PROLOGUE

Under cover of darkness, we had crossed the Vire River deep inside occupied France and were now behind enemy lines. It was very early on D-Day plus 7, and I was the lieutenant in charge of Third Platoon, G Company, 175th Infantry Regiment, part of the 29th Infantry Division.

The day before, on 12 June, our Company had made an aborted attempt to cross this key river in boats. But the Germans had turned us back with harsh counter fire. Now we were in a sort of frustrating stalemate, with the Jerrys holding one bank of the river and our Company holding the other.

We were dug in and waiting for orders. After fighting our way a dozen miles into Normandy, my men were worn out and tired. Our bodies were dirty, our minds numb. My men were hungry, their bellies empty. But they weren't complaining.

I was proud of my men. They had fought well. We had already been through a lot together. Our unit had been on the move, with only one day's rest, since just after sunrise on 7 June, when we landed on the coast at DOG GREEN BEACH in the second wave.

Soon new orders arrived from our Company commander. We were to move further south along the river to a point where intelligence had determined the river to be only two feet deep. We were to traverse the river at that shallow point, move cross-country, then seize and hold the several bridges where an important road crossed the Vire-et-Taute Canal. This was the only route Allied armor could use to push further inland. But, in crossing the river at that shallow spot, we would end up several miles behind known German lines.

The Company was beefed up with the addition of a section of heavy machine guns from H Company. In total, our force now numbered more than two hundred men, including our Regimental Commander.

Moving out now in a column of platoons, by 2300 hours we arrived at the point where we needed to cross. It was dark, very dark. No moon. No light whatsoever.

An hour later, at 0003 hours 13 June, I was in the black water leading my men across the river. The information was correct, at least in one respect. The water at that spot was only about two-and-a-half feet deep.

But, beneath the water, there was more than a foot of gooey mud. This made for a rather messy crossing. To keep our weapons dry, we held them over our heads as we quietly slogged and slopped our way through the water and muck to the other side.

Half-covered with mud now, we fanned out on the opposite bank and positioned ourselves to move quietly cross-country. My platoon was on the left, Second Platoon on the right and First and Fourth Platoons in the rear behind Second. Fourth was our Heavy Weapons Platoon.

We edged forward. All of this was done with extreme quiet. We were behind enemy lines. No conversation. As little sound as possible.

We passed by a tiny, no-name hamlet, my platoon still on the left as we advanced. The rest of the Company passed through the center of the village. Less than a mile further on we ran into trouble.

Reading maps and plotting our position had become a practical impossibility in the black of night. We relied instead on our compasses and our intuition, a near-perfect recipe for making a mistake.

Moments later all hell broke loose. My Third Platoon had stumbled onto a German patrol bivouacked for the night. Most of the enemy was asleep. No matter. A short but vicious firefight ensued. It didn't last long. Conditions favored my men and we killed a lot of sleeping Germans without any losses to our own forces.

Success in hand, I rapidly disengaged my men and we continued toward the bridges. At least I hoped we were headed in the right direction, as we were still traveling somewhat blind in the dark.

In the minutes ahead, the sky began to lighten as dawn approached. I broke out my flashlight and buried myself under my raincoat. Hidden this way, with a little natural light, I was finally able to check our position on my map.

What I discovered made my heart skip a beat. We were south and east of la Roy. That meant our connecting file was gone. This was dangerous. *We were advancing without contact with the rest of the Company.*

I needed a moment to think and decided this would be a good place for us to stop for a short rest. We had been on the move for nearly twelve hours now.

By 0700 we were up again and moving. I was determined to push my men until we reached our objective, the bridges.

We continued to observe complete and total silence. I controlled my men's movements with hand signals. Going was slow, though not as slow as it had been during the night.

Each hedgerow represented a new danger, every hidden spot a possible German position. Each field — as well as the hedgerow beyond — had to be thoroughly scanned before risking an attempt to move out into the open and cross it.

Caution, caution, caution. These were our watchwords.

In the dark we had moved in a tight group, fairly well bunched up. Each man followed the man in front of him so as to not get lost.

But, as the sky lightened, our tactic had to change. I decided to employ a skirmish line: two squads up front, the third holding back.

With the platoon dispersed this way, enemy resistance would not have a concentration of men to fire upon.

