



FALL EDITION

SEPTEMBER 2007

A Remembrance from the 291st IR

As a benefit derived via a forum within Jay Puckett's 75thdivisiondad.us web site, we have received permission to print some of the pre-publication manuscript of a memoir to have been published as a book by the grandson of Sgt. Donald R. Pierce (deceased, 17 March 1992) of K Company, 291st Infantry. Our thanks are hereby extended to Donald's heir and grandson, W. Dean Freeman, for granting us permission to excerpt and share those portions of the manuscript that would be of most interest to our readership -- experiences our own 290th may have shared with the 291st from December 1944 through April 1945. Though space limitations will not allow us to accommodate full accounts of *all* such experiences, we will follow precedent and restrict inclusions to one or two issues of our newsletter, this being the first.

The uniqueness of Pierce's remembrances lies in the lack of any comparable 291st remembrance for the period included by Alfred Roxburgh in his PKG, the source of much of the compiled history of the Division. The reason for this lack of input for Al's work was that the 291st was late going into action, having been "outposted" along the L'Ourthe river in *reserve*, while the combat teams of the 290th and 289th became attached to the 3rd Armored Division and were committed to combat on the 24th and 25th of December 1944, respectively. E.g., as evidence of their "reprieve", the 291st suffered only 3 KIA casualties in 1944: one from Co. C and two from Co. H. The 290th and 289th altogether suffered 149 deaths over the same period of time due to their earlier confrontation with the enemy. Al had solicited 75th veterans for memories of the *end-of-December time frame*. Thus, Al received, and history benefited from a wealth of responses contributed by members of the 289th and 290th, but only got a few from members of the 291st.

We start with Don's rare account of the 291st's attack on 15 January 1945 at Grand Halleux, Belgium.

Attack at Grand Halleux

News of the attack came to us by way of our runner, Pvt. Arnold, a lad even younger than we. His beardless face and boyish body had gained him paternal care from the brass and had earned him the enviable position of communications runner for the higher echelons. Arnold appeared to tell us that an attack was to take place in the morning: 15 February [actually, at 0730 January...Ed.] 1945. The 2nd Battalion was to move in past us and attack the well-fortified town of Grand Halleux. "E" and "G" companies were to lead the attack with "F" in reserve. We were to be in reserve as a battalion. This simply meant that we were not committed to dying in the morning.

As Arnold stepped outside to return to battalion, a mortar round came in from the Jerries, exploding at our doorstep. The young runner went down and we sprang into action: he was a "K" company lad and he had been hit. Hastily, we brought him into safer quarters, noting that he had been hit in the lower stomach or groin area. We instantly sent for the medics as we tried to attend our wounded comrade. He was not bleeding profusely as a piece of his intestine was blocking the hole in his skin. We sprinkled sulfur powder onto this area and applied a bandage. It seemed that Arnold had what we had learned to call a "million dollar wound." It was his ticket out of the lines and he would not sell it for a million bucks. However, we later learned that in his case it was a ticket to death. Arnold died in the hospital from complications arising from his stomach wound. This we did not realize as we carried him off to what he had hoped would be a safe trip home. It wasn't for days that word came down about his death; all of us were saddened by it. He had been a highly regarded member of our company.

The attack came off as planned on the 15th, with "E" and "G" companies of the 2nd battalion going past us into the open fields which separated us from the enemy. All along the front, other 75th units charged into the attack. It was hell holding back in reserve in the Grand Halleux, but not the hell our comrades were experiencing along the line. We learned later just what we had missed.

"K" Company had a front row seat for all of the above, and we knew only too well the slaughter that was taking place out there on those exposed slopes. Nightfall had been a blessing, and the policing of wounded fell to the men of "F" Company. As for us, we had received the news that we would take that hill tomorrow. There was no discussion about this, it was just another order.

Finding some very attractive holiday stationery in the store which we occupied, I wrote what I thought was my last letter home. My parents did not have any idea where I was at the moment, although I offered some hints through my letters about reading the newspapers and relating the news to our position. We were in the "hot spot" and making headlines. I resigned myself to the fact that "somewhere in Belgium" is where I would be [listed as] killed until after the war. As for Bill, his folks would have a first hand account from his brother who came into Grand Halleux to pay him a social visit. His brother was a paratrooper on leave. Who else would spend his time visiting his kid brother on the front lines? No wonder I had such a great buddy! Those men from Dakota may have been a hungry lot, but they were real men.

We made final preparations to move out at 0400, and there was no levity in the air. Finality was the thought of the moment; facing certain death on everyone's mind. This was it! Our long-awaited attack was about to begin. It was finally the real deal, and the reality of the moment made sleep impossible for us. I do not remember any man among us who had to be awakened. . We had witnessed the battle on the 15th and were next. Every one of us had fear gripping his bowels. Those who did not were fools; I could not think of a single fool in our company. All of us were garbed in

sheets scrounged in the town, or any other white items which would blend in with the snow. The lesson of the 2nd Battalion had been quickly learned. If we were to die we did not wish to make it easy for the enemy!

It was only a short walk out to the fields where we were to take up offensive positions for the first time. Halted along a path leading up to the woodline, we dug into the bank to our left. All it took was a bit of scooping out and we were relatively secure. At 0700 there were twenty minutes of an artillery barrage on the German positions, while three light tanks moved up on the attack. None of them would make it to the woods before they were knocked out by enemy fire. Meanwhile, we lay there waiting for the feared command to "move out!"

