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MESSAGE CENTER



WINTER EDITION

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ADDRESS CHANGES

Distribution of the July issue produced at least three change-of-address notifications from our subscribers. They have been duly entered on the last page of this issue. Rob Smith moved to Jacksonville and both Nina Parsons and Janet Moir made moves.

BITS AND PIECES

As a result of the plea in our last issue, we have received some exciting new memoirs, with promises of more to come. Once again, Bob McElroy has tapped his memory for some anecdotal recollections of the war years, and both Bill Sheridan and John Pildner have promised to try and do the same. Two of Bob's are printed -- nearly verbatim -- on the pages to follow. They are "nearly" verbatim because due to shortcomings in my scanning software, it became impractical for me to transcribe his original manuscripts precisely as he had written them.

In case you have not been aware of it, Rob Smith's daughter, Stephanie, has been doing the final proofing and printing of the M/C ever since her dad and mother moved to Jacksonville from Sarasota. As the Editor, and in your behalf, I'm taking this opportunity to express our sincere thanks for her unselfish dedication to this important task. *Thank you, Stephanie.* And we also thank both you and your mom, for assembling the pages of each M/C and getting them into the mail so flawlessly.

Paul Ellis received an immediate response to his generous offer to provide, free-for-the-asking, a copy of Charles MacDonald's A Time for Trumpets. Appropriately enough, Connie Bradley, Rudy Gillen's daughter responded most promptly and Paul sent the book to her. I have called this an "appropriate" gesture, because when Paul first proposed the donation, he was seeking some way of honoring his good friend, Rudy. He has.

THE BELGIAN FARMER by Bob McElroy

Following is a contribution first offered to us for publication in March 1999. I (Ray Smith) failed to publish it then, possibly because I was distracted by Rudy Gillen's decision to withdraw from active production of the M/C, a decision that was soon followed (but was not associated with) a rapid deterioration in his health. It's a lame excuse, but I'm glad that Bob reminded me that it and some other similar remembrances might be just what the M/C could use for its rejuvenation. So here is the story of the Belgian Farmer, as Bob probably told it many, many times over the years to his children. We know that it further reinforces the good feelings we have for the Belgians, and we thank him for that and for the poignancy of the story.

In the second position that AntiTank's second platoon occupied during its first ten days in action during the "Battle of the Bulge", the first squad was dug in on the east side of the road that ran between Soy and Wy. Their gun position was within 25 yards of a farmhouse that was on top of the highest treeless hill in the area. Most all the hills around us were covered with thick pine forests. The Belgian family made these men feel welcome when a few of them at a time entered the home to warm up from the bitter cold weather. There were always some of members of the platoon in the farmer's home, sharing it with him and his wife and his three daughters, the latter aged from about eight to sixteen years.

The farmhouse was heated by a wood burning stove that also served all the cooking and baking needs for the family. Almost every Belgian farmhouse had a similar stove for heating and cooking. It always surprised me how well these stoves heated their houses. Outside the house the farmer had a large quantity of wood stored. It looked like the wood must have taken a lot of work and was probably meant to last the entire winter. Unknown to me, S/Sgt. Paul Graves had become very ill from living and sleeping outdoors in the extremely cold weather. Our medic, PFC Franklin Emberry, nursed Paul back to health in that farmhouse. However, in order to keep the house warm during his illness, a large part of the farmer's wood was used up. The sergeant had not wanted me to know how sick he was for fear that I would have ordered him to a hospital.

Including Paul, all the men were reluctant to be hospitalized for fear that they would be sent to another outfit when they were returned to duty. They were unaware that SHAEF required that the hospitals send all men back to their original unit unless they requested a change.

Thus it came to pass, that one day the farmer left to cut more wood. T/Sgt. Don Rice saw him go off with his wood-cutting tools and followed him. This farmer was a veteran of World War I, so he might have been forty or fifty years old, but due to the hard work on his farm he looked much older. Sgt. Rice came and asked me if it would be all right to take one of our trucks and a couple of men to help the farmer replenish his wood pile. That was when I first learned that Sgt. Graves had been ill. I readily granted Sgt. Rice's reasonable request. The platoon was equipped with axes, two man saws, and other tools for building or clearing road blocks.