My men understood my motives. It was simple economics. Spread out this way, an exploding mortar round would take down fewer of us, leaving more of us alive to carry on the fight. We moved forward slowly and carefully.

About 0800 we came upon a small farmhouse with what appeared to be an upstairs loft. Two of my men spoke fluent French, so I kept them at my side as I entered the house. An older French man and woman — probably husband and wife — stood inside the door. They held on to one another, obviously frightened. I couldn't blame them.

Who among us wouldn't be terrified if a contingent of foreign soldiers brandishing automatic weapons entered their home, drenched in mud, sweat, and blood?

And, even if these people did recognize us as being American, even if they did recognize us as being allies in common cause to expel their Nazi occupiers, we were still fierce-some looking men — and we were still present in their home without so much as an invitation. That would scare me too.

I could see the fear in the old man's eyes. He and his wife were at once frightened and excited. We were liberators, yes. But we were also destroyers. Our armies were about to tear up their fields and their homes and their towns as we drove relentlessly toward the heart of Germany. And, in our wake, we would leave behind stinking corpses and dead bodies for them to clean up after, as well as mountains of rubble and debris.

I turned to one of my translators. "Ask these people if there are any Germans in the area?"

He did and they quietly whispered "Non." But they pointed nervously toward the ceiling over their heads. We got their meaning and immediately proceeded to fire a clip apiece into the ceiling.

Plaster fell everywhere. At the sound of gunfire, the old woman began to scream. Her husband clamped his hand over her mouth to keep her quiet. I could imagine my own wife Connie in the same situation. She would have fainted, I was sure.

At the corner of the room was a ladder-style stairway to the loft overhead. I poked my head up through the opening and spied two German soldiers lying on the floor badly wounded and moaning. Our wild firing had hit them.

Holding tight to my weapon, I climbed up through the opening in the floor. Several of my men followed. On a table in the corner of the loft we discovered a field phone. Now everything was clear. *This was an outpost. These men had probably seen us approach, maybe warned others in the vicinity.*

I instructed my men to pull up the phones and cut the wires outside. I had my aid man shoot up the Germans with morphine and bandage their wounds. Then we were out the door and again on our way. *But I was troubled.*

Despite our every effort, silence had now most definitely been broken. There was a small chance that the sound of our guns being fired had been muffled because we were inside the house.

But that was a big maybe. Plus, those Germans had probably alerted their unit of our approach. But, maybe, if we moved fast, we would be okay. Resuming total silence, we crossed the next three fields nearly at a run.

Once I felt we were out of immediate danger, I stopped my platoon in the shadow of the closest hedgerow to check my map and verify our position. We were almost to the road that crossed the Vire-et-Taute Canal.

I didn't want to remain out in the open long, so I decided to stay off the road and confine our movements to the fields that ran parallel to it. The bridges were close. Probably only a couple hundred yards off. We couldn't see them yet. Maybe another field or two.

Because the road was as important to the Germans as it was to us, I knew we had to be extra careful now.

Scrutinizing every inch of the field ahead of us and the hedgerow beyond it, we saw no sign of the enemy. I signaled my men to climb over the hedgerow and start across the field.

But we only got about ten feet into the field when the Germans opened up on us with rifle and machine-gun fire. They had been well hidden behind that next hedgerow. Probably alerted to our presence by their comrades when we knocked out the outpost in that farmhouse loft.

I urgently shouted "Back!" to my men, and we beat a hasty retreat back over the hedgerow we had just crossed.

I was not at all happy with what had just taken place. I looked anxiously about, did a quick headcount. The men in my command seemed none the worse for the wear. But it was a close call. Somehow, none of us had been wounded or knocked down by enemy fire.

Now we responded in kind. We started firing back. I ran along the line of bushes shouting to my men, "Shoot only at what you can see!"

Soon we were in a full-blown fight. Within minutes, a couple of my men caught bullets. Doc, our aid man, sprang into action, quickly bandaged the two men, after which they again took up positions beside the hedgerow.

But we had a problem. The vegetative growth atop the hedgerows blurred our sightlines. We were shooting blind. Fortunately, the overgrowth across the way was quite sparse indeed.

