The Cold War

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Abstract

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Our hole was a good hole as holes go. It wasn't always that way. We were dug in on what Field Manual 21-100 calls the military crest of the hill directly in front of the town. It was a solid town. Three feet of stone masonry make buildings solid. The barns were all connected with the houses and the dusty smell of old hay drifted out of the mows when we sneaked through the town. It was a town without people. It was just a collection of a dozen buildings sitting solidly and quietly minding its own business.

When we came up to relieve the armored outfit, it was just an ordinary depression in the frozen earth. We had just come over a mountain on a slippery road, and I wasn't in a mood to get ecstatic over anything. Going up the mountain was bad enough but coming down was worse. A shimmering coat of ice covered the whole length of the descending road. A person is unbalanced when he has forty pounds on his back and twenty-one pounds slung over his shoulder. Slippery footing makes the task of maintaining equilibrium very difficult under such conditions. I started to count the number of times I went down but I gave up after counting to eleven. It was dark by the time we arrived in the town and I was very sore. It was about all I could do to keep track of Higgs who was six yards in front of me. Higgs was big and clumsy. He was capable of tripping over a newspaper lying on the barracks floor, and he had fallen more times than I had. We were passing through the town when Higgs fell again and spoke a soft, "God damn."

"God damn you, Higgs," followed in the loud rasp of Sgt. Scardaci's voice. Sgt. Scardaci was interested in keeping things quiet. We continued to move forward in search of the armored outfit's positions, and we finally found them. The first time I saw our hole two joes were standing in it. The hole wasn't very deep, for the men stuck up far enough to reveal their torsos. Sgt. Scardaci decided that this hole would be just right for a BAR position and he directed Pasqua and me to take it.
Everything would have been cozy, but the two joes didn't consider themselves properly relieved. This strict adherence to military etiquette caused them to stay all night. Sgt. Weathersby came over after a bit because there weren't enough holes to go around. That made five of us and conditions were a little crowded. The armored outfit boys began to orient us.

"It ain't bad. You'll get used to it," was the consoling contribution of the taller one.

"Yah," I said.

"Once in a while the Heines throw over a shell."

"Yah," I said.

"You got to keep watching for them."

"Yah," I said.

"You'll get used to it."

"Yah," I said.

My idea of getting used to it was to recline in the bottom of the hole. I was tired and sore from falling down so much. Pasqua shared my idea and squeezed in beside me. The two joes and Weathersby knelt on top of us and peered out over the top of the hole. I didn't sleep too well. The joe who was on top of me was nervous and kept shifting his knees. Every once in a while he would catch me where I was tender and I would wake up and hear the two joes talking.

"I wish I had some water so's I could make some lemonade."

"It's too sour for me."

"You gotta put lots of sugar in it."

"Who's got lots of sugar?"

"We got two packs from the "C" can."

"Two packs ain't enough."

"Two packs is plenty. Otherwise it gets too sticky sweet."

"I don't like it sour."

"One pack of powder and two packs of sugar makes it just right."

"Aw."

Then I would go back to sleep. Just before dawn a knee dug deeply into me and a foot came down gently on my chest. The two joes were leaving before the light would show them up. Pasqua and I stretched luxuriously in the new found space. Weathersby was still looking out, but he didn't say much. Weathersby was nineteen. He was six foot one, lanky, and reticent.
The First Day

Things began to take shape as the light got stronger. The valley sloped gently before us and terminated in a stand of pine about seven hundred yards away. From there on, the ground rose again to form a ridge in the distance that was the periphery of our world. There was a barbed wire fence running parallel to our position one hundred and seventy-five yards to our front. One isolated pine stood two hundred and fifty yards to our right front. Six inches of snow weighed down its boughs and gave its branches an exaggerated thickness. The smooth chastity of the snow on the ground was interrupted by a scattering of black splotches which indicated the places where shells had landed. The town lay over the hill at our back.

Pasqua and I were setting up the BAR when the first shell whistled over and landed in the town behind us. Weathersby was down in the bottom of the hole before the shell landed. He was shaking and digging at the dirt with his fingernails. I was on top of Weathersby, and Pasqua was on top of me. The occasional shell Jerry was supposed to throw over turned out to be an intense barrage. The air was heavy with the acrid odor of burnt powder. A piece of dirt fell off the side of the hole, bounced off Pasqua and then hit the bottom. A close one was loud enough to make my ears start ringing, but I could still hear the shrapnel whine over our private six square feet of sky. It was like that for twenty minutes. After it began to ease up Pasqua and I got off of Weathersby and looked out. They didn't follow up with anything. Weathersby was still in the bottom of the hole shaking convulsively. His attacks of shakes would coincide with each shell that went over. There were a few minutes of silence and then Weathersby spoke. "We had better d-d-dig the hole d-d-deeper," he said. He was from Texas.

