

A Private's Survival Guide

by Clifford J. Wood, MP

If you are a private in the Army and I was, you learn to beware of certain things. Two such things are officers and artillery.

Let me cite some example to prove my point. I'll cover artillery first, since it is always to be avoided. Officers sometimes are a problem, but not always. Still be careful of them.

To position the examples—World War II, European Theater of Operations, Seventh Army, 100th Infantry Division, MP Platoon mostly in the Alsace–Lorraine area.

One night, probably in the winter of 1945, I was on jeep patrol with one of the officers in our platoon, Lieutenant Solberg I think, the driver of the jeep and another MP. I was sitting behind Lt Solberg who was in the passenger side of the front seat. I don't remember why we were on patrol. In fact I probably never knew, such is the lot of privates. It was late, probably between 10:00 PM and midnight and pitch black. We drove into the center of a small village and stopped in the middle of the village square. We didn't see anybody, either friend or foe, but I knew we were quite close to the front lines. Suddenly there was a loud bang from an incoming artillery shell. I didn't know where it landed. I didn't see anything, but I smelled cordite. Lieutenant Solberg and the driver both jumped out of the jeep and hit the dirt, or to be more precise, I should say hit the mud. In those days, there were crossbars on the jeeps supporting the canvas roof to the metal frame of the vehicle. They were positioned so that people in the back seats could not directly get to the ground; you had to get into the front seat first. I don't know how we did it but when Lieutenant Solberg and the driver jumped out, the other MP and I ended up taking their seats in front. I have no idea who went first through the narrow space between the two front seats. But that is where we ended up when immediately a second shell landed. Again there was only the sound of the shell landing and the smell of cordite. The other MP and I both bailed out. There was a lapse of a few seconds when the Lieutenant stood up and said "Let's get out of here". It was then that I realized I had lost my rifle. I put my face down to the ground and sighted along it to get a glimpse of the silhouette of the rifle laying on its surface. But it was pitch black I couldn't distinguish anything. After what must have been a few seconds the Lieutenant stood up and said "Let's get out of here". I said I couldn't find my rifle. He replied that we were leaving anyway. I remember imagining the dire consequences that could happen to me if I lost my rifle, particularly in a combat area. At worst they would ship me to the infantry. But I climbed back into the jeep as ordered. Like manna from heaven, what do I find in the back seat; my rifle. What an immense relief. From disaster to salvation in the flash of an instance.

As the war progressed the division moved into Germany. Division headquarters moved forward to a new town every day. Then we came to a momentary halt as the division tried to cross the Neckar river at Heilbronn. The Germans commanded the high ground east of the river. A pontoon bridge was thrown up at Heilbronn and a crossing attempted. The Germans countered with an artillery barrage of 88s that destroyed the bridge. It was at this bridge that the MP platoon suffered its only casualty. PFC Joseph Myers was directing a tank onto the bridge when he was hit and killed from the enemy artillery. He was in an exposed position standing on the bridge, where as the men in the tank were protected because it was buttoned up. There was talk of trying to make another crossing further downstream. I don't know how we finally got across the river. A few days after the bridge was blown away I was on jeep patrol with another MP. We came upon an area in the outskirts of Heilbronn (Heilbronn as a fairly large city then). It was an

apartment type location with sidewalks, but no front yards. I believe it was a few blocks from the river. There were about a dozen infantrymen standing on the sidewalk at the intersection. The driver pulled up to talk to them. We got out of the jeep and as we stood talking to them, an artillery shell came in. The other MP and I hit the ground. As we got up, we became aware that the infantrymen had not moved. They kind of grinned and told us that the incoming shell was not close and that with experience, one can tell from the sound the shell makes in the air if it is going to be close. Another shell came in. The other MP and I stood there being embarrassed by our reaction to the first shell. We then became aware that the infantrymen had hit the ground. I have no idea where the two shells landed or how close they were. What I do know is that artillery is dangerous and to be avoided at all costs.