At this time I suddenly remembered that I had never actually fired my new .45 automatic! It was not a weapon to be relied upon at any distance, but up close it was devastating. Taking my weapon out of my holster, I fired it at a fencepost on the other side of the lane. It was a direct hit, but it scared the hell out of an officer crawling up the lane. He thought I was shooting at a Kraut he had not noticed. When none appeared, he asked me what the hell I was doing! "Nothing, just testing my weapon, Sir," I replied, chuckling to myself. It was a relief to learn that my gun was reasonably accurate.

Then came the feared order to "move out." It was repeated and I looked up at Sgt. Edwards. According to the chain of command, first came the captain, then the platoon leader, then the platoon sergeant, section sergeant, and squad leader. After "Scauldy," as mortar gunner and second in command, I was expected to go. I made sure I did not "move out" before my sergeant. Machinegun bullets were whizzing down the lane, indicated by the streaks from tracers. For every tracer there were from three to five other bullets passing along. Tracers were used to help a gunner observe and adjust his fire and they were blazing past us. "Scauldy" moved out of his position and I turned to Bill, saying, "Let's go, buddy!" How anybody in their right mind would leave a safe hole along an embankment and crawl into machine-gun fire was an enigma. I chalked it up to "conditioned response" because intelligence had nothing to do with it. Capt. Mikules was an intelligent officer whom I respected. He led the charge in keeping with the infantry motto: "Follow me!" He, too, was the victim of "conditioned response." How he survived that attack, only God could say.

As for the rest of us, we followed. I had crawled only a few yards after testing my weapon, when I was struck in the shoulder. It turned warm. "Bill," I called, "I think I've been hit." Instantly he was by my side querying, "What do you mean you think you've been hit?" I showed him my right shoulder and he checked it. Going down through a makeshift snow cover, my G.I. field jacket, a wool O.D. knit sweater, a wool O.D. shirt, Long Johns, and a cotton t-shirt took a bit of doing. Finally he arrived at my skin and announced, "Sorry, Don. No Purple Heart. You have only a crease across your shoulder." The bullet was a tracer which had seared my skin as it ripped through my clothing. "Well, on with the attack" was my reply as we moved forward.

The attack went slowly as men died for every precious foot gained. Not all of the bodies spread over the open fields were our men. "F" company was unable to bring all of the casualties back from the day before. We learned to ignore bodies and to think of objectives. The riflemen, as usual, were catching hell, dying like flies; falling wounded in the snow. Machinegun squads were prime German targets and sought out. The rapid fire capability drew their attention. Corporal Tusty was an unfortunate squad leader, his helmet failing either to stop or deflect the 8mm round which struck him in the head. He lay there dead, eyes open in a blank state. Ammo bearers and others were wounded that day, but both our machine gunners survived. Dendy of California and Dennehy of Montana lived charmed lives. Both finished the fight without being wounded.

We 60mm mortar men were really "rear echelon" types when an infantry rifle company is being considered. Up ahead of us the casualties were mounting. The situation seemed serious from where we were, but the riflemen were truly into it very deeply.

Sgt. Orey, a rifle squad leader, got tired of being shot at by a machinegun and charged the position. He was riddled by fire and fell, bent over backwards having taken several rounds in the belly. Sgt. Brizzi, incensed by the death of his fellow non-com, charged the position and received five machinegun bullets in his shoulder. He blasted away with his Garand until he wiped out the machinegun nest. Calmly he walked back, pick up Cowan, one of our riflemen, who had received a miraculous wound through his scrotum. It missed his penis, gonads and other vitals, but it took a piece out of his ass! They limped passed me, only pausing to stop as a shell came ripping into the area. I was busy crawling into my helmet, but they were almost casual. The next man to crawl past me was Lt. Knuckles, who had been shot in the leg. "Hey, Lieutenant," I called, "you won't need that map, so why not give it to me?" I hated not knowing where I was, or where I was going, and his map was the answer to all! He handed it over to me as he crawled back and we crawled forward. (Only years later did I learn that he had been hit in both legs and knocked cold by one in the head).

All through this I might have been killed at any moment, but it was still early in my combat experience. Now, it was all new and exciting. I lived from moment to moment. What was going to happen next?

"Next" was crawling up and viewing Sgt. Bitka, a big Polish member of our company who lay quite dead upon his back. We had been "horse and rider" opponents during company games in Breckenridge, where we were the last of the horses. Only a fast and tricky rider had saved me from defeat. I had a healthy respect for Bitka's prowess. Seeing him dead on the snow-covered slopes outside of Halleux was a shock. Later, I learned about the Kraut who had come out with his helmet knocked off. This was a sign of surrender. He was crying "Kamerade" or "Comrade," the German word used for surrender. He had concealed a grenade up his sleeve. As a fanatic Nazi, he shouted "Heil Hitler" and hurled the grenade. It killed Bitka in a desperate final effort on behalf of his dictator. Sgt. Gaughen, one of Bitka's friends and fellow non-com, emptied his rifle into that misguided Hitlerite. As I crawled past, the body of a dead German lay nearby. I knew it was all true.

