

2/23/05

January 13, 1945

by

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This was the worst day of my life, and it occurred in World War II as a member of the First Platoon, "G" Company, 119th Infantry, 30th Infantry Division. This January day during the "Battle of the Bulge" included most of the elements of close combat that can ever be inflicted by the Gods of War. Further, it took place in the bitter cold of a Belgian winter over frozen ground covered with a foot of snow. It was miserable.

The 30th Division had been in fierce combat with advancing German forces since December 18 in the Malmedy-Stavelot sector of the Ardennes. At the end of December we were in a defensive position near Malmedy. Below our dug-in position along a railroad embankment there was a factory complex about a quarter of a mile away. Our platoon was ordered to mount a reconnaissance patrol to search this area for enemy activity. When we arrived we found dead American soldiers lying on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs with wire before being killed by German SS troops. Several dead German soldiers in the vicinity provided evidence of the severe fighting at this location. We found a German Panther tank altered in appearance to resemble a U.S. Army tank and not wanting it recaptured and reused by the Germans, I took a thermite grenade and put it down the barrel of the 75mm tank cannon. The grenade melted most of the end of the cannon tube to ensure the tank would not fire its main gun again.

During this time our company and platoon took a well-deserved rest as we waited for the oncoming action. The German offensive had been blunted and a counterattack was planned to drive them out of the Ardennes and restore the battle line to its former location. It was cold and we tried to keep warm in our foxholes along the railroad track. Of all the men in our platoon Ernie King and Edward Knocke were the most inventive when it came to digging foxholes. The longer they were in one defensive location the more elaborate their underground "homes" became. This particular foxhole would have won the prize if any prizes were to be awarded. Their foxhole could accommodate about six men was covered with a door they had removed from a nearby house. The door was piled high with dirt to protect the occupants from any mortar or artillery hits. A small table, several chairs, and a small stove had also been "requisitioned" from nearby houses. This was heaven! We would sit in their abode at night eating our heated K rations, telling, "war stories." and reminiscing about home, and our lives prior to our present circumstance. This was a time when we "recharged our batteries" and rested up for what we knew would be severe fighting ahead. It was also an opportunity to reassure the green replacements we had received, and hope they would meet the test of the coming combat.

By now we were a veteran outfit. I believe the phrase "hard bitten" could adequately describe us. The core group of our platoon had been together since early September and was a well honed fighting force. Some members had been wounded and had returned to the platoon in time for combat in the Ardennes. Before Christmas day we had collided with Adolph Hitler's First Panzer SS Division in a severe "bare-knuckle" firefight that caused their retreat. We knew we had met the test of combat and were ready for what was ahead. "Old timers" like us welcomed the new men that filled our ranks, some of them eighteen years old, and scared to death. We were all scared, and as the saying goes "had seen the elephant." This knowledge gave us an edge, however slight, over the new men in subduing our own fears.

The intense cold added uncomfortable dimensions to our existence. Unlike the days of September, October, or November when we could get by wearing only a field jacket and combat boots we realized that to survive we needed to pile on more clothes. We all carried a heavy load of clothing and equipment that weighted us down. By December I was wearing two pairs of long underwear, top and bottoms, a wool olive drab shirt and matching trousers. Over this was a field jacket, a wool scarf, and a wool trench coat that was long enough to reach the top of my combat boots. To keep my

feet warm two pairs of socks and a pair of four buckle "Arctic's," sometimes called "galoshes" fit over two buckle combat boots. My steel helmet had a white camouflage cover and a knit wool cap underneath to keep your ears warm. I wore wool knit gloves that fit in a leather glove shell. In addition, I was equipped with a gas mask and a haversack, which held a mess kit, K rations, and a sleeping bag. A canteen with canteen cup, an entrenching tool and first aid pouch was attached to my ammunition belt. I was one of the fortunate few in the platoon to have acquired a blow torch while in a Belgian town we had occupied and carried it in my left hand. The Army had a small stove to heat rations, and our platoon was issued only one and Mullins, our medical aid man, had that one. We were willing to carry the extra weight of the blow torch in order to have hot meals. These were all the clothes' one could wear, and still be able to move as an infantryman is supposed to move. I could not run fast or very far with my load, but a steady waking pace was possible.

