

A Night in the Potato Bin

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In December, 1944, we were singing Bing Crosby's "I'll Be Home for Christmas," thinking the war was just about over. But December 16th it was a different tune as we were moving under cover of darkness over mountainous terrain to plug a hole in the line at Stavelot, Belgium. We arrived there at 0400 hours and suddenly, hearing tanks being revved-up on the other side of the hill, Lieutenant Jack Doherty, our platoon commander, ordered two units to proceed across a bridge, up a hill to investigate. Sergeant Armstrong's unit was first up the hill and we followed, with Sergeant Jonas Whaley in charge. We paused momentarily to check a soldier in a jeep that had been shot but he was dead and we continued up the hill.

In just a few minutes as we reached the top, a flare went up from a trip wire and the Germans opened up with fire power. Our town troops back across the river began to shoot and we were caught in the cross-fire. We tried to retreat but the Germans had pulled a tank or an '88 in a curve and began to shoot, hitting Sergeant Armstrong's unit, setting it on fire. We were behind them and trapped so we had to leave our unit for cover. I was handed a 30 caliber M.G. from the pedestal mount and four of us took shelter inside a tin shed. Momentarily, the German infantry came in droves and we ran into a house and upstairs by a window. The only weapon we had was the machine gun and a carbine with the barrel filled with mud. Naturally, we had to hold our fire as we were out-numbered by the Germans. We watched as they used a burp gun to kill Sergeant Armstrong and part of his crew, trying to get out of the burning unit.

Realizing there was nothing we could do, we retreated to the basement where there was a potato bin and got inside. Later a German soldier came down and took a position just outside the open potato bin, and we waited for him to toss in a hand grenade or shoot us with his burp gun but evidently, they wanted to interrogate us. All day long we waited while our own outfit, the 825th Tank Destroyer Battalion, knocked out several Tiger tanks and one Royal. Lieutenant Doherty's jeep was hit at that time

hit at that time and he and his driver Earl Shugart were blown out, but Lieutenant Doherty continued to direct fire against the oncoming German army. In the evening at about 2000 hours, after it had gotten dark, the German soldier went upstairs to eat, I guess, and we took advantage of his absence to escape. We ran down a hill, silhouetted by a burning building, when the Germans opened up with machine gun fire. We managed to get to the river as three mortar rounds landed on the other side of the cold, swift river we tried to cross. We crawled several miles to a dam and skimmed across, finally making it to the 119th Infantry Regiment of the 30th Infantry Division where we were shot at but were quickly identified as GI's and were taken in and given warm clothing and "K's."

Next morning the four of us, Willie Banes, Leonard Walsh, Ike Echorn and myself, were taking two German prisoners back to the C.P. when we met Lieutenant Doherty and Sergeant Wester Lowe looking for us. We were so elated when we saw them, we let the prisoners go, jumped into the jeep and were taken to Malmedy where we were attacked the next morning by the Germans at a road block using captured American vehicles. There were no prisoners taken because we had already heard about the massacre of Americans just outside of Malmedy toward Stavelot. While in Malmedy we were bombed three days straight by our own planes whose pilots were told the Germans held Malmedy - but they didn't. Fortunately, we escaped with only vehicles destroyed and no loss of life, but much shaken by that experience.

[Very little has been said about the battles in Stavelot and Malmedy because there was no news media there; however, Company "A" 825th Tank Destroyer Battalion under the leadership of Lieutenant Doherty and Sergeant Lowe, and other army units, delayed and repelled the Germans and a major breakthrough was halted until reinforcements could come. As I look back now, I don't see how we survived the onslaught and the bitter cold, icy and snowy weather we had to contend with during those historical days of December, 1944. Maybe it was because we were well trained, disciplined and proud young men.]