

RESURRECTION SUNDAY

By Mack R. Ferren, revised, July 15, 1999

According to the Order of the Day, 13 March 1945, Major General H. F. Kramer, commanding, the United States Army 66th Infantry Division, there were sixty thousand German soldiers bypassed by the American invasion forces. They were concentrated along the seacoast cities, St. Nazaire, Lorient, and LaRoche, in Northern France. In those towns were German U-boats pens, protected by impenetrable re-inforced concrete shelters. In turn, the submarine Naval operations bristled with crack German troops protecting the areas meagerly supplied from the sea, and using stores built up through the years. The allied high command had concluded that to wage an all out campaign was too costly in time, and American casualties. Eisenhower decided to fight warfare of containment. So that invasion breakthrough had pressed on across France into Germany, leaving that area behind for others to manage.

Those German troops did not surrender until the war was over in Europe.

CAVALRY FIGHTING DISMOUNTED

In March, nine months after the Normandy invasion, C troop of the 107th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron stocked up on hand grenades, took their carbines, M-1 Garands rifles, 45 caliber, M-3 "Grease Guns" automatic pistols, stripped their weapons off their jeeps and M-8 armoured cars, half tracks, fifty caliber and 30 caliber machine guns, relieved an exhausted, and overmatched infantry unit, took up positions on the front lines at St. Omer, a village near Blain, France. In some locations we filled sand bags, dug trenches and "dugouts" where none existed before. We had never been battle-tested, would we fare any better than the infantry?

Easter morning, 1 April 1945, the St. Nazaire sector in Brittany, France, I was wakened from sleep after having been on guard in our trench machine gun position, two hours on and two hours off all night. In a few minutes death would strike at me again, I was 19 years old with no desire to die as a teenager.

SPOTTING FOR THE ARTILLERY

A couple of GI's wanted me to find the splice in the telephone wire laid on the ground leading to a French farm house about 75 yards in front of our positions. The Farmhouse was one of those, which housed animals in one side, in the other side were the living quarters and the loft above both sides was the storage for hay. Using the loft in the Farmhouse during the day we would stand on the hay slightly back from a small hole in the roof. We were careful not to let our field glasses get to near the hole as a precaution against the sun striking the glasses causing a glint or flash which would alert the enemy to our position, our job as spotting for the artillery taking readings from our military compasses.

ST. OMER AND ST. FESSION

St. Fession was a village about seven hundred yards away, occupied by German forces. We would spot any activity or suspicious terrain, which could be a military dugout, report the azimuth by field telephone which we had strung along the ground linking to our Command Post in the village of St. Omer. When an opposite spotter at another location phoned in his azimuth artillery would fire at the center of the coordinates. We would abandon the house before dark, separate the wire at a place nearer to our trench dugout position at night. This would prevent the enemy who might come in at night, discover the field telephone, listen in on our activities.

CALLING FOR A BARRAGE

We got results one day. It was raining quite heavily, so heavy that the enemy relaxed thinking they could not be spotted in the downpour. They lit fires in their wood stoves inside their dugouts to warm themselves believing the smoke could not be seen. I was spotting. I was amazed to see the total line of their positions! And they were back further from the town than I had ever believed. I called in the azimuth, as did my counter part, waited for the artillery, some trial rounds were fired, and I corrected the artillery until they were right on target, then they began a barrage sweeping the German lines with delayed fuses to explode below ground, the dirt geysered upward forcefully.

THE TRIP WIRE

On Resurrection Sunday 1945, death was waiting to retaliate against me like a snake using one of our own tripwires at St. Omer. The two GI's who had wakened me watched me from a distance as I was stumbling along in combat boots not even securely on, half asleep looking for where we had separated the splice on the field telephone the previous night. The trip wire was attached to one of our hand grenades. I hit it. I heard the preliminary "pop" sounding like a "lady finger" firecracker. I was instantly fully awake I took off running fast for almost as many seconds before it was supposed to explode. I dove to the ground, the grenade exploded. The shrapnel made a terrific noise cutting into trees, bushes, brush, and digging at the ground all around me. I was not hit at all, just shook and shaking. Anastasio! Maranatha! Amen. The trip wire was for our own security during the night, and was to have been taken up at the precise time to prevent such a happening, someone goofed, and I could have paid for it with my life.