When the sergeant and the others arrived at the farmer's wood lot they immediately went to work. In less than an hour they had cut more wood than the old man would have been able to cut in a week.

When the farmer saw them pitch in and cut all this wood and load it on the truck he sat down and cried. The men didn't know what to think. They asked him if they had done something wrong. The farmer replied that they didn't have to do what they did, and he didn't know how to thank them. It was then he told them that he knew how hard a soldier's life was, because he had been forced against his will, to serve in the German Army in World War I.

The next evening the entire family prepared a dinner and invited all the men to eat with them. They had a dining room table large enough to seat the whole platoon, but we had to eat in shifts in order to keep some men manning our positions. Our hot meal arrived in time to share our food with the family, so that there was an abundance of food on their table for everyone.

The second platoon was always a lucky group. A few days later a large enemy artillery projectile made a direct hit on their position right alongside the 57 mm. gun and failed to explode. It just plowed a groove in the dirt and bounced away.

Shortly after the war ended a group of us from the regiment returned to the Ardennes and visited those families in the area around Soy. This farmer and his family gave us a hearty welcome. They remembered many of the men and asked about them by name.

THE BRONZE STAR MEDAL

Many of us didn't pay much attention to the medals awarded for heroism or achievement during the war, and whatever interest the awards may have created then, seemed to wane as the war ended. Prompted by the recent discovery that Johnny Benfield had distinguished himself in this way, I took it upon myself to find out who else might have been so honored without some of us having been apprised of it.

S/Sgt., later 2nd Lt. Carol C. Smith (we privates respectfully called him "CC") was one of the first in the company to receive the Bronze Star Medal for *heroic* achievement, and was cited for it in regard to certain events of December 29, 1945 in Belgium. We've lost track of "CC" since his death in 1960, so can anyone recall the circumstances of this award and if so, will they share them with us? Write or email the answer to me. No reward. My e-mail address is raysmith111@attbi.com (it appeared incorrectly in some copies of the last M/C).

I guess that all of us in the AT Company who wore the Combat Infantryman Badge with pride, were also eligible for the Bronze Star Medal that was awarded by the President's Executive Order of February 4, 1944 citing "*Meritorious* Achievement in Ground Operations Against the Enemy, European Theater of Operations..." Other Bronze Awards, like Johnny Benfield's and Ruby Daniels' were earned by "*heroic* achievement" in connection with the action on January 17, 1945 near Burtonville, Belgium...You'll recall that this was where Frances DeVault met his death when he was KIA despite his comrades' efforts to pull him to safety and out of the enemy's line of fire.

Willard L. Strawn was also awarded the Bronze Star for *heroic* achievement in connection with February 4, 1945 action in France (probably at or near Colmar). And finally, (are you ready for this?) Captain (later Major) Walter E. Brown was awarded the Bronze Star for "meritorious service from 24 December 1944 to 1 March 1945 in Belgium, France, and Holland." I'm sure you'll recall that Brown was our company commander immediately before Rudy Gillen, having left us while at Camp Breckinridge

to serve as the 290th's regimental S3 and ultimately receiving a promotion to Major for that move.

WAS AUGUST 6, 1945 NECESSARY?

Fifty-seven years and 87 days ago (as of November 1), a final blow was delivered to the Japanese with the expressed (but oft forgotten) objective of shortening WW2. After deliberating long and hard on its moral implications, President Truman decided its use was justified and gave the order to use the newly developed A-bomb on the Japanese homeland. It's clear that his objective was to shorten the war...Not to kill and/or maim Japanese civilians unless they got in the way. However, many of them *did indeed* get in the way, and an estimated 140,000, many of them civilians, were killed. Since then, a lot has been written about whether or not it and the second bomb were necessary. And since then, some pretty educated predictions have been made about what would certainly have resulted had the two not been dropped. Some of those of which I'm aware are:

