

## The Plane Riders

by

John M, Nolan

Christmas was never the same after the one we experience in Coe, Belgium in 1944. You would think everybody would take this day off from the war, but no such luck. That morning our platoon was ordered to run a combat patrol on the side of the mountain between our company and an adjacent one. Nothing eventful happened so we were looking forward to our Christmas dinner, which we had planned for that afternoon. We had "liberated" a couple of Belgian chickens and Ernie King was appointed the cook. He had made the necessary preparations to get the chickens into the pot and they were simmering while we were out on the morning's business. We were in the safest part of the house we had commandeered, the basement, and were just about to sit down to our Christmas chicken dinner when our dear friends in the Air Corps arrived to join us in our celebration.

Since this was to be called "The Battle of the Bulge" there was much confusion as to where the friendly lines ended and where the enemy was located. Of all of the combat units in this fracas the most confused was the Air Corps. A flight of two P-38's had spotted a couple of our tanks parked on the only street of this town. The tanks were plainly marked with orange panels, but this didn't seem to register on the minds of our steak-eating comrades. Both fighter pilots decided to "kill" our Sherman tanks with 500-pound bombs. Fortunately for the tankers, "buttoned-up" in their armored boxes, our plane-riding heroes missed their intended targets. Unfortunately for our platoon the concussion of the bombs shattered the chandelier above the dining table where our Christmas dinner awaited, scattering shards of glass into our anticipated feast.

When we finally crawled out from under the table, and other furniture that we thought would help protect us from the blast, for an instant we couldn't perceive what had happened to us. We sensed that no one had been hurt, but when we looked at our Christmas dinner we saw the awful truth. Blasphemy burst forth, a chorus of oaths appeared that had been polished and refined over the course of many months and days of ground combat. If those P-38's had returned for another pass at that moment we would have run outside and shot at them with our M-1 rifles.

It was a very long time before I was to decide what proper expletive should be assigned to our "Boys in Blue," although in those days they wore olive drab like the rest of us. It wasn't until 1948 when I was commissioned and met Len Preston that I finally discovered a proper epithet. He was a ROTC graduate from the University of Kentucky and the most amiable fellow you would want to have around. Len was a country boy and he liked to chew tobacco, which he bit off from a twist. My short-lived chewing had been done from plug and pouch so I knew Len was different by the tobacco he chewed.

My new friend was as big as a house, actually he was as big as a football tackle had to be to play at UK. When Len would talk about his football days he would always

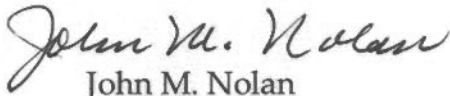
talk about his coach. This was 1948 and this little known coach was Paul "Bear" Bryant, long before he was canonized at Alabama. There is one incident that Len related I have not forgotten. In those days football teams traveled to and from distant opponents by train. After returning from a Saturday when Kentucky was badly defeated, Bear in a rage berated his team as no-good, and told them they were nothing more than "train ridin', steak eatin', fucks."

Bear's invective rates high on my all time list of denunciations. In fact I am wont to use the same salutation when I think of the no-good Army Air Corps. In their case however, I would substitute the word "plane" for "train." I wish I could say that I am not prejudiced in any way, but it isn't true. I disliked the Air Corps, and believe I share the feelings of most infantrymen that fought in WWII. While sitting on the edge of our foxholes we all looked up and watched fighters and bombers flying over. We were convinced to a man that when those lousy bastards all got back to their bases they would have steak for supper.

Such thoughts were induced by the fact that we had just finished, or were soon to eat a K-ration. This was our constant diet, month after month, and it was monotonous. Sometimes we would get a hot meal, but such meals usually included dehydrated potatoes, which had the consistency and flavor of wallpaper paste. Such concerns were relatively minor when you consider that those high flying plane riders were a menace to your very life and limb. If you weren't careful and particularly alert they would bomb and strafe you right out of your sox. Our greatest fear was the "American Luftwaffe," not the German Wehrmacht.

After over fifty-six years I still do a "slow burn" when I remember Christmas 1944. We ate our K-rations again that day as our visitors from the sky rode their planes back to their base somewhere in France. We were certain when they returned, instead of the monotony of a steak dinner; they would dine on turkey before going to the party at the officers club.

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