FORREST RENSLAW

Pre-dawn, about 3am, 26 March, an attacking party of German soldiers almost got the jump on us. They were up the small road from the farmhouse, almost even with our lines when they were detected. They had stealthily, carefully, taken down all our trip wires in the dark, except one, before they were detected. They were Germany's top combat soldiers with many years of training and combat experience. They had penetrated only about ten yards from being even with our lines when they were detected by either Forrest Renslow, 22, of Cumberland, Wisconsin or Sgt. Lee Thomas, of Lorain, Ohio. Both GI's opened up with their weapons, Forrest with a thirty caliber marching gun, Lee with a fifty caliber. I was in the dugout with Forrest. He opened fire with the machine gun, firing to the right almost straight at Sgt. Thomas on our right flank. I stood to Forrest's right, as rapidly as I could pull the trigger, firing my semi-automatic carbine straight at the gun flashes. And they were slinging lead at us, too. Neither Forrest nor I was hit. It was a rapid-fire battle.

The German soldiers were strung up and down the road firing at us. The only thing we could see was gun flashes. A group of them had rushed forward shouting in German. There was one German who had a machine gun with a bipod, he ran forward, fell to the ground not more than 15 yards from Lee's left, precisely to take out Sgt. Thomas. Unfortunate for the German, he hit that last trip wire; he got off one abbreviated burst of just two rounds made inaccurate and terminated by the trip-wire explosion. The raiding party left dragging their casualties with them leaving trails of blood. We put this together when daylight came. One could read the desperation as they pulled along, hugging the ground, dragging their casualties as well along the road. It wasn't a pretty sight. None of us was hurt, but we were shaking right after it was over, calming later. By the grace of God we had survived their best. And they were professionals, somebody was watching over us. Who was more professional? It could have gone the other way, you know. We did not rejoice. We just looked.

STRESS

I want to interject something here. I hated to see night coming. When we ate each meal. We could go by turn into the village where we had a makeshift mess hall. I passed thought an old, stark, apple orchard to get there. Each evening on the way back, my stomach was so nervous that the food would come up into my throat causing a terrific burning, I had to constantly swallow until I got relief. I would pause in the apple orchard trying to calm, and I would pray that God would keep us through the night. I use to pray, "*Help us Lord God, give me your eyes, give me your ears, and protect us tonight.*" My food was hard to digest at night.

MIKE PATRICK

Another trip wire incident did not come out so happily, a terrible tragedy, just the day before Resurrection Sunday. It was that of a 23-year-old Tech Sergeant Mike Patrick, of Cannonsburgh, Pennsylvania. On 31, March 1945 he was trouble shooting the field telephone wire laid on the ground, trying to locate a wire break in the early afternoon. He as intent on the telephone line as he was walking, not seeing the thin trip wire connected to dynamite in a bucket filled with metal and glass, topped the explosive. It was one of our own security devices, a trap.

I was standing outside my trench when I heard a loud explosion, thinking it was an enemy round of artillery, I jumped into the trench, shortly, I heard shouting, I climbed out, looked toward a field seeing a knot of GI's, I walked swiftly out into the field. About ten yards from the scene of disaster there came a shout of alarm to me to stop! Another tragedy was just barely averted, but for me this time. I stopped just short of another trip wire connected to another load. I stepped over the wire, arrived to see Mike Patrick sitting on the ground, rocking back and forth in pain and horror saying over and over again "*Oh, My Poor wife!*" One part of an eye was hanging out on his cheek. He was bloody all over, glass pierced. In his condition he was selflessly thinking of his wife back home. My heart went out to him, and that feeling lodged in my heart where it remains to this day. They transported him back to the medical facilities back in the rear, and I did not know if he survived. For years after the war I would search for him using the telephone calling "information" with no success, no one knew what happened to him. I really didn't know if had survived his terrible wounds. Many ears after the war, was over, in December of 1991, 46 years after World War II, I spotted his name on a list provided by the reunion committee of the 107th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron.

How his name got on the list I don't know. I was overjoyed! I telephoned him immediately making contact. He could not remember me. I was one of several radio operators, but he was unique, a young man of good technical rank, a Sergeant, one of the leadership. The memory of him lived in my heart after that, several years later, Mike told me in March of 1999 what happened to him after he left us in 1945.

He was transported to a hospital in France where they operated on his eye using a magnet trying to extract some metal, with no success. While he was there another GI from the 107th Cavalry was in the hospital in bad shape, it was Sergeant Steve Karas.

STEVE KARAS

Steve Karas, of Byesville, Ohio, was one of the best 60-millimeter mortar men I ever knew. We had called upon him occasionally to fire mortar flares at night when we suspected the enemy was trying to come in on us.