We approached the lunch hour and some of us had not yet reached the wood line. Our clothing was soaked from all the melting snow and snipers were still trying to kill us. I became aware of the need to void my bladder, and this presented me with a "first time" problem. I sure wasn't going to stand up to go, nor sit up, nor was I going to "wet my pants" baby style. Nobody had trained us to urinate in the prone position, but it's a fact of life which was learned quick-

ly from necessity. I took the proper action, without hesitation, having observed the downhill slope from my position. Spitting into the wind had trained me to be careful of bodily functions.

There was a lull in the fire from the other side, so instead of crawling, I jumped up, slung the gun and ran forward. With the first crack of a gun, I hit the snow. The sniper had missed me. Thus we began playing leapfrog with the snipers. We noted that the bursts usually rose, each taking a turn but none getting a hit. Then Sgt. Gordon Willis, leader of the first squad, decided to set up a mortar and we began to fight back. He called instructions to P.F.C. Donald "Smitty" Smith, his gunner from upstate New York. Smitty, a fairly tall, lanky and sandy-haired soldier, soon had shells flying towards the enemy. One dropped in the hole of a sniper. It was pure luck, but it put him out of action. Other rounds scared off the remaining snipers and soon it was clear to walk upright in the field.

Checking around amidst the wounded, I encountered an old A.S.T.P. rifleman friend, Roy Staub, who had been shot through the stomach. He asked for water, but all I could do was wet his lips as water could be fatal to a man with a stomach wound, even a stocky gymnast like Roy. Everywhere I looked, lying in the snow, were American bodies. I gave cigarettes to some of the wounded, but many could not even smoke. I hoped the medics would soon take care of these wounded, but in the meantime we had to advance with those who could still do so.

We entered the woods and encountered a wounded German who had terror in his eyes. An older man, he bared his body to show me his wound as I approached. Then he begged in German not to shoot him. He called "Bitte, nich schiessen," or something similar. Obviously in his fifties, he was desperately trying to stay alive for his family's sake.

We did not shoot him, but he died of his wounds before anyone could assist him. Such is war. If your number is up, there is nothing you can do about it. For many of my comrades, their number had come up that day: 16 January, 1945.

Over 30 were killed and some 40 or more wounded. I was lucky to be alive, but the day had just begun. We continued to move up, trying to catch up with the riflemen.

Into the Woods

It was difficult to leave our wounded friends behind, especially when they were so many and the medics so few. Lt. Smorack, our platoon leader, knew that we were needed to fight with the rest of the company. We had been out on the battlefield for over eight hours, but the day had just begun. Quickly, the lieutenant reformed our weapons platoon. Without looking back at the hill covered by our dead and wounded, we walked into the woods. We were in pursuit of Captain Mikules, leading the victors of the Battle of Grand Halleux, who were in pursuit of the retreating Germans. The forest had enveloped all in a dense, green and white scene. A strange silence took over as we followed the chase into the woods.

"Into the woods" is an interesting phrase because it can mean different things to different people. "Woods" triggers scenes in your mind according to your experience. My experience was with the Woodmere Woods on Long Island.

These were mostly hardwoods growing on swampy ground reserved by our local water company. I was scarcely prepared for the "Grand Bois" of the Ardennes forest. These woods were towering pine trees, neatly spaced by reforestation along local hilltops. They were only broken by fire lanes cut through them. This was a far cry from my youthful experience on Long Island. Regardless, we entered them without hesitation. In fact, we entered with expediency. As the wall of green wrapped us up, we suddenly became aware of the fact that we were all alone.

The silent woods, cloaked in a blanket of snow, had quickly engulfed us. Finding the others now seemed like the right thing to do. A mortar is a most useless weapon in the forests because you can kill yourself and your comrades just as easily as anything else. Once the shell slides down the barrel and strikes the fixed firing pin a shotgun-like base charge, and extra increments, ignite. This causes it to rocket out of the mortar tube. As the shell clears the tube, the secondary safety pin is released. The powder train lines up and only three pounds of pressure on the nose of the shell will cause it to explode. If a gunner has miscalculated his overhead clearance and a limb is in the path of the shell: boom! You're dead!

Confidence in killing a distant enemy with a .45 caliber pistol had long since been destroyed. The next logical thought was to use grenades. Yes, we were armed with hand grenades stuck to our lapels and I had a good throwing arm, but unless it was a close-in fight grenades were equally useless. Our machine-gunners were already with the riflemen, so with only two carbines and three M1s left, it made sense to hurry on up and support the rest of the company. We moved quickly and quietly through the woods. Just as we closed up on the advance elements, one of our German-speaking riflemen called to a solitary figure walking through the forest. He made the mistake of replying in German and the rifleman shot him dead. It had been one of the volunteer snipers who had stayed behind to pin us down. After the carnage witnessed on the slopes outside of Grand Halleux, all of us were in a vengeful mood. He died without mercy while the main body of Germans continued to retreat to their new defensive positions.

Our skirmish line of riflemen continued to move silently through the Ardennes with us closely following. Suddenly the air was filled with flying machinegun bullets. Swiftly, I dropped the mortar and dove under a fallen tree.

