

FEAR

War is a vast world of fear, and the individual soldier participating in a war lives with the fear of death. Perhaps because I was in the Infantry I believe I have seen war in its most fearful aspect. This war-inspired fear has an absolute climax; this climax is reached only once. It over-shadows any fear a person may have experienced before or can ever experience afterwards. During my first two days of war I experienced this ultimate of fear.

I was section sergeant of the second section, second platoon of the 45th Infantry Division Reconnaissance Company. We had landed in Sicily the day before, and already I had experienced enough of the war to make me afraid of death. I had seen seven of our men killed in the streets of the city of Vittoria. These men had been my friends; we had lived in close contact for over two years, and now they were gone. Their sudden disappearance frightened me. The fact that you could be talking to a man one minute and see him fall dead the next was difficult to comprehend. It took several days to accustom yourself to his absence. When a man died someone else picked up his rifle, his binoculars and compass; thus, his equipment remained in the company, but the man was no longer there. This morbid reflection was running through my mind as we turned onto the Vittoria-Biscari highway.

Our mission was simple: The platoon would move along the highway in the direction of Biscari to a small hill which would overlook the town. There we would set up our weapons and protect the left flank of the 179th Infantry, which was attacking Cosimo

airport. As we moved cautiously along the road, the signs of war were evident around us. We saw several burned-out tanks and a number of dead men beside the road. Some of the dead men were American soldiers. They lay sprawled in the grotesque attitudes of sudden death. Most of them had died bleeding - bleeding where death had touched them with steel-tipped fingers. Already the bodies were bloated and turning black, and the stench of decaying flesh was in the air. Their dead eyes had turned the color of ripe grapes; these eyes seemed to stare at us with the envy that perhaps the dead feel of the living. All this back-wash of war made me afraid - afraid that in a few hours I, too, would be lying dead and decaying in the July sun.

War magnifies time and distance, and it seemed hours before we arrived at our destination. It was a small oblong hill criss-crossed with the low stone walls so common in southern Sicily. As we climbed to the crest of this hill we could almost feel the silence prevailing over the surrounding countryside. The only sound we could hear was the dull booming rumble of the battle for the airport eight or nine miles to the northeast. By the time we had reached the summit and set up our weapons, the ominous silence was getting on our nerves, and I was glad when the Lieutenant ordered Corporal Potts and me to take a jeep, machine gun, and two privates, and report our position to the Division command post. We reported the position to the Division and began our return to the hill.

While returning along the wreckage-strewn road, we encountered an anti-tank gun crew digging an emplacement for their gun. The frenzied haste of their digging and grim expressions on their

faces told us something was wrong. I questioned the sergeant in charge of the gun. He informed me that the Germans were breaking through the flank and that his gun had been ordered into position to protect the road. This news made me uneasy as we again started out to reach the now dubious safety of our isolated platoon. As we approached the hill from the Vittoria side, we could see a thin column of smoke rising from the crest and could hear the sound of gun fire. We could distinguish between the long rapid burst of the German machine guns and the less rapid burst of our own. This sound of automatic weapons could have only one meaning - our platoon was engaged with the enemy.

When we arrived at the reverse slope of the hill, we met an American self-propelled 75-mm howitzer. This half-track was moving slowly, and several riflemen were deployed along the road beside it. I dismounted from the jeep and signaled for them to stop. A middle-aged Captain opened the door and stepped out. I explained to him that our platoon was under fire on the forward slope of the hill and asked if he would please fire a few shells into the area beyond it. A startled expression appeared on his face; he seemed to hear the firing on the other side of the hill for the first time. After a moment's silence he said, "My God, son, the Germans must have broken through!" With this reply he and his crew climbed into their half-track and roared away, leaving us standing in the road. As I watched this last source of outside help disappear, the cold perspiration of fear drenched my body.

Suddenly the firing on the other side of the hill stopped, and after a hurried consultation with Potts, we decided to set up our machine gun so it would cover the road. When this was done,

Potts and I decided we would leave the two privates to man the gun while we went up the hill to see if the platoon needed our help. Our decision to go up the hill was not motivated by patriotism, inexperience and nothing else caused us to do this obviously stupid thing. We began ascending the hill using one of the knee-high stone walls for cover. The ominous silence of a few hours before had returned, and with each step my fright became greater. My shirt was clinging to my shoulders like a wet sheet, the beat of my heart was jarring my body, and my nerves were tense and naked. Holding our rifles in readiness, we reached the summit where we could look down on the forward slope. About one-fourth of the way down we could see a burning jeep. In front of the jeep was a stone wall running north and south along the face of the hill. Just beyond the wall and parallel to it was a narrow road leading down the hillside, and just the other side of the road was a small partially demolished stone house. Thinking the platoon would be dug in on the other side of this house, we began crawling down the hill in its direction, using for cover another stone wall intersecting the one in front of the house. As we crawled past the burning jeep, the ashes from the burned-over grass momentarily choked and blinded us. When we reached the stone fence in front of the demolished house, we flung ourselves over it and dashed to the shelter of the building. I stepped to the corner of the house and looked in the direction of Biscari. I saw only the gentle slope of the hill leading down into a wide valley covered with olive groves. I saw no sign of the platoon. The only sound I could hear was the crack of the flames on the burning jeep behind us. My eyes were searching for some movement