Five days before Resurrection Sunday, pre-dawn 27 March 1945; I detected a sizable enemy patrol coming in to attack us. They had returned with a vengeance follow-up from the previous night's defeat. I opened fire with my 30-caliber machine gun, and all hell broke loose directed at me, gun flashes from the startled and angry enemy punctuated the darkness. Forrest Renslow ran quickly to my aid. The bullets and tracers were flying, the smell of gun powder was acrid, dirt was flying all over kicked up by the enemy bullets searching for me, holes were punched into some dirt-filled bags near me. I was hit in the head by German hand grenade shrapnel, knocked to the bottom of the trench. It was like someone had hit me in the head with a club, and the blood was just squirting. I recalled thinking; ***"I've got a bullet in my head! I've heard of people living for a while with a bullet in their head, so I don't have anything to lose now."*** I jumped up. Forrest asked, ***"Do you want me to take the machine gun?"*** I said, ***"No, I'll do it!"*** I told Forrest ***"Move those bags so I can get them on the left!"*** He did, even when a spray of bullets tore into the dugout eating away at the crude top we had on the dugout, just inches above our heads. I crouched as low as I would get, aimed the machine gun about knee high, hoping to get the enemy whether he was standing or crouching. That finished the attack from our left.

Relief had come from my right, Sgt. Lee Thomas in the next dugout about fifty yards on our right flank had opened up with a fifty caliber machine gun, but fifty yards on my left flank there was one of our positions with a thirty caliber machine gun, idle. The two GI's were in the dugout cowering down, hiding, and doing nothing, fear frozen. An enemy flanking attack toward me was being staged almost in front of them. They could have easily taken out my attackers. Sergeant Robert Ailes, age 31 (one of the "old men") of Dayton, Ohio rushed into the dugout, shouting at the men, ***"what the hell is going on!"*** The men answered him, ***"There is a fire fight!"*** He could see tracers in the darkness from an automatic weapon, being fired at me. He described, ***"he would fire a burst, the gun would lift, he would fire another burst. By the time I got my machine gun into position it was all over."***

We finished the battle. It became eerily quiet, and then Steve Karas started firing the mortar in back of us to get the retreating German soldiers. Then E Troop opened up with their Seventy-five millimeter artillery from their tanks quite a distance in back of us joining Steve Karas in his mortar work. They had the coordinates. It was awesome. In later years, Riley Bailey, of Davis Oklahoma in E Troop told me that they zeroed in nearly on top of us and worked outward the catch fleeing Germans. He told me the E Troopers were really concerned that the close-in support might kill us too.

I was taken back to the aid station where they held me for a while. While I was there the German artillery opened up on our positions. I heard with alarm the blasting of the German artillery. The enemy was furious. It was told me that the German artillery placed 200 rounds into an area equivalent to two blocks. They had to have rage to use up munitions they could ill afford to waste. I was really glad I was out of the target area. I was told later that the mortar of Steve Karas was hit by German artillery shrapnel, totaled.

I was taken further back to a larger facility where the medics shaved my head on the side where I had been hit. They stitched me up, and patched me. Thank God there was no bullet in the head, and that the hand grenade shrapnel did not pierce the skull. While I was there the ambulance brought in Steve Karas. German artillery shrapnel had hit him during the barrage, he was in terrible pain, and the wound was about the size of your thumb in the back near a kidney, I thought, "He's not going to make it!" It was 27 March 1945.

In later years I learned from Robert Ailes that Steve Karas survived. I was so happy, but I so regret I never saw Steve again. I really liked him. Sometime after that Mike was put on shipboard, the Arcadia Hospital Ship, transported to South Carolina. They moved him on to West Virginia to the Newton T. Baker Hospital. After a long hospital stay Mike Patrick was discharged from the Army at Newton T. Baker in October 1945.

In a seven-day period from 26 March to 1 April 1945 there were four occasions on which I could have been killed.

LT. ALVA JEFFREY FORSYTHE

Never would we face any harder fighting until we were released to race across France, cross the Rhine at Mannheim on a pontoon bridge, getting in on the tail end of the Battle of the Rhine, started seeing intensified action just before we crossed the Danube at Ulm, Germany while it was still burning, we had to wait for the engineers to build a pontoon bridge before we could cross. We drove hard night and day into the Alps, fighting mounted and dismounted until just six miles from Innsbruck, Austria. Everywhere we stopped that's where I wanted to stay! Lt. Alva Jeffery Forsythe, 25, a West Point graduate from Oklahoma City, ordered, "Let's Go!" even when our tank support never showed up, I'd groan inwardly, "oh god!" I was a reluctant warrior, but we would follow Lt. Forsythe anywhere. Not only did we respect him, we liked him, he was a West Pointer, and more. We turned back only when we were ordered to turn around because the American Army driving up from Italy had beat us to Innsbruck. Now each of us who went the distance was awarded three battle stars, the Battle of Northern France, the Battle of the Rhine, the battle of Central Europe to be pinned on the European Theater of Operations Ribbon.