I was armed with an M-1 rifle, 8 round semi-automatic, as well as a 10 inch long barrel Luger 9mm pistol on my belt. The Luger pistol was acquired in October from a German soldier Bill Cline had shot one night when we were dug-in on a ridge at Wurselen, Germany. For my rifle there were one hundred rounds of 30 caliber ammunition in 8 round clips, and a few extra 9mm rounds for the pistol. A bayonet was attached to my pack, and a rifle grenade bag was slung over my shoulder containing four anti-tank grenades and a launcher that fit over the muzzle of my M-1 rifle. Under my wool shirt was a sheath knife carried under my left arm fastened to a string around my neck. Remembering how much weight this added during this campaign it is a wonder how I did it. I weighed about 150 pounds then, and I suspect the weight of the clothing and equipment was at least one half of my body weight.

We received orders to close the "Bulge" and return the line to its December 16 location. Our battalion would attack, moving south from Malmedy, to seize the town of Belleaux that was situated behind a high ridge. Company "G" would lead the attack and our platoon would be the lead unit to carry the assault up the narrow road to the heights above the town. In preparing for the attack our platoon was told to leave sleeping bags in the rear with the company mess truck. The plan was to bring them forward that night after we had captured the objective. I decided to put my gas mask in my haversack instead of carrying it slung under my left arm. For a "GI" the gas mask carrier was considered a good place to "stash" personal belongings. In mine I carried

ried letters received from home, writing paper, a shaving brush, razor and soap, and a coal miner's carbide canister filled with tea bags.

Our platoon moved to the line of departure in darkness and at dawn the attack began with combat engineers moving forward to remove any anti-tank mines. We then were to clear out any German opposition so our supporting tanks could follow us then deploy in the open ground to support our attack. As we moved forward we learned the engineers had discovered an extensive mine field on the road. It was late in the morning before we could move through a foot path the engineers had opened through the mines. We continued the attack up the road to seize and hold the ridgeline until the tanks could catch up. The platoon slowly trudged its way up the steeply sloped, narrow road that ran a quarter of a mile to the top of the ridge. The snow was a foot deep and it was slow going as we made our way up the hill with combat boots and our four buckle galoshes.

Ernie King's squad lead the attack, as the platoon sergeant I decided to be up front with Ernie's squad; the other two squads in the platoon deployed in single file behind us. Cletus Herrig was the lead scout with Bob Friedenheimer the second scout. As the platoon approached the crest of the ridge Herrig spotted German soldiers in foxholes and yelled back that they were dug-in some thirty yards ahead. Cletus could speak German so we told him to call to them and demand that they surrender. I thought I could fire a rifle grenade into their position, but when it landed the deep snow cushioned the impact and it failed to explode.

Cletus kept trying to talk them into surrender, when suddenly all hell broke loose! No one who has ever heard the sound of a MG42 German machine gun open fire will ever forget it. This machine gun was pointed down toward the ditch line where we were crouched spraying us with bullets. The first burst hit four of us before we could find cover in the ditch below the machine gun's trajectory. Herrig was hit along the top of both shoulders, Friedenheimer was hit through the lung, I took a bullet in the back of my pack and was knocked down to my knees. Behind me was Milton Cohen, a private, one of the eighteen year old replacements that had joined us two weeks earlier. He was hit in the teeth with the bullet exiting his head behind his right ear, and I will never forget his plaintive call for his mother. Ernie King was the only one of the first five that was not hit by initial burst of fire from the machine gun.

Having been knocked down I immediately thought, "I just got lucky, I am on my way to the hospital and off this damn hill, and hope my wound is not too severe." My back was hurting and I assumed that I was bleeding from a puncture in my back. I rolled over and took the pack off my shoulders to see what had happened. To my surprise a German machine gun bullet was lying in the hole on my pack with a shred of rubber attached to it. I picked it up, it was still warm, then put it in my pocket as a souvenir of the occasion. Later I opened my gas mask container and discovered that the pack fabric, the gas mask container fabric, the rubber face mask, the metal gas mask canister, and the handle of my shaving brush had slowed the bullet to a stop on the surface of my field coat. It gave me one hell of a thump on my back that was sore for a few days afterwards. This was the only day in combat I had ever carried my gas mask in my pack and it had saved my life.