With the first lull, I picked up my head to see my squad leader just ahead of me. Another burst quickly lowered it; the zing of bullets was interrupted only by a wounded man's shouts. Then came Captain Mikule's call for the B.A.R. (Browning Automatic Rifle). Another burst of machinegun fire; another call for from the Captain, this time a more forceful, "God damn it! Get the B.A.R. up here!" It may not seem like a very funny comment to some, but to "Scauldly" Edwards and myself it was hilarious. Choking down the laughter, we looked at each other and nodded. Our captain was not a man to give invectives. As a good, practicing Catholic he was never disposed to take the name of the Lord in vain. We knew that it must certainly be a rather stressful situation to have provoked such a command.

The riflemen reacted and began to maneuver. The sniper fire ceased as this cat and mouse game continued, the Germans falling back through the Grand Bois. Halts were called and it seemed that our "King" Company Captain was truly leading the battalion through the forest. At any rate, nobody had shot him at the first chance he got. Some had promised that they would do just that. During the attack, his bodyguard had disappeared but it did not stop the captain.

He led the charge into the woods, was the first man there, and had made it on his own. Yes, he was a stickler for going by the book, but that book also says a good infantry officer leads his men and that is exactly what he did!

Many of us had found him to be fair-minded. Today he had proved himself brave. "Chicken," when applied to Captain Mikules, did not allude to his courage. When properly used, there was an accompanying four-letter word to describe him. He had set up a farmhouse for the C.P. (command post), but he had made his officers stay out in the woods with us. They naturally referred to him in less than complimentary terms. We privates and privates first class rather enjoyed his action. True, he may have abused some errant N.C.O.'s for violations of regulations, but some of them deserved to be broken. The nice things that he had done were not often known. Giving me two overlapping three-day passes to go to my brother's wedding, just before we shipped over, was one of these. Another was touting a newly married machine-gunner, Sammy T. Dendy, to delay his going overseas by going on dental call for bad teeth. Sammy shipped out with us and went all the way.

The company, and perhaps the entire battalion, had indeed followed Captain Mikules into the woods. He proved to be not only an intelligent officer, but a fearless one. Such a leader I was prepared to follow, and this I continued to do.

Delays for whatever reason afforded us a chance to think about our forgotten stomachs. A skimpy breakfast in the middle of the night, sneaking out of town at 0400 to scoop out a shelter along a country lane, and then an early morning attack after a twenty-minute artillery barrage, does little to satisfy one's hunger. Once fear of imminent peril has passed, your stomach reminds you that it's a really time to eat something. Of course, all we had were "K" rations issued for this attack. Now most people may have heard about "C" rations which, so far as I know, were named because they came in a can. "C" rations had been recently upgraded by offering greater variety than the original beans and franks, but the quantity remained the same. The "K" ration, although even smaller, were supposed to be as nutritious because the food was concentrated. The cheese and bacon was tasty, and the deviled-type meat was passable, but none of the three choices did much to fill our stomachs. Yes, a stick of chewing gum and a few packaged cigarettes helped to offset the void which the crackers had failed to fill, but our bellies were not fooled. They were in fact shrinking from lack of attention.

Defensive positions allowed us to make use of Coleman burners to heat our rations, but on the attack these, along with our packs and overcoats, had to be left behind. How to heat water to make our instant coffee a part of the "meal" was the challenge, but infantrymen are resourceful. A forest full of snow did not offer apparent fuel lying on the ground, but there was plenty of it overhead. Dead pine limbs were within easy grasp and were rapidly fired by burning the wax-covered paper box of the "K" rations. One does not think of a "K" ration as the "pause that refreshes," but when it's late afternoon and you haven't eaten since the night before, it is truly a banquet. The cheerful little fires which sprung up about us did more than boost our morale and provide some stomach contentment. They also warmed up our very wet, chilled bodies. Night was coming on and it was getting bitter cold.

The stop and go tactics continued to lead us deeper and deeper into the Bois. We wondered just how far the brass was going to ask us, the untried "Diaper Division," to go. Trying to change that image in one day was proving injurious to our health! It grew colder and colder. We were still attacking through the woods. Finally, during another lull, it was impossible to just stand there and freeze. Our outer garments had become wet from crawling through the snow and had frozen. When squeezed, the ice crystals became visible. Beating ourselves with flailing arms helped, so we moved about swatting and stomping our feet. How much longer before we would be able to take some shelter? Overcoats had been left back in the town and our ice-coated outer clothing did little to warm us.

Being occupied with staying alive, I had failed to notice my friend and sergeant, "Scauldy" Edwards. He was not doing the same, and I figured that being a Mississippi Rebel, he did not know how to combat the cold. Moving towards him, I softly called his name. He seemed to turn, stumbling. His steel helmet rolled off his stocking hat, and I bent over and picked it up. "Scauldy" failed to get up. He sat weaving in a peculiar stupor. He was our first weather casualty. He actually had been freezing to death, standing up on his feet. I picked him up, got him moving, and told somebody to tell the lieutenant. He was unable to speak intelligibly, his eyes glossed over. Rocco and Mac were given the task of getting him back to the battalion aid station in Grand Halleux. With one on either side of him, they staggered off into the night towards the distant town. We kept on.

It must have been almost midnight when we paused once again. One of the "K" Company men walked off the patch to relieve himself. Suddenly, he shouted "hands up!" Five German snipers stood up to surrender. We had walked into their position, astounding them by doing so at this late hour. They had desperately tried to crawl off into the night.