- (1) Many of the veterans who survive today would have been amongst those to have died on the beaches of Kyushu in *Operation Olympic* that had been scheduled for "X day", November 1, 1945. That's just 57 years ago this month and for obvious reasons, is an anniversary of escape that we should pause to reflect upon. And more casualties would have come later in the follow-up "knockout" blow of *Operation Coronet* to have taken place on the island of Honshu, 1 March 1946. Total U.S. KIA casualties in the first 30 days of Olympic were variously projected to have been from 95,000 to 500,000. The higher figure was said to be the most accurate estimate, in that it represented the quantity of *body bags* thought to be needed for the invasion. A full 90-day campaign could have been expected to result in a total to 1.5 million American KIA, WIA, or MIA casualties¹.
- (2) With the realistic expectation of their ultimate defeat, a Japanese order to commandants of POW camps across Asia had already gone out, instructing them that in the event of an invasion of Japan proper, they were to *murder* all of the 100,000 Allied POWs they held² and "leave no traces". Thankfully, the surprise A-bomb attack fore-shortened the war and deprived them of that opportunity. The lives of many of those POWs were saved, enabling them to return home as we did.
- (3) Extrapolating the effects of continued conventional fire bombing as an alternative to A-bomb warfare, we find that by early March 1945 there had already been 185,000 Japanese civilian and military casualties from the first Tokyo attack of 9 March 1945. The predictable direct casualties from such continued conventional bombardment *would have exceeded those caused by the A-bombs*. For example, by August 1945, Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya had all been reduced to rubble by nightly fire bombings with napalm. Thus, the continuation of such bombings would surely have been as devastating to the Japanese population as two days of A-bombing, and over a much longer period of time³. And though only very recently admitted, the United States was prepared to reduce those forecasted invasion casualties by the use of poison gas on all of Kyushu's cities, with the estimate that there would have been *five million Japanese casualties* on the main Japanese islands alone. Had the A-bombs not become a reality when they did, our now-known stock piles of poison gas and

other chemical and biological weapons would surely have been the means employed to reduce invasion casualties and hasten the end of the war. Thus, the war's end was imminent, whether or not the A-bomb card had to be played...Few punches would or could have been pulled, had the conventional warfare scenario been played out and the suicidal defense of Kyushu begun in response to an amphibious attack by the United States⁴.

As embodied in the notorious proposed (but later modified)1995 A-bomb exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution, the "bleeding hearts" of the world (with attitudes like that of Henry L. Stimson, our dangerously naive Secretary of War), for lack of anything better to protest, wanted to criticize the United States' *manner* of ending a war; a war they were too young to have fought in and about which they could not possibly have been objective. Until a drastic revision of their Smithsonian display was forced upon them by public outrage, their efforts had (1) uninformedly downplayed the invasion casualty estimates that had been prepared for President Truman by no less than Herbert Hoover, George Marshall, and Samuel Halpern; (2) provided more narrative space to anti-Asian racism in the U.S. than to the attack on Pearl Harbor; (3) included only six sentences relative to Japan's nearly 10 years of aggression in Asia prior to December 7, 1941; and (4) displayed 49 photographs of suffering Japanese ... but only three of suffering Americans⁵.

The same liberal, perhaps stylish anguish persists today in the world, as well as in the United States⁶. Media documentaries continue to show the regrettable effects of A-bombings on Japanese civilians, but at the same time, conveniently ignore the atrocities perpetrated on subjugated Caucasian and Asian populations by the Japanese⁷....And continue to criticize America and Americans for the effects of a war the Japanese themselves, the self-characterized "victims", had brought upon themselves and enthusiastically supported. One can only conclude that practicing all-out, or total warfare seemed okay to these "victims" as long as they weren't in that position themselves. One can't help but wonder how many *factual* documentaries were ever shown in Japan after their defeat...For example, documentaries displaying the inhumane brutality of the Bataan Death March (which they had photographed with pride at the time to demonstrate their superiority over the surrendered and therefore, Bushido-viewed "cowardly" Americans); their torture and murder of POWs; the slave-ship means of transporting POWs to Japan for forced labor; and the conditions POWs endured in Japanese mainland mines in order to earn their starvation-level rations of food.

