

I MEET THE ENEMY?

After "redballing" for a month or so, we drew live ammunition and 105mm howitzer shells and drove through the suburbs of Paris and into the front lines at Metz in Eastern France. Our infantry division replaced the 29th which had fought from Normandy across France right up to the border of Germany. It had great success but paid a high price in casualties. It had to be pulled out of the line to take in replacements and to rest.

I was still with the howitzers a couple of miles behind the lines. I was a telephone operator taking firing instructions from our battery's 3 forward observer teams.

On our first day in combat we were sitting on the side of a small hill when there was a sound like a freight train in the sky. We looked up to see a German jet fighter plane fly down the valley. No one had told us there was such a weapon so it made us somewhat nervous. Fortunately for the Allies the Germans could not get many of them into the air as our air corps continuously bombed their factories.

Late that day as we sat around eating our supper about a hundred yards up that same hill we heard 3 or 4 "whiz-bangs". The ground at that spot exploded. We hit the dirt but that was the end of it. We had been treated to our first visit from German 88's, probably the most effective anti-tank and anti-personnel weapon the Germans had.

There was no KP in combat. So that I would not break my string of "firsts", I was assigned to guard duty that night. Before going to the outpost, we were told that there were reports of German patrols in the area. We were advised to be especially alert, to challenge anyone who came near the outpost and shoot, if they did not have the password.

There were 3 guards at each outpost and you stood 2 hours on watch and 4 off to sleep, if you could. I drew the second shift just as it was getting dark. We were posted about 150 yards from the battery looking down and out over a small rise.

About a half hour into my shift I noticed movement about 50 yards further out from the guns. It appeared there were a couple of bodies crawling just at the bend of the rise. They would halt, then move a little and stop again. I pointed my rifle at them and tried to decide whether to challenge them or wait for them to get a little closer so I could have a better shot at them.

This game went on for about an hour when from behind me I heard footsteps. I whirled around, pointed my rifle and called in a very nervous voice, "Who goes there?" The response in English was, "The Sergeant of the guard." I sort of whispered, "Password"? The correct counter-sign came back. The Sergeant approached and said, "Put down that "GD" rifle, you're liable to hurt someone. Why is your voice shaking? Is everything OK out here?" My first inclination was to tell him about the German



patrol that was waiting to jump us. But instead I said, "All quiet". He said, "Stay awake. Keep an eye out for anything suspicious".

I went back to keeping an eye on the German patrol. They stayed in about the same location but every once in a while they would shift slightly. For the rest of my 2 hour shift I kept a bead on them with my rifle. When I went to call my replacement, I had trouble releasing my hands from the gun. They were about paralyzed from the tight grip I had held all during my shift.

I told my replacement to keep a close watch on the brow of the hill. I didn't tell him that's where I had seen the German soldiers hiding but I figured he could decide what to do about them, if they came at us.

Well they did not attack us. The next morning I looked out at where the Germans had been and all I saw was some low bushes and tall grass moving back and forth gently in a light breeze.

Was it possible that was all I had seen during the night? Had I let my imagination build these innocent shrubs into some fierce Waffen SS patrol? I think so.