Captain Mikules, and some others of us, were not thrilled by the taking of these prisoners. Had they been instantly shot while trying to get away, all of us would have been relieved. Now someone would have to take them all the way back through the forest. A volunteer was asked for and a man from "I" Company, armed with an M4 "Grease Gun" (a type of submachine gun), stepped forward. He said he was prepared to take them back and off they went. It was not very long after that he returned – without the prisoners. He said that they had tried to escape and that he had shot them out of necessity.

Finally, it was decided that it was time to call a halt for the night. I suppose you could say that contact with the enemy had been reestablished, so it was now ok to get some sleep. One small problem: lying down in the snow-covered forest in the freezing temperatures, sans sleeping bag or overcoat, was just asking to die of exposure. Once again "volunteers" were called for to go back and bring up enough clothes for these hardy survivors. Bill and I volunteered as it made sense that someone ought to do it. Besides, I was worried about "Scauldy," Rocco and Mac and volunteering for the mission offered an opportunity to check up on them. Back down the forest lane we walked, too bone tired for chatter or levity.

Dark shapes soon appeared on the snowy trail – the shapes of dead bodies. A closer look identified them as the dead German snipers. They must have been extremely precise in their escape attempt to have fallen at such neat intervals. What was more logical was that the "volunteer" had decided to end their military careers. Such cold-blooded killing is never justified, but the butchering of over 50 unarmed American prisoners in the woods near Malmédy had been reported to us and we all noted it. While "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is not a Christian teaching, there were some Americans who believed such conduct to be pardonable under the circumstances. None of us were going to point enlightened fingers of accusation at what we had seen in the Grand Bois. We were too bone-weary, too busy just trying to stay alive. Somehow a few dead Krauts just didn't seem important, especially after seeing so many of our own dead on that day. A vision of Sgt. Bitka flashed before me. Shooting these fanatical volunteers while they crawled in the snow may have made a better legal distinction, but the result would have been the same. We shrugged our shoulders and pushed on towards Grand Halleux.

Reaching the new battalion C.P., I was surprised to find Rocco Macchia there. "What happened, Rocco?" were the few words I could muster.

"Don't get mad, Don, but this is as far as we could carry Scauldy," he replied. "Besides, he was out of his head. He asked me, 'where did that girl go, Rocco?' I looked about and saw only the trees and the snow. Then I realized he was goofy, so I said, 'Oh, she had to go home, Scauldy.'"

"Well, where is he, and where's Mac?"

"They're over there under some coats in the C.P.," replied a relieved Rocco. "He's making more sense, but he can't see anything. He's gone blind from the cold."

Lippert and I approached the area indicated, finding the others as Rocco had described. We helped 'Scauldy' to his feet and he leaned on us for assistance. We proceeded down the hill towards town. Near the church was a kitchen truck, which was a boon of good fortune. Hot coffee was on hand and all joined in for the unexpected treat. After the warming brew, we proceeded toward the aid station. It was then that our sergeant started to notice shapes. His vision was beginning to return and we were all happy. A few minutes later, he was in the competent care of the medics and we were loading up with overcoats. Back into the woods we went, but this time we knew what was ahead. We also knew how important the coats would be to those waiting for our return.

Prone shelters had been dug and, with warm coats now on hand, sleep became possible. So far as I could remember, nobody stood guard. 16 January, 1945 had been a day I would like to forget, but I have never been able! "Bone-weary" was a meaningful term only after that day. We hurt bone-deep and all over. It had been a memorable twenty-plus hour event.

It did not get any better the next few days in those forests – each a day of cat and mouse. We walked along in three-file columns because the snow was so deep. Men took turns breaking the trail as others followed. With the gun on my shoulder, I stepped into a hole filled with snow. Both of my legs disappeared and I was pinned by my pack and mortar. The snow was so deep that it took a couple of guys to get me back out. Each night there was just another cold hole in the ground to call home.

It was so pitch-black under the trees that we had to see with our ears. Every noise was registered. I stood there, chilled all the way through, watching dark shadows and listening. Thoughts of home and more pleasant times drifted into my mind. One of my mother's fine, home-cooked meals was the center of fantasy when: bang! My helmet fell off and I was bouncing off the foxhole wall. I had actually fallen asleep standing up! I moved out to tell Sgt. Willis that I was not fit for guard duty. I happily fell into that cold hole upon my return.

How many days we spent in the Grand Bois I cannot recall. One day was much like another. We cleared areas of Germans and moved on to others. It was not large-scale fighting with heavy losses, but none of us were complaining. In fact, it was reassuring when our generals came up to visit with us. We were happy that they knew where we were and it made us feel better. We knew the war had to be going well for us if generals were dropping by for a chat.

Moulin de Beho

Perhaps a correspondent could describe the pursuit of the defeated Germans through the Grand Bois in some glamorous fashion. To those of us who did the pursuing, it was bone-chilling, nasty work. Flopping down to an exhausted slumber in or on G.I. overcoats was how we spent another night. The fine American victory at Grand Halleux meant little now. Our reward was to chase the enemy through the Grand Bois. Eventually the hunt was to lead out of the woods, so symmetrically planted and filled with death. German snipers risked all, and often died, for their Hitler. However, they continued to slow our approach. They were desperate and deprived of comforts, but nevertheless determined that we would not push them back into Germany. On the other side, we were committed to freeing our allies from their Nazi oppression. Dogmatically, we pressed forward, hoping for final victory and our return home.

