

What Price Glory?

by Bill Watson, 398-A

Bill Watson was a 60 mm mortarman in Company A, 398th Infantry Regiment. In late November, Able Company was exploiting the penetrations made in the German Winter Line in the High Vosges range, pursuing the beaten 708th Volks-Grenadiers who had been forced from their prepared positions.

We were again moving forward. The main action was up ahead, a few miles, judging by the sounds. We came to a small town that had just been liberated by the units ahead. The shooting was over, and the inhabitants came out to cheer us on. They were deliriously happy, some crying, some laughing, waving flags—French ones and even a few American ones, probably hidden away for just this dreamed-for eventuality. A few were home-made without the requisite number of stars or even stripes. But no one counted.

We heroes got caught up in the exhilaration of the occasion, Private First Class Alle Levy, for reasons unknown, started yelling, “I’m telling you! I’m telling you!” The gathered natives picked up the chant and pretty soon everyone, GIs and French alike, were shouting in unison, “I’m telling you! I’m telling you!” just like a school cheer at a football game. We marched through town and out again to what at the time seemed a perfectly sensible refrain.

We were marching down another mountain road, this one winding with large conifers on both sides. We were in company-size column. We had seen no Germans and from the sporadic artillery fire assumed we were several hundred yards from the actual fighting. There was no fixed front. Things were in a state of flux. You learn to be particularly wary and apprehensive at such times. This is when the unexpected happens.

We were ordered to “take ten” but to move off the road and up the hill a few yards into the trees where there would be less chance of being observed. We had barely settled down—a few had lit cigarettes—when it happened. A salvo of 88mm shells came in directly on top of us. There was no mistaking the high-pitched screech of an incoming 88 and nothing more frightening. They burst in the treetops above us, ripping off the tops and spraying the ground with shrapnel and wood fragments. It was over in seconds, just a half dozen rounds, or maybe fewer. Nobody counts accurately at such a time.

But the nightmarish result will never be over for me. I had dropped flat, face down at the sound of the incoming barrage. My closest friend and fellow mortarman, Edwin Tarter, had dropped beside me. He groaned once, and I looked over to see that he had been cut almost in half at the waist. There were the terrible and unmistakable screams of the wounded but they were not from Tarter. He died instantly without making another sound.

Only one other person in our group of 30 or so who were on the hillside was seriously hurt. I did not get so much as a scratch.

Edwin F. Tarter, Private First Class, US Army. I called him Tarter. He called me Watson. That was common practice, to call people by their last names. He was from Somerset, Kentucky. We were the same age, twenty. His hair was reddish brown, and he had a bad case of acne. He was retiring, shy except with those he knew well. With them he smiled easily, a kind of grin. He was a private person, reserved. He had a girl back home.

He carried her picture in his wallet and talked enough about her for you to know it was a serious relationship. Otherwise, he didn’t talk much about home. Time supposedly heals emotional wounds. Maybe *heal* is the wrong word; *mend* might be better. I still think about Tarter, on special days like the Fourth of July and Veterans Day without fail. The usual remarks about those who have died for their country have a special meaning for me. I knew one, my best friend, and he died just inches from me. I remember at other times, too. No pattern, something will happen and there he is. The memories are maybe not as acute and not as frequent anymore, but they have somehow become more poignant.