That first burst of machine gun fire put our platoon down hugging the ground in the ditch beside the road. We were stunned, and began to assess the extent of our casualties; we were grateful to find that no one had been killed. For the wounded among us immediate evacuation to the rear for treatment at the battalion aid station was made more difficult by the sporadic machine gun fire. The "jerries" had us pinned down and we could not move forward in the face of their machine gun fire on the road and ditch line. The phrase "all hell broke loose" again applied to our situation when the Germans began to drop 81mm mortar rounds on our position. There are few things more fearful to an exposed infantryman than incoming mortar or artillery fire. To compound this fear the "jerries" included in their barrage "screaming meemies," enemy rockets that made a horrendous noise, and caught us unprepared as targets for this form of artillery. When they came in on us I perceived their sound was comparable to railroad boxcar flying sideways through the air with both of its doors open. I found out later that the German name for this weapon was Nebelwerfer. As a rocket it did not compare with the accuracy of mortar or artillery fire, but its high pitched screeching noise made it all the more terrifying.

The "screaming meemies" did not get us but the 81mm mortars did. From their defensive positions the German's were masters at pinning down advancing infantry and then raining mortar rounds on them. The mortar shells were falling on the road behind us and on the remainder of our platoon. An 81mm mortar shell fragment hit Vic Kwiatowski in the head seriously wounding him. Mortar shell fragments hit Bob Heider in the neck, shoulder and back. Jones got hit in the head by a fragment that penetrated his

steel helmet, and the mortar barrage also wounded the second squad BAR man, Charles Holverson, Clarence Overton was killed. Our progress halted, we could not go forward and were not going to retreat. The immediate requirement was to evacuate our wounded. Smitty, our platoon leader, was in the middle of the platoon column and organized the effort along with the platoon medic to remove the wounded from the hill. Those that could walk moved to the rear. For the more seriously wounded a door was taken from nearby house and brought forward to use as a stretcher for Vic and others wounded from the barrage.

Ernie King and I stayed to the front keeping down low in the ditch beside the road. We were concerned that the Germans would mount a counterattack on our position after their first machine gun burst. Artillery support fire began, but we were too close to our enemy for the artillery to continue and be effective. Any artillery rounds falling short would have landed on our platoon deployed along the road. The tanks would eventually move forward and up the hill to support us when the minefield was cleared. In the meantime we scanned the hedgerow along the crest of the ridge and a row of trees about thirty yards away that ran down the hill paralleling the road. A German soldier was spotted on the other side of the line of trees crawling down the hill in an attempt to outflank our position. Both King and I shot at him, but at the time we could not see whether we got him. We finally received word that two light tanks had moved through the cleared mine field and would support the Third Platoon in its attack through the field on our left flank to knock out the machine gun emplacement.

The attack by the Third Platoon was a sight to behold, with a deafening crescendo of small arms fire and cannon bursts. Each platoon of Company G had a slightly different character regarding weaponry preference. Our platoon had no particular love for the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR); it was a 21 pound load to carry and a weapon that required constant maintenance to keep it operational. Each of our three squads was issued a BAR. However, the 3d Platoon thought the BAR was a great weapon and almost every third man in the platoon carried one. Sergeant Frank Wease, the Third Platoon Sergeant, carried one and encouraged the weapons use.

In the combined infantry and tank attack up the hill Wease deployed his platoon abreast in a line on each side of and between the two light tanks. The tanks were armed with a 37mm main gun on the turret and a 30 caliber light machine gun that protruded from the front of the tank where the machine gunner sat beside the tank

driver. There were about 14 men with BAR's in Wease's platoon and the remainder with M-1 rifles. Coming up the hill with the tanks in the middle of the formation, they were all firing as they moved forward. Each tanks main gun, its machine gun, the BAR's, and the M-1 rifles of the third platoon created a sheet of fire concentrated on the enemy position at the crest of the hill. There was no way the third platoon could be stopped by any counter fire from the entrenched German troops. Wease and his men, with their tank support, surged through the enemy line along the trees on the ridge. The German troops that were still alive immediately surrendered. Several minutes had passed when Sgt. Wease brought some prisoners down the road where we were located. All of us were furious at the casualties they had inflicted on our platoon, and wanted to shoot them, but Wease would not let us. Later, after calming down from the days' events, I was grateful that Wease had restrained me from taking such a rash act. I had never shot an unarmed prisoner, and didn't want such a thing on my conscience. After the attack King and I went over to the hedgerow where we had shot at the German crawling down the hill. We found him dead. Someone in the attacking third platoon had taken his pistol as they moved up the hill in the assault.

