

# A FLARE, MARGRATEN, AND FRIENDS

Joe Pat Ward

The years are going by so fast and I find myself reflecting on the time some fifty years ago when we were in World War II. Along with thousands of other young men I found myself being called upon to fight for our country. This meant leaving family, homes and jobs and enduring the awful hardships which we faced in battle on foreign soil.

My training began with the formation of a new division, the 75th Division, at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri. All the privates were eighteen or nineteen years old but the sergeants were old army men; several had more years in the army than we were old. My platoon sergeant had nineteen years of service when I went in and I stayed with him until our division was deactivated and coming home after the fighting ended in Europe. I will have more to say about this sergeant later on.

Our time at Ft. Wood was very rough. The terrain in the Ozarks up hill and down, cold and hot. It did not take these old army sergeants long to make an excellent division out of a good bunch of young men. Everyone including the officers thought we would go overseas together. We went to Louisiana for three months of maneuvers in the rainy season. We spent three months without a pass or even sleeping one night in a bed. When our training there was over we found out at retreat one afternoon that we were going to Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky.

I had been married for some time to Euple Edwards when I went into service and we had a daughter eleven months old. When I found out we were going to be stationed within 120 miles of Murray, I ran five miles to Camp Polk, Louisiana, to get on a phone to my wife. I got the call through about 2:00 a.m. I then ran back to where we were camping to be there without being missed. By this time I had made sergeant and could make arrangements to come home every weekend. A lot of our good men that we had trained with, most of them privates, had been pulled out and sent overseas as replacements.

By August we knew we were on our way to Europe. I was sure proud we were going that way instead of the Pacific. It was harder to leave this time, knowing what I was going into, than the first time I left; also our little girl had grown so much. This was a rough time in my life.

We left Breckenridge by train for New York to board a ship for Portsmouth, England; then by train to South Wales for about a month or so until all our division could get together again. We landed at Le Havre, France, after staying on the English Channel for four days. We were ready to make the last big push into Germany when we heard that the Germans had made a last great offensive push called the Battle of the Bulge. Little did we know what we were getting into.

In the Le Havre area of France we loaded 40 & 8 boxcars, the type used in World War I. They held forty men or eight horses. Later on I wished we still had horses to carry part of the equipment we were loaded down with. It was bitter cold and we stayed on these boxcars for about a week or longer waiting for them to find out where the Germans were going to make the strongest push.

If we had been doing anything but fighting a war, this would have been the most beautiful spot in the world. Christmas time in Belgium in a beautiful pine forest with picturesque small villages with a foot to eighteen inches of snow. Smoke coming from chimneys, and the smell of pine. I can tell you there is

nothing pretty about fighting a war in bitter cold weather.

On Christmas Eve 1944 about midnight, we met the Germans for the first time. Our mortar section lost the first two men wounded in our company. One was a squad leader and the other a gunner. Our company was split in two by a big German tank. The next day we got back together about two hours before dark and just at that time a massive artillery barrage came into the forest where we were and killed seven men from one infantry squad. We dug in at that spot and held for almost a week. My closest buddy and I stayed on a machine gun for almost a week, after our mortar was destroyed by armor piercing ammo. It was so cold you didn't dare touch the machine gun with your bare hands or face for they would stick and if you pulled back too quick it would pull the hide off. At night the snow was so cold you could hear anyone walking for thirty or forty yards. I will not go into any more details here but we stayed within sight of the enemy for nearly three weeks. We pulled back and had our Christmas Dinner on January 12, 1945.

When we finally pulled back for replacements, we did not have but one officer left, an executive officer that stayed with company headquarters. That is when these old army sergeants came in handy; they took over the Company. Two of them, the First Sergeant and my Platoon Sergeant, received battlefield commissions. Our company commander went "off his rocker" and two lieutenants deserted their command and were court marshalled. We got a Company Commander who had been a transportation officer but he made a top notch Company Commander. Had it not been for our two sergeants—officers I am sure I would not be here today.

After the Battle of the Bulge we were sent to the Alsace-Lorraine Valley between the French and Swiss Alps. This is country owned by the Germans before World War I and given to the French. The Germans put up a terrible fight to hold this. We were in the 7th US Army but attached to the French Army. I lost some of my closest friends here, wounded and killed.