Pasqua had a pick and I had a combination entrenching tool. The clay peeled off evenly as the point of the tool pushed beneath it. The earth wasn't frozen at the bottom. The shovel only took out a tablespoonful at a time but there wasn't much room to dig with three of us in the hole. Weathersby took a turn at digging. He scraped hard and threw dirt out in quick movements. Little beads of perspiration appeared below the front edge of his helmet. He stopped shaking. After two hours the hole was long enough to allow two to stretch out and there was room at the end for the third to stand guard.
There was nothing to do now but listen for shells and think about being hungry. We had three cans of "C" rations; two meat and beans and one meat and vegetable hash. Nobody liked meat and vegetable hash, but Pasqua said he didn't mind it. We took turns using the little key to rip the band of metal from around the cans. The first turn of the key would break the vacuum and the air would make a little noise as it rushed in. The meat and beans were covered with a layer of congealed yellow fat above the red tomato sauce. Crystals of ice indicated the food was frozen. Our forks would bend as we tried to jab them in. The only recourse was to use our bayonets to chip off hunks we could soak in our mouths and chew. Nobody thought he was good enough to make a fire that wouldn't smoke.

Oakie, the company runner, pulled himself over the side of the hole and dropped in. He was panting hard. He hadn't wasted time coming up the face of the hill. He brought six bandoliers of ammunition, four grenades, and some mail. Weathersby received a letter from his wife. Pasqua received a V-mail from his girl. I received a two month old edition of Time Magazine. Oakie told us to expect an attack and then he boosted himself over the edge of the hole and ran fast. He was behind the hill when a shell dropped in his footprints.

We stripped the yellow cloth tape from the grenade cans and placed the grenades where they would be handy. Pasqua and I took cartridges out of the M-1 clips and filled four BAR magazines with them. Weathersby kept looking out to the front, and he started to shiver again. Pasqua and I went out to try and find something with which to make a roof and to relieve ourselves. We didn't have time to find anything for the roof. The artillery convinced us to wait until night. Weathersby never left the hole. He began to shake more violently. He suddenly seized an empty grenade can and put it to his own use. The volume of the can was not commensurate with Weathersby's capacity and a considerable amount of liquid spilled before he could empty the can over the edge of the hole. Weathersby stopped shaking.

Darkness was settling over the heavily overcast sky. Pasqua took the first guard and I settled down in the bottom of the hole. I opened my copy of Time and read by the dim light. I started an article telling how we were beating hell out of the Germans and then I went to sleep.
Days and Nights

The phone came on the second night. Sgt. Stabluski loomed out of the darkness from behind while I was looking for Germans in the front. He stood at the edge of the hole for awhile and looked at the other holes down the line and then he looked at me. I looked back at him.

"I think we'll make this an O. P.," he said and then he threw the phone down in the hole. I caught the phone and said, "O.K." but by that time he was following the black line of the wire back to the town. The black line led back to the basement of the house which contained Captain Brooks and a pot bellied stove. The line led out of the back of the house to a place where three battalions of artillery were disposed. Our hole was the sensory organ; the house was the brain; and the long motor neuron touched off the response. The brain kept calling for a stimulus every fifteen minutes that night. The Germans were obliging enough to toss mortar shells and shoot a machine gun at somebody. It was worse when I didn't have anything to report. The wind blew cold against my face and mucus kept running from my nose and freezing on the bristles of my upper lip. The last ten minutes always passed slowly. I wanted to crawl in beside Pasqua and get warm again. I knew Weathersby would be hard to waken. During the day he had said he wouldn’t stand guard. Pasqua told him a thirty-one caliber makes the same size hole in a noncom as it does in a private. He seemed to get the idea. It was 0300 when I touched his leg for the first time. He groaned and rolled over. I jigged his leg again. "Just a minute," he mumbled sleepily. I stooped beneath the roof and grabbed him by the shoulders and started to shake him hard. His head swung loosely and described an increasing arc as I shook him harder. His head hit against the edge of the helmet which lay upturned on the bottom.

"O.K., O.K., I'm awake," he said.
"I'm cold," I said.
"I gotta have a cigaret," he said.
"Go ahead," I said.

He had difficulty lighting the match. He kept spitting little crumbs of tobacco from his lips, and he made that cigaret last forever.

"You have to call the captain if anything happens," I said.
"O.K.," he said. He crawled out to the open space, and I
shoved in beside Pasqua to get my four hours. My feet were numb, and I couldn't go to sleep right away.