Lulls continued to allow us to perfect our forest heating techniques. Using pine branches for a quick cup of hot coffee helped but, still, it was Spartan going. Attempting to return to the company through these forests, Sergeant Almond J. "Scauldy" Edwards was shot by one of the snipers. Hit in the leg, he received the million dollar wound which would allow him to go home to his bride. It put me in command of a mortar squad no longer functioning as such. With Tusty and Byrnes's squads suffering losses, the machine-gunners needed help. Mortars, useless in the woods, were sent back to the kitchen. We were acting as machinegun ammo bearers.

At last we reached a road out of the Grand Bois. We were approaching a mill called "Moulin de Beho" near the outskirts of a small village. Moulin de Beho wasn't much, but compared to the forests, it was civilization. Things were quiet, not an enemy in sight. We advanced steadily along the road toward the farmhouse. The dinner hour passed and, of course, we had not eaten. Dinner was only missed by those who remembered when it was supposed to be eaten. Bill and I remembered.

The riflemen led the way and we rear echelon types tailed behind. The farmhouse had to be checked for enemy. Standard Operating Procedure was followed: a grenade was lobbed in through the front door of the farmhouse and the advance party charged in. The grenade performed as expected, exploding and throwing shrapnel in all directions. Then the advance party charged. Fortunately and unfortunately the farmhouse had not been filled with soldiers. However, it did contain Belgian civilians. Up to now this was a rather rare event. The mother of the family just happened to be in the kitchen. Her leg was in the line of fire on the other side of the door. A piece of shrapnel burst through, wounding her. It was a moment for American remorse and we provided medical attention, profusely apologizing for wounding an ally. Shrugging our shoulders like the French, we said as they, "C'est la guerre."

During this episode, an "I" Company patrol passed by, moving up the road to the railroad bridge. A tall lieutenant was leading four men through the dark night. He had no knowledge that a German machine-gun trap had been set up at the railroad. The patrol walked blindly into it. A few short bursts and it was all over. The guns then turned to fire upon "K" Company. Bullets raked our area and all hell broke loose. Troops were diving everywhere and the panic around the farmhouse swung attention from the wounded woman inside to combat outside. Streaking tracers whizzing by smartened us up considerably. We joined those diving for cover. Easily I cleared a low brick wall, which led up to the farmhouse. I flopped into the snow, listening to the machine-gun bullets singing over my head. My G.I. glasses were covered with snow. I lifted my head, turning it to the left, to try and see what was happening. "Booang" – a German bullet echoed off my helmet, cutting the camouflage netting. Curiosity satisfied, my head went quickly back into the snow. Not able to see, I took the mole route toward the farmhouse. "Creep and crawl. Babies creep and snakes crawl," was an old infantry expression. This G.I. became a first-class snake as he crawled to the front door.

A trained mortar man appreciates the need to be able to observe the enemy. Once in the farmhouse, I cleaned my glasses, surveyed the situation, and went upstairs to a bedroom. I looked out the window facing the machine-gun side of the farmhouse. They had set a gun up at the site of a blown R.R. bridge. Bursts of fire made it quite easy to observe.

While this was going on, the riflemen had been doing their share of diving and crawling. Tufick George, A B.A.R. man, found himself lying in the shallow stream which powered the Moulin de Beho. His answers to the machine-gun bursts caused them to reply. Both were readily detected even on this dark night; both continued to fire back.

Sgt. Willis and Bill Lippert, my assistant gunner, had set up a mortar gun by the front gate. They were attempting to fire it by the free-hand method, which requires no front bipod; just a pair of strong infantry hands and plenty of courage. Bullets were splattering all around them but they continued to fire shells. I called to them the necessary corrections in range and direction. Within a few rounds the guns fell silent. The Germans had retreated towards the town, carrying their wounded. Nobody from our company had been hit. The mortar section, providing a successful team from two different squads, had adjusted in the way we Americans do. I remembered at Halleux when the Germans had failed to overlap their fields of fire as one gun was knocked out. This ability to adapt was "Yankee know-how," and it proved to be better than German methodology: move over a bit and you were relatively safe from the German fire.

When all was quiet, a patrol brought back the bodies of the "I" Company lieutenant and his men. They were laid outside the front door of the farmhouse. It was then that I finally realized how calloused I had become to dead bodies. In a short time, total strangers had no sense of comradeship to me. I had no true sense of remorse. I was just glad that I was not one of them and that none of my buddies' bodies were lying there.

These men were fellow Americans, but I am ashamed to say that it did not stop me from taking the dead officer's overcoat, which was longer than my own, for myself without hesitation. His frozen overshoes were higher but not so easily obtained. The icy covering made it too difficult to remove them. Trench foot, a serious problem in the Bulge, was caused by freezing weather and wet feet. Men were having their toes turn blue-black from gangrene. The medics were amputating their toes to save their lives. This was my reason for wanting to protect my feet with higher boots.