Late afternoon had come by the time our company had seized the ridgeline above Bellevaux. We received orders to set up a defensive position, the days were short in the middle of winter and night would soon fall. The third platoon was to occupy that part of the ridge they had captured earlier in the day. Our platoon deployed in a stretch of open field to their right where digging a foxhole was very difficult. To get beneath the frozen ground required an extraordinary effort. Fortunately, someone in command had realized this problem and before the attack thought to issue a quarter pound block of TNT with a fuse and blasting cap to every other man in our platoon. Instructions have been given on the proper method to assemble the explosive device: dig a small hole in the ground, put the charge in the hole, light the fuse, and move away quickly before it exploded. The resulting explosion broke up the frozen crust so that a foxhole could be easily dug in the softer ground underneath. We were also told that the blasting cap was volatile and could explode if jarred violently, or exposed to excessive heat. This required that every man carrying a block of TNT, with its fuse and blasting cap, carefully wrap each separately, hoping they did not get hit, or in some way inadvertently ignite the blasting cap and TNT while they were carrying it.

Those of us in the company that survived this day's combat were faced with enduring a cold winter's night on a Belgian mountain. Previous to the attack we were

told to lighten our equipment load by leaving our sleeping bags in the rear area. Then after the attack our sleeping bags would be carried forward for use that night; this did not happen. Because of the snow cover and the steep incline of the winding road to our defensive position, our company truck could not move close enough to deliver the promised sleeping bags. We were in for a very long, cold night of lying in the open on frozen snow covered ground, or in hastily dug foxholes. The rifle squads on the defensive line got busy, breaking up the ground with TNT then dug their foxholes for the night. We, in the platoon headquarters were not issued blocks of TNT so lying on top of the snow-covered ground was our only option. Lou LeFever, always a great forager, went down the hill and found a barn with some hay in it. He brought as much as he could carry to our position behind the ridgeline. We scattered the hay in the drainage ditch where previously the machine gun fire had pinned us down. We lay on the hay putting the remainder of it on us. Smitty, the platoon leader, Lou LeFever, the platoon runner, Mullins the medic, and me, the platoon sergeant, huddled together in the "spoon position." I don't remember who was in the middle, or who was on the outside of our sleeping "formation," but I do remember that it was very cold, and we were all shivering and hoping for morning to come quickly.

The next morning "G" Company was ordered to advance over the ridge and down the road leading to the town of Bellevaux, our next objective. The Third Platoon would lead the attack, with the Second Platoon in support. The First Platoon having been severely mangled the day before, followed in reserve, with my position being at the rear of our platoon column. It was a cold dark morning as the remaining members of the platoon reluctantly shouldered packs and rifles to prepare themselves for another day of combat against a determined enemy. As we moved single file down the road toward Bellevaux one of the men from the platoon, Samuel Klugman, dropped out of the column. I walked over to find out why. He pulled off his glove and showed me his right hand, saying his hand felt frozen. The hand looked blue and rigid so I told him to go to the rear for medical treatment. This was our last casualty from the attack the previous day, the worst day of my life.

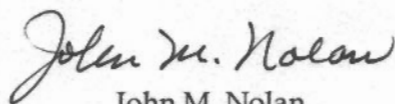


Company G, 119<sup>th</sup> Infantry Strength Comparison January 8, 1944  
strength with January 13, 1944 Casualties

	January 8, 1944			January 13, 1944			Casualties		
	EM	OFF	Medics	EM	OFF	Medics	EM	OFF	Medics
Headquarters	14	2		11	2		3		
1 <sup>st</sup> Platoon	28		1	14		1	14		
2d Platoon	25	1	1	14	1	1	11		
3d Platoon	30		1	17			13		1
4 <sup>th</sup> Platoon	31			19			12		
TB	6			3			3		
	134			78			56		1
Rear	16			16					
Totals	<u>150</u>	3	3	<u>94</u>	3	2			

Comment: The combat strength of Company G, 119<sup>th</sup> Infantry at 0300 hrs. on January 13, 1944 was 140 (134 EM, 3 Off, 3 Medics). At 1600 hrs., at the end of the attack, the company combat strength was reduced to 83 (78 EM, 3 Off, 2 Medics). In a 13-hour period Company G lost 57 men, a 41 % loss rate. Of the 57 losses three men were killed, Clarence Overton, 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Lauren A. Gates, Jr., and James W. Phillis 3d Platoon; the remainder were wounded in action.

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