Our tactical position was simple enough. We were pinned down. We were pinned down in a smaller field, with larger and wider fields on each side of us. A flanking attack would certainly meet with stiff resistance. For the moment, the enemy was firing in great volume at us with machine guns and rifles. Thus far, there had been no mortars flung our way. I thanked God for that one.

To hold them off, I moved B.A.R.'s to each flank, keeping one gun in the middle. These were Browning Automatic Rifles, and they were very effective guns. The Browning had a high muzzle velocity and was accurate out to about six hundred yards with sight adjustments. Our Brownings were the newer models, the ones with a skid-footed bipod fitted to the muzzle end of the barrel, as well as a redesigned magazine guide. My B.A.R. men were crack shots. Not to brag, but so was I.

The enemy continued to fire, and we continued to return fire. With the B.A.R.'s in place, we were being more effective knocking them down. Even so, several more of my men got hit, one badly.

The opening into the field in front of us was at the middle of a long hedgerow across the way. Suddenly, four Germans swung open the gate and set up a machine gun right there in the opening. I was amazed. It was as if they were going through a parade ground exercise rather than lethal battle.

Right about then, my B.A.R. man in the center of our line got hit in the left upper arm. I saw him go down and grabbed for his gun. I had no problem taking out the four enemy machine-gunners busy setting up their gun at the opposite gate.

In the minutes ahead, we kept picking away at the enemy. The moment we spotted someone stick his head out or saw a weapon protruding over the hedgerow, we would shoot.

About ten minutes later, another set of four Germans began to set up a second machine gun at the same spot, right smack in the middle of that opening.

I couldn't believe my eyes. I was still at the B.A.R. where I promptly dropped the four of them. I thought they must be nuts. *Why didn't they set up the gun over top of the hedgerow?* I couldn't figure it out. They had now lost eight men in a stupid move.

It was at about this time that I decided we needed reinforcements. I'm not sure what made me come to that decision. Maybe I reasoned that any force that could withstand the loss of eight men in rapid succession without withdrawing had to be much larger than my own.

I called over my Staff Sergeant. He was a good man, and I trusted him implicitly. Like me, his first name was Bill. I told Bill to work his way back and to the right to find the rest of the Company and to tell the Colonel of our plight. "Ask him for support," I said.

Bill left as ordered. But I never saw the man again. We didn't know it at the time, but the rest of our Company was fighting a losing battle some six hundred yards up the road to our right.

No sooner had Bill taken off, than there seemed to be a sudden, large increase in volume of fire from across the field. Jerry had brought two 40 mm anti-aircraft guns into position. The explosive rounds were now hitting the hedgerow, spraying us with small but deadly shrapnel.

I was still manning the Browning when suddenly I noticed that my men on the right flank had started to increase their rate of fire. Jerry was trying to sneak along the hedgerow, trying to outflank us on that side.

So far, our rifle and B.A.R. fire had them pinned down. To drive the enemy back, we tossed in a couple fragmentation grenades. That tore them up badly, knocking down perhaps eight of them at one time. The rest beat a hasty retreat.

My bazooka men had but two rounds remaining. I knew we had to use them judiciously. I gave the men orders to aim for the location where the 40 mm rounds seemed to be coming from, then crossed my fingers.

My men fired one round. It hit the hedgerow near the top. A miss. *Damn!*

My men moved a little to keep the Germans off-balance, then fired again. This time they aimed just a bit higher so the round would clear the bushes. *Bingo!* The second round — our last round — exploded just beyond the hedgerow. That AA gun fell silent.

Now, yet a third enemy team set up a machine gun in that opening. *These guys must be absolutely crazy*, I thought, as I dropped them with my trusty B.A.R. They had now lost twelve men trying to set up that gun.

My original B.A.R. man was now bandaged and back in the line of fire. I gave him back his piece. I don't remember the man's name.

The volume of fire from across the field seemed to lessen, if only for a moment. Then, another machine gun started up, this time from over top the hedgerow. *They had finally gotten smart*, I thought.

Again the fire from my men on the right flank got heavier. The Germans were trying yet another sneak move along that hedgerow. This time they didn't get far at all. My third B.A.R. man had moved to where he could fire his Browning from the opening across the entire field. Three of my riflemen were there alongside him. The opening was only about twenty feet from the corner of the hedgerow.