No further advance was planned for that night. We settled down to wait until the morning light showed us what lay ahead. Sociable young bucks left with a bit of time, we soon engaged the wounded Belgian's daughter in what might be called conversation. Fred Sickert was of German background, and was able to speak to her in German. I, not a French-speaking American by background, had to rely on my high school education. It was fun vying for attention in a warm barn with a pleasant young farm girl. Mortar gunners were sociable types. Fred and I needed no formal introductions. It was moments like these that helped to keep us sane in a world of madness and hatred. We lost a bit of sleep, but nobody cared. When fatigue got the best of us, it was off to bed. We would be on to another attack in the morning.

The next day was just what we expected: the 3rd Battalion was continuing the attack! "K" Company, however, was to be in reserve. This meant that we would be relatively safe until things got bad. "L" and "I" Companies would lead and "K" would follow behind. Happiness is when you do not walk blindly forward into an ambush waiting to happen! If your scouts do not discover the enemy lying in wait for you, you might suddenly find yourself quite dead. This is why we had to stay alert, no matter how tired we got. The enemy could gain the edge at any moment.

Out went the scouts and the rest of us followed. We had hardly reached the railroad track when a halt was called. The enemy was standing their ground and we would have to fight our way into Beho. The railroad bridge had been blown and the enemy was on the run, but they were sure in no hurry to retreat to Germany. We reserves did not have much to worry about, so we relaxed until needed. On a corner by a farm lane near the blown bridge was a stack of wooden mines which the Germans had never deployed. Lippert, always thinking and innovative, soon had the tops off the mines and a fire going. Somehow he had managed not to blow himself up. We gathered around the fire, sitting on the explosive part of the boxes and it was quite pleasant.

I turned my attention to my poor, old frozen feet. We had been receiving cautions about trench foot, which had become a major problem, and mine had been numb for some time. Off came the G.I. overshoes, which were never high enough to keep the snow out, then the World War I leggings and the G.I. shoes. We had heard about a new issue of

"snowpacks," which were waterproof, with knee-high fastenings and insulated bottoms. None had come up to us. The support staff seemed to need them more than we. Trench foot in the rear must have been a real problem to have caused those guys to steal our snowpacks.

Off came my socks. A close look at my bare feet worried me. Around my toes the skin was starting to take an off-color red. There was no feeling to the bottom of my fish-white feet. When I squeezed, the skin would stay pinched, like putty. My feet were not desperate, but definitely a matter of concern. The battalion aid station had just moved into the Moulin de Beho and I decided to take advantage of the lull and pay them a visit. Toeless feet, or footless legs, did not come under my idea of self-inflicted wounds. Pulling on my boots without lacing anything, I hiked back down the road for a professional opinion. Halfway back to the farmhouse, the still cold air was split by a terrible explosion. Turning, I saw a black cloud of smoke rising up over the site of the fire. Fearing the worst, I rushed back up the road toward the blackened spot. Nearing the area, Sergeant Hawkins told me, "Don't go up there, Don. That's them all over the tree." On the corner of the lane, near where we had been, was a lone tree. It had blackened bits dangling from it. Our boys had perished in one flash. Willis, Macchia, Lippert, and three riflemen had become bits of blackened material clinging to the branches of a lone tree and strewn around. I did not notice much else. My mind was stunned. My eyes saw but could not register. My heart was sickened by this sad sight. I turned back toward the aid station, crying like a baby. My buddies were gone.

An ambulance jeep started up towards the scene, bringing me back to reality. I started back once again, and arrived in time to see Gordon Willis being put on a stretcher and loaded into the jeep. He was black from the explosion, in shock but conscious. He was unaware that his legs had been blown off – one at the knee, the other just below. He had started to come over to visit his sergeant friends, Eason and Hawkins. It was then the tragedy occurred. Willis was blown thirty feet into the air. Coming down, he landed on the wire cow fence. He was the only one still alive. Coming to, he had started across the snow on his stumps without realizing that his legs were gone.

Looking down while on the stretcher caused Willis an even greater shock. He had always said that if he ever lost any limbs that he hoped never to go home. Seeing his legs gone had a terrible impact on him. The medics restrained him as they rushed off to the aid station. He got his wish 15 minutes later, his crushed lungs failing to give him the breath needed to sustain life. He died and, once again, I dissolved into tears.

A dirty, battle-weary young G.I. sobbing in the aid station with a tear-streaked face, moved a battalion officer to pity. He asked me my name and then said, "Pierce, you are going to take a three-day pass to Paris because you need a rest." "Sir," I replied, "I can't go now. The company needs me." He said, "Pierce, this is an order. You stay here and take the truck in the morning." I went over and sat down. He had done me a favor, although at the time I failed to realize it.

Munro, one of our men who had been picked to be the grave registration N.C.O. for battalion, came into the aid station. He saw me sitting there and approached me. "Don, I know how you feel, but I need your help with Willis. Will you help me move him out of here?" It was a most difficult request, both to ask and to fulfill. There was really nobody else to assist, so I followed him to the body.

Gordon Willis had been a blond, curly-haired, vivacious lad from California. He had a well muscled body, which had been a source of pride, and a means to being a good gymnast. He was a flier, and very good on the high bar. He could ride a unicycle, flash a wide, white smile and joke with all of us. I tried to remember him as he had been, speaking to him as I helped carry his body out to the trailer. This was all another side of the rear echelon which I had never experienced. Grave registration N.C.O. was definitely not the happiest assignment. Poor Munro had seen a lot of our boys pass along his way, and it had taken a toll on him. He had a gaunt, haunted look and I was learning why.