From here we went to the Netherlands and were attached to the British 2nd Army, along the Maas River. This was probably the best assignment we had during the war. After leaving the British, we were back with the US 9th Army and ready for the last big push. We worked our way up to the Rhine River and were located across the river from Düsseldorf, Germany. This was a large industrial city and very important. It was here that I received probably the most important assignment I had during the war. We were here about ten days before the river crossing.

On about March 10, my mortar section was dug in behind the levee on the west bank of the Rhine River across from Düsseldorf. About noon I saw a command car from the XVI Corps stop and out came a colonel along with my company commander. My first thought was surely word hasn't gotten up to the Corps about the hog we butchered and ate a day or so back. My second thought was I believed the company commander would take care of us as he helped eat the hog.

I was a little relieved when Capt. Behrends said, "Sgt. Ward, the Colonel wishes to ask you a few questions." His first question, "Have you been firing here?" My answer, "Yes, Sir, we have." His response, "Let's see how good you are. Do you see the rowboat on the far levee? See how close you can get to it." I didn't tell him we had a stake set on it and I knew just how far away it was. One of our best men was on the gun and when I gave the command he fired one round over the boat about fifteen yards, a second round short about ten yards, and the third round in the boat. The three of us were lying face down looking over the levee. Although it

has been nearly fifty years ago I can still remember his words and the look on his face. He stood up and said, "Captain, I believe your man can handle the job." I was puzzled for I didn't have any idea what was going to happen.

The Colonel started talking: "Within a couple of hours a truck with a large amplifier will come up here and will start talking in German to the soldiers in the town asking them to come down and surrender the town. We have every reason to believe they will not, and if they do not, tonight at exactly 12:00 midnight you are to fire a flare over the city. After you fire it you and your men get in the bottom of your holes for that flare will start the largest single artillery bombardment in the history of World War II. The guns are lined up as thick as can be for twelve miles back. I am sure there will be some short rounds, so stay down."

When the man started talking over the loudspeaker, not a soldier came down but about 300 to 500 civilians came down wanting to come across. The soldier on the amplifier told them they could not come across but to all get out of town as soon as possible and not to come back in. I didn't enjoy my meal that night and all I could think about was, what if that flare doesn't go off? We had never had one fail but I was afraid this might be the first.

I was so nervous I could hardly give the signal at midnight. The greatest relief of my life came when that flare lit up the whole town. The split second it lit up, every gun for twelve miles back fired and the ground shook like an earthquake. After about five minutes I got up enough nerve to look up and the sky was solid red. There were several short rounds that hit into the Rhine and they made the water rise. It would have been something to see but I didn't have the nerve. After about fifteen minutes all was quiet but I will never forget the first look at the town. It was in terrible shape.

I didn't know what this was all about until the next day, when I found out it was a divergency measure while our troops were making a river crossing a few miles downstream. Thank goodness all went well and I was able to walk across the Rhine on a pontoon boat bridge. Years later I found out that this artillery barrage is written up in many of the history books.

For the next three or four weeks our 75th Division took several large industrial cities in the Ruhr Valley. The fighting was very rough as we were moving fast and taking many prisoners. The Germans did not believe in giving up easy, although they knew there was no chance for victory. About three or four days before Memorial Day a runner came to tell me to report to Capt. Behrends. When I got there, he told me I had been selected to go as honor guard for Gen. Simpson, 9th Army Commander, at Margraten Cemetery, Maastricht, Holland. I had no idea why I was chosen or who chose me, or what I would be doing, but with the help of the supply sergeant I found my duffel bag with my rolled up dress uniform. Some of the boys helped me to get it pressed and I looked fairly decent. There were nineteen enlisted men and one officer, all with some kind of special decoration, chosen for the assignment. We rode all day in the back of a two-and-one-half ton truck on dusty roads. I would be afraid to guess how many miles, but I know it was a long day.

We were billeted in a University in Maastricht, and the next two days would be something I would remember the rest of my life. The next day we got up early and rode four miles out to the Margraten Cemetery. There were over 8,000 graves there, and there was not a clod of dirt even the size of your thumb. The dirt over the graves was raised about three inches and was beveled on the sides and end,

and from one end of the cemetery to the other there was not one inch out of line. At one end of the cemetery I noticed open graves, and when I got there they had ten or fifteen soldiers laid out ready to be put in the bags for burial. I will never forget that sight.

