

Colonel Howard Housel's 1944 Christmas Story

As one of the three Forward Observer Sections organic to an Armored Artillery Battalion, when not attached to a supported unit, we were normally employed as a part of our Headquarters perimeter defense. We would in most cases occupy a sector not too close to the unit. Our M4 Sherman Medium Tank, with its five-man crew, was a formidable defense, while at the same time, had a propensity for drawing enemy fire. This could result in a love-hate relationship with our friends and neighbors. Of course, we did get considerable consideration from the Mess and Maintenance crews within our unit. Personnel available were always ready to bunk in near us and share outpost and sentry duty.

In consequence of this, we find our crew "holed-up" in a three-story building, in a corner of a large orchard in Stegen, Luxembourg on Christmas Eve, 1944. After much begging and borrowing, we'd acquired enough white paint to coat our tracked vehicles. They were spread out within the orchard, which was on a forward slope, behind the building. Our mess truck, which had not been repainted, had been moved in close behind the house to gain some concealment. The building was the first shelter we'd been fortunate to acquire for some time. It had been a crossroads 'Bierstube' while in German hands. It had also been used extensively by enemy troops as a headquarters. This was evidenced by the eight to ten-inch layer of straw on the dirt basement floor. Very inviting to spread the bed rolls but we'd learned early on that that was a no-no. The ever-present lice, millions of lice! For the most part, we were dry and protected from the elements. The fireplaces and wood stoves annoyed us continuously; the cold was ever present. Heat in a building, in the snow area, would result in melted and dry roofs, as well as tell-tale chimney smoke. Suspected building use made for a prime target for both artillery and planes. No fires, except, in remote, covered areas.

We set our BC Scopes up on the top floor, removing a few shingles, to observe the rear area and possible crossing sites. With darkness approaching, we set up our own guard plan and observer assignments. During this time, five or six personnel from our mess and maintenance sections moved in with us. They were included in our operations, and our overall disposition was reported to headquarters. Occasional movement along the road in our immediate front would result in enemy MG or rifle fire. Both the orchard and the crossroads near us were subject to intermittent artillery fire, mostly light 76 or 88mm firing pieces. Nothing more than harassment fires, as far as we could tell. Not to be outdone, we'd return an occasional round of 105mm from one of our batteries. We relied mostly on targeting by the "flash bang" system.

Things were quieting down, with darkness, when suddenly two Deuce and a Half cargo trucks came racing down the road. They roared into a spot close behind the building, where the drivers turned off the engines and ran into the building. They were most grateful to find us. They had been chased by artillery fire for the past hour, trying to find their way back to their unit. They had lost their way in the dark. They were members from one of our units. We advised them to stay with us until daylight. While getting ready to bed down, on the second floor, we heard "incoming" artillery. With one mass move, all personnel dove down two and three flights of stairs to the basement. There we huddled for some time, while a dozen or more 'rounds' landed about the building and in the orchard. The most apparent damage was approximately a quarter of the roof being blown away. This made for a good dusting of snow on the top floors. Fortunately, no one was injured, just a little more fraying of the nerves.

My observer section, consisting of six personnel, representing six different States, is begging for attention. They were an outstanding crew, always dependable, well trained and qualified. Capable of performing any job or assignment within the section, ready to capably fill in for a missing buddy at all times, they were a crew, working together, but they also responded to the need for individual performance, when the situation warranted. They had other talents as well, talents they had brought with them. My bow-gunner on the tank, Cpl Freddy Elias was an exceptional violinist. Although he came from New Hampshire, reportedly five or six years ago, he'd been one of the youngest violinists playing with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He was good, during his time with us, he'd become even better! He found out what a fiddle could do, in the right hands. Swing and Hoedown became so natural, he continually wondered what his parents would say when he returned home. Freddy was forever liberating a violin during our European encounters. During quiet sessions, he would provide much needed and highly appreciated entertainment.

After things had quieted down again, and yes we did expend a dozen or so 'rounds' on Jerry's behalf, Freddy retrieved a fiddle and began quietly playing a few selections. First a couple of semi-classical tunes, anything is good. Then swinging into a few of the more noted numbers heard on the BBC and Armed Forces Network. Getting into the late hours, someone reminded Freddy, that it was Christmas Eve. Freddy acknowledged by hitting on a few well-known carols. We got carried away, The Season, the music, the thoughts obliterated the presence of our time and circumstances.

At first, a slight humming, then low singing, no one conscious of an increasing volume in sound output by some 14 or 15 voices. Expectably, we came to that world-recognized carol, Silent Night. This was a Christmas song with its beginnings in Germany as "Stille Nacht". At the conclusion, Freddy put his bow down, ready to call it a night.

Suddenly, the stillness was broken. Not until now did we realize how quiet it had become - no noise, no voices, no firing. Then, from across the road, down near the river, came a voice, that said something like "Sehr Gute - Sehr Gute, American, Grossa - Grossa", interlaced with "more - more - more". In the stillness, in the darkness, Freddy's fiddle had led our voices in the night. A night that heard no shot, no shell, within our area, as Freddy played well into the daylight hours. Today, as we recall that Christmas Eve, that time honored, birth date, we still wonder at the spell worked by that time, that place, that music. A spell of Hope for all who believed in Hope.

Just one last postscript, our mess truck had all ten tires flattened by the shelling we'd taken upon the arrival of the two trucks the night before! The two trucks had not a mark. We had thought them to be empty when they pulled in behind the building. We unceremoniously escorted the drivers to their vehicles and threatened them with all manner of retribution if they ever returned. Both trucks were loaded to capacity with 'live' 105mm artillery ammunition, for their gun battery.

Colonel (Ret) Howard Housel served with the 695th Armored Field Artillery during World War II. He was posted to a Forward Observation Section and was awarded a battlefield commission after the Battle of the Bulge.

Housel was allegedly recommended for the commission by LTC Creighton Abrams (later General and Chief of Staff of the Army), Patton's tank commander who led the drive on Bastogne.

Housel was commissioned by LTC Herb Kale, who commanded the 695th AFA in 1944. LTC Herb Kale is the uncle of LTC (Ret) Bill Kale, assistant curator at the National Guard Militia Museum of New Jersey in Lawrenceville.