I figured the Germans had only recently moved to their current position. They were probably called back from defense of the bridges and were therefore not well dug in at all. *This might work to our advantage*, I thought. Plus, the absence of mortar fire indicated they were likely a rifle company not a full infantry company. That meant they were armed with lots of machine guns and Schmeisser MP 40 automatic guns but no cannons. I had seen at least four machine guns so far. A typical German infantry squad had at most two.

But then the situation changed drastically. We were suddenly under sustained fire from heavy cannon, my worst fear.

Based on what I could see through the bushes, the Jerrys had moved in two 88's, probably self-propelled. The big guns were positioned just behind the hedgerow. The 88 mm gun was a German anti-aircraft gun. It was used widely throughout the war and could be found on just about every battlefield, where it was often used as an anti-tank weapon. This particular pair of guns was about two hundred yards away and firing instantaneous detonator shells, very bad stuff.

With this new weapon now in place, a murderous barrage began to descend upon us. It ran the length of the hedgerow as their fire systematically traversed it from one end to the other. *The results were devastating.*

With nearly every explosion, now, my men were getting hit. One of my two men who were fluent in French went down with a big hole in his leg. I went over, cut open his pants, tore open a packet of sulfa powder and

sprinkled it over the man's wound. I bandaged him best I could, shot him full with morphine using the syrette in his bandage pack. Then I laid him back against the hedgerow.

I moved to the right and found my B.A.R. man dead. His assistant now manned his gun. Everyone else was hunkered down. One of my Sergeants was dead. Another had half his right arm gone, plus a big, gaping wound in his abdomen. He, too, was dead.

There was a brief pause in the cannon fire. I glanced along the hedgerow counting heads. Some of the wounded were moaning in pain.

It looked as though I still had ten, perhaps as many as twelve men in position and still firing spasmodically.

But the firing was sporadic and accomplished little. The men fired only at what they could see, which wasn't much. Ammunition was low. So low, we were almost out of it. Whenever a man went down, we would take his ammunition, refill the B.A.R. magazines and distribute the rest. We had already fought for hours, stretching out what little remained.

From where I was, near the center of our position, I started left to check on my men on that side. I was in a crouch, running. After about two steps, there was an explosion on top of the hedgerow beside me. Something that felt like a rod of hot steel rammed into my left leg just above my knee. I knew I had been hit. But the sensation was short-lived. Within moments I passed out as I was lifted violently into the air.

I don't know how much time passed before I came to, perhaps minutes, maybe only seconds. But through a fog, I heard one of my men yell, "The Lieutenant's dead!"

Me, I was dazed, not dead. I raised myself half-up on my arms and answered his frenzied call.

"In a pig's fuckin' whistle, he is!"

But my bravado didn't match my condition. I was splayed out on the ground about ten or twelve feet from the base of the hedgerow, lying in a pool of blood — my own. The explosion must have flipped me through the air.

Rolling, now, onto my side, I pulled myself back in the direction of the hedgerow using my arms and hands. I cut open my pants leg where it hurt, and sprinkled the last of my sulfa powder into the wound. It cooled the fire of pain down a bit. But the damn thing still hurt like hell.

I had no bandages left, nor any morphine. I had used the last of it minutes ago on another man. I thought to call our aid man for help. But from where I lay, I could see that he too was dead. There would be no relief for my pain, nor any bandage for my wound.

My B.A.R. man was dead. He had been in the center of our line near where I lay. So I rolled over, picked up his piece and propped myself against the hedgerow. I was hurting badly. But I wasn't defeated. I selected a few targets, managed to squeeze off a couple bursts. Our fire had dwindled to almost nothing. We were badly beaten down. It was over.

At about this moment, thirty or more Germans came pouring through the opening in the hedgerow to my right.

I yelled, “Cease fire!” to my men and threw down the Browning in defeat. I raised my hands best I could and said, “Kamerad!” I was surrendering my command, what little was left of it.

The German closest to me looked as mean as I looked scared. He raised his gun, pointed it at my head.

I judged my alternatives. Only two things could happen to me in the seconds ahead:

Either I was about to be shot dead or I was about to become a prisoner of war to the Third Reich.

At that moment in time, I wasn’t sure which fate was worse.