Officers should also be avoided as much as possible. Before going overseas, the 100th Infantry Division was stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The division MPs did town patrol evenings and nights in the nearby city, Fayetteville. There were slews of bars up and down the main street of Fayetteville on both sides of the street. One of my friends decided he was going to have one drink only in each bar. He didn't get very far. There was another camp also near Fayetteville, Camp McCoy, where paratroopers were in training. So town patrol could turn dangerous. The standard weapon for division MPs was either a carbine or the heavier bulkier M1 Garand rifle. Neither was practical to carry on town patrol. So we borrowed for town patrol the pistols issued to the officers of the 100 Division Headquarters Company. One evening I was assigned the duty of charge of quarters. One of the duties for this position was to stay in the MP office and answer the telephone. Another was to collect the pistols and ammunition from the men coming back from town patrol, make sure the weapons were disarmed and stow them in a large box. Sounds good, but what usually happened is that the charge of quarters went to sleep in the office and the MPs returning from the town patrol put the weapons and ammunition in the box without waking him. This is what happened to me. I don't remember whether I was awake or not when the men on town patrol returned at an early hour of the morning. At any rate they put the weapons away. The next day the officers of Headquarters Company borrowed their weapons back to practice dry firing. Without checking to see if there was a bullet in the chamber of his gun, a Lieutenant Colonel fired his pistol and a round went off right in the middle of Fort Bragg. Fortunately nobody was hit. But you know there was going to be all hell to pay. Who would be censured? The Lieutenant Colonel? No way, he was an officer, a high ranking one at that. The MP who had the pistol on town patrol? Not him, he was a favorite of the commanding officer of the division MP platoon, a major no less. And eventually he was promoted to sergeant. That left me. I later heard that they considered sending me to the infantry. I suppose they eventually decided they couldn't do anything to me unless they also reprimanded the Lieutenant Colonel and sergeant-to-be. So I was off the hook. God bless the wisdom of officers.

You would have thought that from that experience I would have learned to run for cover whenever I saw an officer. Not Me. Maybe I am a slow learner. My next encounter was in March 1945. The Allied advance had temporarily ground to a halt close to the German border. The 100th Division headquarters had the misfortune to be billeted for about a week in a little French farming village named Bitche. It was well named. The one street through the village wasn't even paved. During most of our stay there it was mostly mud. But worst of all there were piles of manure in front of the houses along side of the street. In wet weather the manure piles seeped down the street. Bitche was located about midway between two "traveled" roads—I won't exaggerate by calling them main roads. It was about one mile each way from Bitche to the traveled roads. One day another MP and I were stationed as perimeter security guards at the

intersection of one of the traveled roads that came in from some place and go somewhere, and the one leading into Bitche. We had been given general warnings to challenge everyone that came by because a German Lieutenant Colonel with a band of English speaking German soldiers dressing in American uniforms were operating “behind” Allied lines attacking stray pockets of Americans. A jeep came down the came-from-someplace road going somewhere road. The jeep contained an officer and driver. It was flying the insignia of a brigadier general. They wore the blue and white stripe patch of the Third Division. Remembering not to mess with officers I waved them on down the road. A few hours later they came back. Throwing caution to the wind this time I stopped them and asked for the password. No problem, right? Wrong. They didn’t know the password. I think I may have asked some questions in an effort to vouch for their authenticity as Americans, questions like what is the first name of the movie actress with the last name Monroe. I do know that the general asked why I had stopped him this time but not the time before when he was going the other direction. Now that was a good question. At that time the driver whispered the password as if he wasn’t sure if it was the correct one. I asked him to repeat it, which he did more loudly. He had it right. I gave the correct countersign and told them to proceed on. Let me repeat—avoid all encounters with officers.

When we were stalled in Bitche, General Patch Commander of the Seventh Army came to meet with the commander of the 100th Division, General Withers Burrell. Part of their conference was held in the War Room. The room was located on the first floor of one of the houses in Bitche we had commandeered. An MP was on guard there at all times. When it was not being used for conferences the MP was allowed to be inside. Otherwise, he stood guard outside by the door. The War Room was a fascinating place. It was lined with maps varying from one showing the deployment of all the troops on the western front to a more detailed map showing the location of individual companies in the 100th Division. I was on duty at the War Room the day General Patch came to our division headquarters. He was ushered into the War Room followed by an entourage of officers. I was standing at attention by the War Room door when he came out followed by his entourage. Before he got to the door leading outside the house he came back about 10 feet and stood not directly in front of me but to my left front.

The General: “Did you go to college soldier?”

I turned only my head to face him directly, answered “Yes sir” then snapped my head directly forward again.

“What college?”

Again turning my head only to face him, “Notre Dame sir.” and then back to position again.

“What kind of team is Notre Dame going to have this year?”

Head snap. “We always have a good team, sir.” Head snap back.

He laughed and the entourage all laughed. I could see one of his officers who was standing directly in front of me nodding his approval of the exchange of words. It was a wonder I didn’t ask the general for the password.