¹ "The Invasion That Wasn't", Newsweek, July 24, 1995, pp. 24-28,30.

² "Behind the Bombing of Hiroshima", Parade Magazine, July 16, 1995, p.13.

³ <http://www.anesi.com/bomb.htm> from USSBS Report (U. S. Strategic Bombing Survey Summary)

⁴ "The Invasion That Wasn't", Newsweek, July 24, 1995, p. 24.

⁵ "No Apologies", Newsweek, July 24, 1995, p.41.

⁶ "Who's Sorry Now", Newsweek, July 24, 1995, pp. 38-39; "Age of Angst", Ibid, p. 30.

⁷ "A Half Century of Denial", U.S. News and World Report, July 31, 1995, pp. 56-57.

THE BATTLE FOR SADZOT BELGIUM by Bob McElroy

Many of you may have read or heard about the 289th's battle at Sadzot, Belgium, sometimes called "The Gap" or "The Sadzot Gap". To set the stage and explain the involvement of the 290th in this affair, the right or westernmost flank of the 289th's 1st Battalion was supposed to be positioned adjacent to the left or easternmost flank of the 290th and Bob McElroy's 2nd Platoon was positioned so as to be about 100 yards behind the 290th's 2nd Battalion, at the interface or seam between the two regiments. Here is another story from Bob's memory - - One about the "Gap", an episode that supplements what surviving members of 289th's 1st Battalion shared at the Kansas City history session.

It was the 28th of December 1945. The enemy consisting of elements of the battered but still effective 2nd and 12th SS Panzer Divisions, were probing the front, looking for a way through the lines of the 289th Infantry Regiment in order to renew their drive to the Meuse River and on to Antwerp. Detecting a weak spot at or near Sadzot, they launched an attack against that little village (called Sad Sack by GIs probably because of the way that the locals pronounced it). This attack didn't directly involve the Anti-Tank Company's 2nd Platoon, but it did have an impact upon its men who had been assigned a defensive position near the left flank of the 290th's 2nd Battalion and about 100 yards behind it. The rifle company at the right flank of the 289th Regiment was unable to locate the left flank of the 290th's Company A. I (Bob) knew that 1st Bn, 290th's *right* flank was supposed to be somewhere off to our left, though I was never able to find any evidence of them having been there or find any entry on my map showing their position. They might have been further forward (south) than I assumed at the time.

Sadzot was about 1000 yards behind the front lines in the gap or seam between the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 289th. A Chemical Mortar Company and a Tank Destroyer Platoon occupied the few buildings in this little hamlet. Twice during the night, wire men from the 289th Infantry Regiment's Cannon Company had driven through the village without having seen anyone or being challenged. It was a bitter cold moonlit night and the troops in the village were most likely staying inside the few farmhouses in the area doing their very best to keep warm.

Some time after midnight, the 2nd Platoon, hearing German burp guns (they sound like ripping canvas) firing. But they heard no answering friendly fire and found their silence to be very alarming. The sounds from the enemy weapons seemed to be steadily coming closer to us, advancing towards our position, apparently without meeting any resistance. We expected to see enemy troops appear at any moment, coming toward us from somewhere on our left flank. It seemed that the enemy couldn't be more than a half-mile away and moving rapidly in our direction. What made us nervous was the seeming lack of any friendly answering fire. The extreme cold and clear weather made the sounds seem very loud and close by. Unknown to us, the 2nd and 12th SS Panzer Divisions were attacking the 289th Infantry Regiment at what they perceived to be a weak point between its 1st and 2nd Battalions - - towards Sadzot. What we couldn't hear nor comprehend, was the lack of any return fire from the 289th's two battalions

and particularly, from their supporting 897th Field Artillery Battalion. In spite of the clear cold weather, the terrain was apparently blocking or absorbing the sounds of the 289th RCT's defensive fire, so that we were left with the conclusion that there wasn't any...And that there was nobody between us and them!