Two of the soldiers had been taken from a German POW camp and were just skin and bones. One was an Air Force officer in full dress uniform; several more had been wounded and died. One of my closest friends, who had been wounded in the Colmar section, had a first cousin who came to the 291st Regiment and was killed after my friend was wounded. He thought he might have been buried here and twenty-nine years later the two of us and our wives came back and found his grave within a few feet of the same spot where I stood. The day of his death was two or three days before I was there. It's a small world; he could have been one of those bodies laying there.

Later in the morning we went through what we would be doing the next day. When we arrived back at the University one of our number said, "I am going to go see if I can find an iron." We were in the very nicest part of town and it had not been touched by the war. The first large home we stopped at we asked the lady of the house if she would loan us an iron. She could speak perfect English and when we told her who we were and what we were going to be doing the next day she told us to come in and while we stayed in a bedroom she would take our clothes and press them for us. She had us tell the others if they would come over she would do the same for them.

The next morning we were up before dawn and had our meal and were on the truck on our way early. The road was closed to incoming traffic and the right lane was completely covered with people pushing anything that would carry a load of flowers to the cemetery. These people raise the most beautiful flowers in the world and they had stripped their gardens to completely cover every grave in that cemetery. They did this massive job in about two hours, and then everyone went to the back of the cemetery for the ceremony. There were over 30,000 people other than the ones in the ceremony. One Division furnished the band, one the Military Police, one the artillery, and the 75th the Honor Guard.

A Catholic priest and a Protestant minister and a Jewish rabbi each had a word; a representative of the Queen spoke; and then Gen. Simpson laid the wreath. Our platoon fired a salute, then the artillery fired, and taps was played in the distance. There was not one dry eye around. You might say, "That's not unusual." but these hardened men who had seen nothing but death for several months were standing at attention with tears dropping from their faces. I have never been very good at expressing myself on paper or in words but I have no doubt in my mind that God was as close to that place as any place on this earth since Biblical times. This was not just my feeling for I have talked with others who felt the same way.

I have told the story of Margraten Cemetery as I experienced it first-hand. In the June 1963 *Reader's Digest* the article "Not Far From God" also tells the story, and certainly no one who was there could disagree with it.

I worked for forty-two and one-half years at the Bank of Murray. We never made a lot of money but no one could have been blessed with more friends, and we had enough money to do a lot of traveling. We have looked up boys that fought with me from New Hampshire and Vermont to Florida, from New York to Oregon, from Minnesota to Texas and the grandest part of it all is I have never found one of my close friends that did not do well and raise nice families.

In the Bible it says "greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for a friend." I know that there were several in my outfit that would have done that for me and I would have for them. One of my closest friends was wounded near Colmar, France. I picked him up and packed him to a Jeep. When I set him down tears were running down his face. I asked him if he was hurting that bad and he answered me it wasn't hurting. My remark was, "What are you crying for, you have that million dollar wound." This was always a remark when someone got a minor wound. Before they left with him his remark was, "I just wish this was you instead of me. If you stay much longer you are going to get killed, and you have a wife and daughter to go home to and I only have parents who are old."

The friendships which were made during the war have proved to be lasting. This was really true in my situation. The same buddy who wished he could exchange places with me when he was sent home with a "million dollar wound" proved this to be true to me when, after the war, he was married and when his son was born he gave him my name. This has been a source of "pride and joy" to me. After graduating from Davidson University he was married and we attended the wedding. Our families have visited and kept in touch all these years. When you share hardship and face death together for so long the bond is much stronger, I believe, than with ordinary daily living. The Bible addresses this in Prov. 18:24, and I have been reminded of that scripture many times.

Many of my friends are passing on as we are getting older fast, but every year we try to make the 75th Division reunion somewhere in the US, and it gets harder each year to break up and go home.

I arrived home December 23, 1945. It seemed as if I had been gone much longer. I guess this is because of the terrible conditions which we lived through. I never received any kind of wound and have always considered myself to have been very lucky and certainly blessed.

