

In the Eye of the Beholder

by Frank Hancock, 399-M

By 10 January 1945, the German NORDWIND offensive against the 100th Infantry Divisions defensive sector had been completely defeated. Although fighting still raged on the Alsatian Plain to the east, the situation in the 100th's area settled into a pattern that would last until mid-March: a stalemate in which both sides warily observed one another by day, and probed each other's lines each night with patrols.

Frank Hancock was a machine gunner on a .30-caliber water-cooled heavy machine gun in Company M, 399th Infantry Regiment during this period.

I am roused from sleep by the man I am to relieve; he lights a candle while I bundle up and put on my pistol belt. I crawl over to the hanging blanket and whisper, "Put the candle out!" He shields it with his hand and I slip under the blanket. A light blinks over my shoulder.

Furious because I think the light came from the candle, I move quickly behind the gun, and my foot strikes something in the bottom of the hole. I pick it up; it feels like a metal goose egg with a raised seam around it. I hold it inside the blanket. "What the hell is this?" I ask.

"IT'S A KRAUT GRENADE! GIT IT THE HELL OUTTA HERE!" he replies.

I turn and throw the grenade, blind, in the dark, remembering where there is a gap in the trees. Nothing happens.

Where is he? The woods are silent. Nothing stirs while I strain my eyes and ears. All night I ponder, "How could he have gotten so close? What would have happened if it had not been a dud? Why did my buddy take the time to insert ". . . THE HELL . . ." in the middle of his warning? The fraction of a second might have been fatal if the grenade fuse had been alive.

The next evening near dusk I venture out again, and peer out from behind the tree above the dugout. With the binoculars I see a column of Germans lined up at what looks to be a horse drawn mess cart. I pick out a tree which marks their location and then scramble down behind the gun and sight it on the tree.

A twig snaps behind me and I whirl with my pistol drawn; it is our old Company Commander, now serving as acting Battalion Commander. I give him the binoculars and show him where the Germans are still busy dishing out chow. I tell him about where the gun is sighted. He looks, then hands me the binoculars and says, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

I crouch behind the gun and fire about half a belt, maybe a hundred rounds, while traversing the gun around the tree landmark. Then I look back to where the captain had been standing, and the forest is quite empty. I duck back into the dugout as mortar shells burst in the trees above us.

That night I return from the chow jeep to find a new neighbor. During my absence of a half-hour or less, a rifleman has killed a German soldier, not 20 yards away from our gun. In the commotion of men going to eat, the gunner did not see the German approaching our hole, but a rifleman did. I wonder if it is the same man who dropped the grenade in our hole the night before.

Trees move in the wind and their moonlight shadows shift across the figure lying still in the snow, so that he appears to move. I know he is quite dead, for the medic checked him. We will not jeopardize a recovery team to bring in a fallen foe from this exposed position. He will keep well enough in the bitter cold.

To the left of our dugout, we see a line of dugouts, spaced 40 to 50 yards apart and manned by riflemen. Beyond them, out of sight, is the dugout housing the other gun of our section. To our right we look down a steep wooded hillside with no more friendly positions in sight. We seem to be at the end of the line. So at night, any sound on the hillside below is assumed to be hostile. And one night I hear a scraping sound, like someone walking.

The grenade was touted by our training instructors as a good weapon to use at night since "there is no revealing muzzle blast." I pull the pin from a grenade and lob it down the hill in the direction of the sounds, ducking down in the hole in one motion. To my amazement the grenade fuse leaves a trail of sparks from my hand to the explosion which I see only as a flash of light against the trees. Then the quiet

returns, broken only by the distant sounds of gunfire and artillery. At dawn I look where the grenade exploded; a tree limb, broken by shell fire, is swinging in the freshening wind; the sound is suddenly very familiar.

Not far from us, Privates First Class Paul Costello and Charles Wunderlich are carrying containers of hot food across a bare field when shells hit the edge of the field. One bursts right in front of them; Charles jumps into a ditch on top of a mortally wounded German soldier and Paul is felled by numerous shrapnel hits. Seeing Paul lying exposed, bleeding and unconscious on the ground, Charles picks him up and carries him to the jeep. Only then does Charles see blood oozing from his own pants leg, and they both wind up in the hospital. Paul recovers and returns to the front, wondering what happened to Charles (who was sent back to the States). At the 1987 Division reunion, Paul is amazed to find that Charles is still alive, and finally thanks him for saving his life.

Sergeant Roy Kaminske is fighting an illness. Finally, the medic orders him back to the hospital. Before leaving, he confides, "I've been pissing blood in the snow!" He has yellow jaundice. I turn over my pistol to an ammo bearer, who becomes the new gunner. Roy takes the ammo bearer's carbine to the rear. I become acting squad leader, complete with Roy's M1 rifle. Scattered sniper, mortar, and artillery fire keeps us in our holes until the night of 15 January when the 1st Battalion relieves us.

Back at Siersthal we get showers, clean clothes, mail, and the *Stars and Stripes*, the Army newspaper. The lead story tells about a major breakthrough by the Third Army, and then near the bottom of the page, the article mentions, "The Seventh Army moved to straighten the front lines against light resistance." It seemed pretty heavy to me.