Everybody in the 2nd Platoon became very nervous and all attempts I made to find out what was happening were fruitless. The only thing that we could do was to remain as alert as possible, watching for any signs of approaching enemy forces. I was extremely annoyed by one of my squad leaders who had been pleading with me to pull out of our positions. I told him that until we were driven from them or received orders to pull out of them, we were going to stay where we were. The enemy would also be a threat to our own 2nd Battalion, which was only about a hundred yards or so to our front. and we could expect a response from them if the enemy came anywhere near our position. There was no visible sign of any enemy activity to our front or to the left flank. In retrospect, what I should have told him was that as soldiers it was our duty to resist the enemy advance and not run away without offering any resistance to his attack, especially since we couldn't see any sign of the enemy. None of the other three sergeants were asking or suggesting that we should pull out, and I'm sure that they were just as nervous as this squad leader.

It wasn't until fifty-four years later at our reunion at Kansas City that I found out what really happened that night. The enemy found a gap in the line between the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 289th Infantry Regiment and the enemy was passing through Sadzot and had reached the village of Briscole on the road between Grandmenil and Soy. In the engagement, C Company of the 1st Battalion of the 289th Infantry Regiment lost all six of their officers on the line. The company commander, their executive officer, and First Sergeant all literally abandoned the company and later were relieved from command. A new company commander and executive officer assigned to the company were soon killed in the furious battle that followed. The NCOs and privates carried on without any officers to lead them and did it well.

The defense line was very thin, and had the enemy been able to break through, there were no troops behind it to offer further resistance to their advance. The enemy would have been in the rear of the 3rd Armored Division, the 84th Infantry Division and the 290th Infantry Regiment and well on their way to a crossing of the Meuse River. The 897th Field Artillery Battalion's twelve guns fired about 4700 rounds in support of the 289th Infantry Regiment's battle to stop the enemy's advance. During the battle that lasted a little more than four hours in extremely cold weather, the 897th Field Artillery Battalion had to stop firing every once in a while to pour water over their overheated guns to cool them off. Just before dawn we no longer heard any gunfire to our left. A captured German artillery officer was so amazed at the rapid rate of artillery fire, that he asked if he could see the automatic artillery guns. The enemy must have concluded that because of the fight put up by the 289th Infantry, they would be unable to break through its positions.

It wasn't until after the German surrender and we were at Mourmelon le Grande, France that T/Sgt Don Rice told me that he and the other sergeants shared my concern over the failure of the squad leader described earlier to demonstrate the field leadership qualities expected of his rank. All three sergeants concluded that I had been unaware of this guy's poor performance. But I had indeed, been well aware of it. However, there was another factor to consider. I would have had a hard time convincing our executive officer that this sergeant deserved to lose his stripes because of his performance. This was because our executive officer [a college educated engineer...ed.] held him in such high regard for his abilities as an instructor. I also felt that maybe with more front-line experience he would gain self-confidence and become more reliable. In his favor was the fact that this was our first time on the front-line and we'd had only six days of combat experience. So I thought that his record qualified him for another chance to prove himself, and I allowed it.

There were several reasons why this attempted breakthrough by the enemy failed, but our ability to hold was mostly due to the leadership of one particular officer who directed his battalion's defense against this all-out attack and who was instrumental in causing it to fail. He was the 2nd Battalion's Commanding Officer, Major Henry Fluck. Major Fluck always led his battalion from the front line, sharing the life of his front line troops in a foxhole. His staff manned the battalion CP well behind the main line of resistance (MLR) while he maintained communications with them by phone and radio. He would go from company to company and size up the situation by being right on the spot where the action was occurring. He had enlisted in the Army in 1938 and rose through the enlisted ranks to become a first sergeant before the war. He must have displayed great leadership ability because he was granted a commission soon after the United States entered the war. He continued to advance in rank, and fortunately for the men of the 289th Infantry ultimately became the commander of the 2nd Battalion. He stayed in the Army after the war and retired with the rank of Lieutenant General. Of the many field grade officers that I knew, he was one of only two who shared the front line life of the men that he led.

Ray Smith, Editor

Rob Smith, Treasurer and Publisher