Sitting in the jeep, riding toward a collection point, I tried not to notice the thumps of Willis' body in the back. How many other trips, with the bodies of other friends, had Munro experienced? The worst was yet to come. Arriving at a barn, he stopped, opened the door and then I could see what lay within. I was aghast with horror. The bodies of dead, American soldiers were stacked like cords of wood. The frozen, snow-covered ground made burial too difficult. Like northern states at home, the bodies waited for spring thaw before they were interred. Realizing this did not make it any easier to move Willis into the barn. I could never forget the sight. We accomplished what we had to do, then, with tear-filled eyes, I said goodbye to another mortar section buddy. At least Willis would not be listed as missing in action, unlike Lippert and Macchia [who] were to be so listed. The term took on a new meaning as a result of that day.

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Please Note: As much as we'd like to continue with Don Pierce's story in this issue, space available doesn't permit it. However, we have already used up one more page than we had available; so we will make up for that by omitting our usual listing of AT-290 KIA/WIA and post-war TAPS on page 8 and print our Directory in that space. Note that the latter gives newly acquired address changes or corrections for Rudy Daniels, Ira Files, and Frank Kolarczyk. Also, we have made three deletions in the Directory: John Harter (Benfield's grandson), Deona Premazzi (Lee's widow), and Grace Raze (Dalton's widow), omitted for lack of valid home addresses or forwarding instructions for them. As promised, we will devote up to seven pages of the next issue to more of Don Pierce's memoir which, space permitting, will address the 291st's actions in the Colmar, Rhine crossing, and Ruhr campaigns.

Ray Smith, Editor
Rob Smith, Treasurer and Publisher

ADDRESSES & PHONE NUMBERS for AT-290TH IR

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<i>Berry, Gordon</i>	616 363 6074	1225 3 Mile Road NE	Grand Rapids	MI	49505
Black, Velma (Bill's widow)	unknown	Infinia at Kensington - 613 N. Main	Kensington	KS	66951
Blake, Jean G. (Charles' widow)	513 984 5589	9840 Montgomery Road	Montgomery	OH	45242 - 6425
<i>Bondaruk, George</i>	203 378 0689	25 Franklin Avenue	Stratford	CT	06497 - 5239
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Coldwell, Mary (Robert's widow)*	unknown	13309 E. 43 rd	Independence	MO	64055
Daehler, Ralph H.	319 652 3737	700 Pershing Road	Masquoketa	IA	52060 - 2402
Daniels, Rudy [or "Rubbie"]	770 613 0389	3231 Canary Ct	Decatur	GA	30032 - 3717
<i>Denegre, John</i>	203 795 4843	289 Merry Circle	Orange	CT	06497 - 3417
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Graves, Betty C. (Paul's widow)	859 987 3754	19 E. 19 th St	Paris	KY	40361 - 1156
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<i>Jarrell, Melvin "Bill" (Buelah)</i>	302 629 3062	Route 1, Box 318	Seaford	DE	19973
<i>Johns, George Randall</i>	503 236 2274	3728 SE 35 th PL	Portland	OR	97202
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<i>Lauland, Byron J. (John's son)</i>	504 348 7651	2776 Colony CT	Marrero	LA	70072
Lauland, Cary J. (John's son)*	504 689 4286	5026 Trahan St	Marrero	LA	70072 - 7656
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<i>Lewis, Charlotte A. (Rudy G.'s dgtr)</i>	410 228 3272	6033 Corners Wharf Road	Cambridge	MD	21613
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McElroy, Thomasina (Bob's widow)	631 669 8251	163 Van Buren Street	West. Babylon	NY	11704 - 3410
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Puckett, Jay R. (Janet)	913 961 5839	1024 S 11 th Street	Louisburg	KS	66053 - 8406
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Rogers, Connie (Bill's widow)*	618 457 2211	1203 W. Hill Street	Carbondale	IL	62901 - 2463
Roxburgh, Jessie Al's widow)	916 485 4226	2719 Laurel Drive	Sacramento	CA	95864 - 4950
Sheridan, Peggy (Bill's widow)	203 458 9733	5 Paddock Lane	Guilford	CT	06437 - 2809
Smith, Raymond C. (Molly)	651 429 1051	2365 Lakeridge Drive	White Bear Lake	MN	55110 - 7412
Smith, Robert M. (Caroline)	904 743 6933	5353 Arlington Expy - APT # 11M	Jacksonville	FL	32211 - 5575
Snow, Gloria Bell (Len Bell's dgtr)	913 722 6385	5017 Reinhardt Drive	Roeland Park	KS	66205 - 1508
<i>Sutton, Robert L.</i>	812 522 4454	614 North Park	Seymour	IN	47274
<i>Swift, Edward L. (Ann) A/290</i>	606 744 6594	103 Hampton Avenue	Winchester	KY	40391
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Note:

Bold, non-italic print reflects a client's valid subscription through July 2007.

Some italicized entries may have become outdated due to communication failures.

* Indicates a paid contribution despite a survivor's qualification for a complimentary subscription.

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