today.

"Smitty, stop it! You're talking crazy."

"Huh? What say? Huh? No, I'm not going to Beuler's wedding, there won't be one. -- Hey! Damn it, quit shaking me -- I told you Beuler's wedding -- quit shaking me -- I'll --." My bleary eyes cracked open and Lieutenant Damkowitch's face floated into focus. He wore a concerned expression. My head bobbed as he shook me.

"Mike! Mike!," I blurted, "Cut it out! Hey, I was dreaming. Good gosh! Is it time already? I thought --."

"You're okay," he sighed, "For a minute I'd thought you'd cracked up. No, go back to sleep." His head drooped.

Outside self propelled guns rumbled into position. Another infantry unit was passing through our position. Boots crunched in the snow, ammunition cans clinked, snatches of conversation, muttered curses as the soldiers tramped by.

Overhead outgoing artillery shells 'whumped-whumped'. Artillery batteries were pumping shells toward the town we couldn't reach. The advancing infantry units were continuing the attack behind the rolling artillery barrage.

Lieutenant Damkowitch snored. The strain of the past twenty four hours was taking its toll. Company "G" would 'lick its wounds', rest and reorganize. Replacements would arrive along with supplies and ammunition and Company "G" would be committed in another sector.

My eyes closed. Silently I prayed, "Our Father which art -- which art -- in Heaven -- ur -- hallowed be thy -- thy --."

I must have fallen asleep.

oOo