ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Seven Roads to Hell: A Screaming Eagle at Bastogne
Donald R. Burgett
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Writing with clarity and simplicity, Burgett takes his readers into the battlefields with him and his closest companions during the entire division's campaign to keep Bastogne, Belgium out of Nazi Germany's hands. From the time the 101st Airborne Division was called back into action on December 17, 1944 until they completed their mission one month later, they were thrown into one horrifically close and bloody battle after another. One sees clearly in microcosm what happened—in all its gruesome detail—to thousands of soldiers as they fought against staggering odds.

Short on weapons, ammunition, food and winter clothing, these soldiers were pitted against the strongest and most stubborn divisions Germany could offer—all while dealing with freezing temperatures and ever-deepening snow. Readers find out quickly that "This operation [was] a matter of make-do before [they] started… There simply wasn't enough ammo to go around." Also occurring early in the operation were illogical commands to abandon gear: "While we were there our new company commander ordered us to shed our overcoats, overshoes, and other heavy clothes… We stacked out heavy winter clothing into piles in platoon and company formations. We stripped down to jumpsuits, jump boots, helmets, and gloves… The captain told us we were going into the attack and would have to be able to move fast. Besides, he told us, there wouldn't be time to get cold and we would come back and pick up our heavy winter clothes the next day, after we'd whipped the Germans back to where they'd come from… We were stripped down to jump clothing that we normally wore in the summertime. The sky was overcast and a misty fog was settling in over the snow-covered fields. It was damp and it was cold."

As Burgett relates his day-to-day actions, one sees and experiences all that happens with him; whether in the midst of battle, moving position or dug in and awaiting orders. And little is spared about any of the realities—everything gets described: men dying in their foxholes from artillery fire, the grisly business of hand-to-hand combat, digging and preparing a decent

foxhole, keeping weapons clean, trying to get some sleep while under stress and the heart-wrenching deaths of comrades. He even includes the rare humor that boosted spirits in the midst of their hellish nightmare: discussing nearby Negro troops in the 155mm howitzer emplacements one night:

> *'They sure have it made,' Phillips said. 'They don't pull any guard duty, no patrols, and they are usually so far behind the lines that they don't even use a challenge or password.'*
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> *Later that night, while Jack Thomas and another man were pulling guard duty on the machine gun, one of the Negro artillerymen crept down through our lines, heading for the straddle trenches in the woods… Thomas allowed him to pass a few feet in front of his position without challenge. After a short while the man was coming back through the woods and when he was just a few feet in front of Thomas, Jack challenged him in a loud clear voice so we could all hear.*
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> *'Halt, who's there? Give me the password,' he intoned.*
>
> *'Man, I don't know any password,' said the startled Negro.*
>
> *'Come on,' said Jack. 'Give me the password or I'll cut you in half with this machine gun.'*
>
> *The man's response was quick, loud, and clear: 'Don't shoot man; you knows they ain't no nigger Nazis.'*
>
> *Everyone burst out laughing. We laughed until most of us lay weak in the bottom of our foxholes.*

Burgett's personal account of combat during World War II's Battle of the Bulge is extraordinary. Even more so when one realizes that "It is not the time-fogged memories of an old paratrooper, but rather the recollections of a young man just home from the war transferred to crisp, clean paper from the time-yellowed pages on which he first recorded them." Seven Roads to Hell is a story for young and old; a profound testament to the courage and honor of all the "Bastards of Bastogne."

Nelly Heitman