The kraut machine gun popped off more than usual the third night. The captain could hear it back at the house. It made him mad. He had the artillery on one end of the line and me on the other. Every time the gun would fire a burst, he would call.

"Bell, Bell, where's that fire coming from?" He talked in a crisp staccato, but he couldn't clip them off at over a thousand a minute like the Jerrygun.

"Right front, sir," I came back at him, fast because I knew he liked it that way.

"Get me an azimuth," he said.

I was fumbling for a compass when a shell came over and cut the line. It would take the communications boys a while to splice the line, and that gave me time to figure. I knew he was sitting back at the house poring over his map, trying to fix a coordinate. What the hell did he think I was? All I had was a cheap army compass and two ears six inches apart. The gun belched a short burst, and I tried to lay out the directions on the compass. I knew I would be lucky to get within twenty degrees. The captain liked precision, but what could I do with a cheap compass and two ears six inches apart? He was sitting back there waiting with a map. There would be a point on the map to indicate the position of our hole. He would take a bearing and correct for declination and lay out a neat polar coordinate. He was a civil engineer and he liked to lay out neat lines. Then he would call the artillery and maybe kill some Germans he couldn't see. A couple of battalions of artillery made him drunk with power.

"C.P. to O.P." The line was fixed.

"273 degrees, seven hundred yards," I said, like I knew what I was doing.

"I'm going to throw in a concentration," he said.

Oh, Jesus, I knew he'd do something big. He sits back there and speaks numbers into a phone and makes the thunder roar. He shakes the earth. He's Zeus throwing thunder down on the earth. He's going to concentrate hell on 273 degrees. He's God. I ducked down in case of a short round and watched the sky light up. The blast was still bouncing around between the hills when I looked out. Some joes from C company were running towards the rear and not looking back. The hill was still there.
Everything was quiet. The Jerrygun fired a long defiant burst. I didn’t call the captain, and he didn’t call me. C company sent out a patrol just before dawn and they got the gun.

It snowed the third day. The flakes were big and sticky. They filtered down into the hole and made the blankets damp. The snow melted on my pants and soaked through to my long underwear. It turned cold that night and that made things crusty. The German artillery must have been conserving ammunition. Half the night passed without a shell.

“Bell, Bell, how are things out there?” the captain called in.
“Quiet, sir,” I said.
“I don’t like it, Bell. It’s too quiet.”
“Yes, sir,” I said.
“Stay alert,” he said.
“Yes, sir,” I said.
“I don’t like it,” he said.
“Yes sir,” I said.

The fourth day we saw a German. He came out of the woods with his hands over his head. His footprints left a crooked path in the snow as he weaved his way up to our lines. The sergeant from the second squad took him back.

“He didn’t look like any superman to me,” Weathersby said.

They discovered his legs were the blue black of gangrene when they took his boots off. The captain became humanitarian when things were quiet.

“Bell, how are things out there?” the captain asked.
“Cold, sir,” I said.

Later, Pasqua was on guard.
“Are you cold?” he asked Pasqua.
“I’m freezing my ass off,” Pasqua said.

Later Wethersby was on guard.
“How are you, Weathersby?” the captain asked.
“I’m all right. It’s just the numbness in my feet. It’s just the pain, sir.” he said. Weathersby went back to the house that night to get the medics to do something for his feet. We never saw him again.

Tomorrow and Tomorrow

The pony edition of Time lay depleted at the bottom of the hole. All of the pages but the one bearing the section on Cinema were gone. An acute five-day shortage of toilet paper was
responsible for the loss of the other pages. Business and Finance went first, followed quickly by Religion and then Education. Lana Turner’s picture was on the Cinema section page. Things really happen when a person goes through religion, finance, and education all in five days. The material environment had been improved by the addition of a roof and a telephone. Then, too, Weathersby was gone. Pasqua and I were adjusted by now. We just sat around in the hole and made coffee over heat tablets. We talked about the captain and tombstones and Weathersby and what we would like to have to eat. We talked about tombstones because Pasqua knew more about tombstones than anything else. He told me how the letters were painted on the stone, and how he sandblasted them out of the granite. He told me about the boss he had who treated him just like he was a real human being. His boss would drive around in the morning and get him out of bed to take him to work. He also told me his boss was hardpressed for somebody to do the sandblasting because everyone who did it got some kind of a sickness in the lungs. Then Pasqua would cough a little and we would talk about something else or make some more coffee.

The field telephone would ring once in a while and I would pick up the receiver.

“How are things out there, Bell?” the captain would want to know.

“How are things out there, Bell?”

“It’s too quiet, Bell.”

“Yes, sir,” I’d say.

“Stay alert,” He’d say.

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t like it,” he’d say.

“Yes, sir,” I’d say.

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