

Chapter 15: A Very Long Day

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When the doors of the bunker were opened, the stench hitting the street was awful. There were two floors of dead bodies, soldiers and civilians. Two floors of wounded soldiers and civilians, and two floors of doctors, surgeons, nurses and aides. Among the wounded, as well as the dead, were Americans, British, Canadians and French besides the Germans. The wounded, when questioned, said that they were treated well. Within an hour, trucks and all types of vehicles arrived as details began to remove the wounded first and take them to other hospitals. The removal of all wounded and the dead went on throughout the night until noon the next day. With hostilities ended in the city all of the civilian population began to return to their homes. They were tired and frightened as to what would happen to them. Lieutenant Fried Potatoes finally returned to the Company Command Post just after witnessing the surrender of the city by the German Commander. We moved 5 blocks from the center of Aachen, South, into a row of houses to rest for the night. Another detail was sent back to the area to remove the dead to the road, for a pick-up. Again, I commend the burial details for their tireless work and efficiency in removing the dead. Un-sung heroes doing a great job with little if any recognition.

Night was fast approaching so I chose a bedroom on the third floor of the dwelling assigned to us. The room was very clean, and the bed had sheets, a mattress, and a large featherbed. I was familiar with these because my mother made them for each of us at home to sleep under. Goose down feathers, stripped, which kept anyone warm as toast. I picked the wrong room, and while I was lying on the bed, in walked a young German woman. I could see she had been crying and she asked in perfect English, "are you going to sleep here tonight?" I replied that "It was my intention but since you are here, I'm moving out." Picking up my gear and weapon, I walked into the hall and placed it near the stairway. The woman stood in the doorway watching me. "My husband was killed in the fighting here and I have no place to go." "I'm sorry about your husband and I do not want to force you to go somewhere else, just because I wanted to sleep in that bed."

Sergeant Popolowski yelled up the stairs, "the Old Man wants to see you right away." "O.K.," I yelled in return, "I'll be right down." Leaving my gear in place, I took my automatic and bounded down the stairs and on to the side walk in the street. "I wonder what the Old Man wants this time," I asked my companion. I hadn't seen Lieutenant Eager Beaver either all day, and wondered where he was. The Company Commander was sitting on a couch in the Command Post when I walked in. He had a pad and pencil in his hand. "Sergeant," the Lieutenant replied, "I am recommending you for the Silver Star for the fine work you did today." "Thank you Lieutenant!" "I am undeserving of that recommendation because I lost a lot of men." The Lieutenant read the citation to me which said, "I am recommending that staff Sergeant Joseph P. Olexa (12016893) be awarded the Silver Star for meritorious service in the surrender of Aachen, Germany on October 21, 1944." I was to forget this recommendation and be awarded the Bronze

Star instead in the city of Detroit after my discharge from the Army.¹ I received word later that Lieutenant Fried Potatoes was put in for the same citation.²

“A hot meal may be forthcoming Sergeant, and don’t get too attached to your sleeping quarters. We are moving northwest and the trucks will take us forward. Have your men move into the street and wait for further orders.” It’s just like the Army, it never changes, hurry up and get ready, then wait. On my way back I could hear the men of the other platoon stumping down the stairs lugging their gear and griping a blue streak. I hated to climb three flights of stairs, but I wanted to be at the top, so it was my own fault. My gear was gone when I reached the top floor and I began to wonder who took it. Looking into the bedroom, I saw my gear placed on a chair. I was puzzled as I walked into the bedroom to retrieve it. The woman was sitting by the vanity combing her hair. “I have decided to let you have the room Sergeant, and I will sleep in the little room down the hall. This is, if you will let me have the pillow and a blanket.” The room was filled with the fragrance of perfume and with three candles glowing for light. “I’m happy to tell you that none of us will be sleeping in the building. We will be leaving Aachen sometime tonight.” Grabbing my gear, I left.

Back in the street, I set my gear near the building and sat down on the steps. A brisk wind was blowing and drops of rain could be felt as we sat in the dark. Within a couple of hours, the wind was much colder and the rain began to fall much faster. We hurriedly moved our gear to the hallway inside and sat bitching because of our predicament. Why couldn’t we stay here for the night and move in the morning? We would get a good night’s sleep and most of all be dry. We earned this privilege, let the other units who always seemed to get the gravy in everything stay out in the rain and see what it is like. Wishful thinking on our part, and the trucks arrived at midnight. We loaded in the rain and the trucks moved out of the city in a northeast direction. We have reached the first barrier of the Siegfried Line straddling the military highway to Cologne.

¹ Unit records indicate that Olexa was awarded a Bronze Star for actions in Germany on Oct. 17, 1944, likely a few days too early. MRC 301-1.13, General Orders, 903.

² Unit records show Lt. Paul Heath receiving a Silver Star for action in Germany on Nov. 19, 1944, which may again be an incorrect date. Ibid, 1163.