among the olive trees when suddenly a chain of red tracer bullets came arching over our heads into the hillside behind us.

When I turned to see where they were striking, my eyes fell on something we had failed to see as we had crawled past the burning jeep. As I looked, my heart crawled up into my throat, and I felt the hair on the back of my neck bristle. I saw, lying in front of the jeep, the body of a man. His clothing had been burned away and where his head should have been, was a red smear. Corporal Potts saw it too, for his face was a picture of horror. While we stood transfixed by this gruesome sight, we heard the snapping of tree limbs behind us. We turned just in time to see two large clumps of brush fall apart and a pair of German armored cars emerge. In an instant we dashed back across the road and threw ourselves over the low wall. As we leaped, the air was alive with a series of loud metallic cracks so close together they blended into one long sound. The force with which I hit the ground dazed me. When I looked behind me I saw that Corporal Potts was still alive and unhurt. We then began our struggle to safety.

Our only hope was in being able to crawl along the protecting wall to the foot of the hill some two hundred yards in front of us. There at the foot of the hill was a deep irrigation ditch which would afford a means of escape. One of the armored cars came roaring along the road. As it passed, the occupants threw several hand grenades over the wall. The ear-splitting blast dazed us and set our heads ringing.

The brassy heat of the mid-afternoon sun beat down upon us, and when I strained my eyes in the direction of the irrigation ditch the dancing heat waves distorted my vision. Several

machine guns opened fire on us from different points. Their bullets were hitting the wall and skimming its top, pinning us down behind it. To add to our danger, Mortar shells began falling on the hill just above us. The jarring blast of their explosions heralded the piercing whine of the fragments as they whizzed over our heads. We were squirming and crawling toward the irrigation ditch, but our pace was agonizingly slow. The rocky soil was tearing my hands and knees, my pack and gas mask were snagging on the rocks and underbrush. In blind panic I paused long enough to unsnap them and fling them away from me. For some reason the armored cars never returned, But machine gun bullets continued to rain down upon us. They were traversing the hillside and the dust from their impact enveloped us in a thick brown fog. My fear was so great that I was incapable of speech, for my throat was swollen and parched. I felt as though someone had thrust a handful of cotton into my mouth and then had withdrawn it, leaving a coating of fuzz inside. My stomach had turned to ice, my heartbeat was so strong that I could feel my pulse pounding in my fingertips, and my mind was struggling to keep back the waves of panic. The irrigation ditch was now only fifty or sixty yards away, but this crawling pace was too slow. With every fiber of my being I wanted to jump up and run, but the groping fingers of reason told me to do so would mean instant death. The German supply of ammunition seemed inexhaustible; they never slowed the tempo of their firing. As we crawled the bullets cracked and popped, they chirped and whistled as they tore through the air. Their noise was punctuated only by the blast of the mortar shells. This was the hell of war, and by what strange quirk of fate we survived I

do not know, nor do I know the time we spent crawling to safety. I reasoned later that the duration of this nightmare could have been no longer than thirty minutes, but as I fell into the irrigation ditch it seemed as though I had spent hours on the hillside.

As soon as we tumbled into the bottom of the ditch, the Germans ceased firing as suddenly as they had begun. The ditch was perhaps twelve feet deep, and it ran in the direction of a thick woods. Without a word we began running down the ditch away from the German line and in the direction of the wood. As we entered the cover of the trees we met an American Infantry battalion moving up to attack the hill. The Major in command began questioning us about the disposition of the German troops, but so great was our fear that for several minutes neither Potts nor myself was able to speak. After answering his questions, we made our way to the Regimental Command Post, where we found the survivors of our platoon. They told me that while Potts and I had been reporting our position to the Division the Germans had driven them from the hill, killing the demolition Corporal whose body we had seen beside the burning jeep and wounding several others. Not knowing this Corporal Potts and I had blundered into the German positions. Thus during our escape I had reached and passed the crisis of fear.

This was only one afternoon of many afternoons of war, and though I was in larger engagements, I never felt the degree of fear I felt that Sunday afternoon, July 11, 1943.