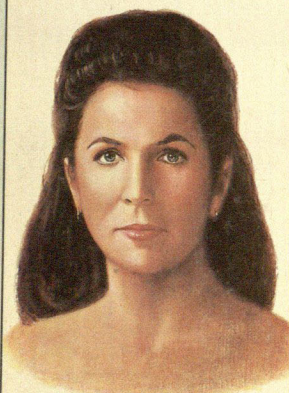


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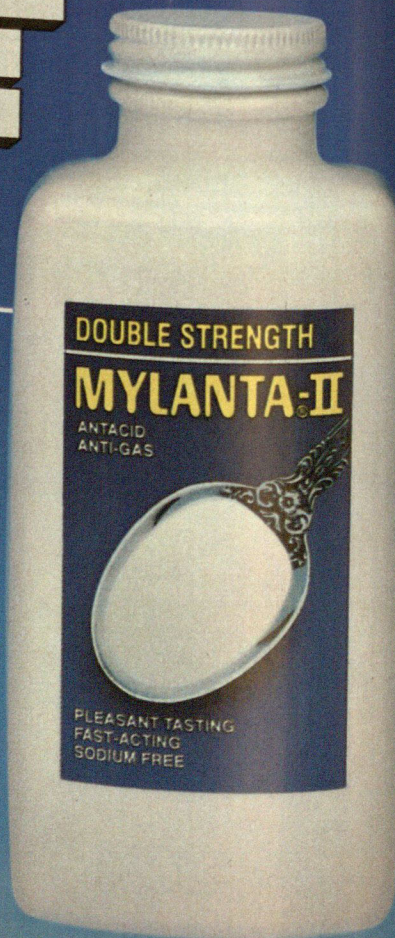
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For decades, the American infantryman was haunted by what happened that lovely autumn day during World War II

## A Strange Encounter With the Enemy

By TONY HILLERMAN



THE FIRST THING I always remember is the change in the weather. It was early November, 1944, the end of autumn in the French Vosges Mountains. Days of cold rain mixed with melting snow had turned roads into quagmires, bogging tanks, trucks and artillery.

Icy water dripped off helmets, seeped down the necks of field jackets, soaked through uniforms and left our skin numb.

But on this day, the sky was mostly clear. Under a warm sun walked the point platoon of a rifle company of the 103rd Infantry Di-

ILLUSTRATION: ED MARTINEZ



vision, Seventh U.S. Army. We had left the roads behind us, and with them mud, noise and exhaust fumes. The plan seemed to be to bypass German resistance by cutting across forested high country, following cow paths and deer trails. So far, the guess that the Germans would leave the mountains undefended had proved correct.

Since early morning, there had been no sign of war—not even the distant mutter of artillery. The tension of combat had gradually fallen away. Someone up ahead was whistling, and there was talk and laughter. A covey of woodcock was flushed from a thicket of bushes, and in the woods birds were singing.

It was early afternoon when our platoon neared the ridge where we were to await three trailing platoons. Two scouts moved through the granite outcrops, stopping to see what lay ahead, then motioning the rest of us forward. Suddenly one of them signaled, "Take cover."

I was 19 then. Today, at 60, I remember the scene vividly. In a narrow valley below sat a stone hut—perhaps the cabin of a shepherd. Smoke from its chimney formed a blue haze over a marshy meadow in front of the cabin and in the dark fir forest that climbed the ridge behind it. From our high position, we could see across scallops of ridges receding into the dim blue distance. But it was not this spectacular view that interested our scout; he was pointing at something below us.

I couldn't see what it was. Our leader, a young lieutenant, was studying the cabin and the meadow through his binoculars. The breeze moving toward us brought the smells of wood smoke and hay—and the sound of a harmonica. A tune too faint to be identified rose and faded and rose again.

Then two men came into sight below us, strolling along a cow path toward the cabin. One was bareheaded, his blond hair looking almost white in the sunlight. The other wore the cap of an enlisted man. Both were draped in the long, gray overcoats of the German infantry. The blond was tapping what must have been his harmonica against the heel of his hand. The man in the cap was talking and gesturing.

We watched in hushed silence. As the gunner of a 60-millimeter mortar, I calculated the distance between us and the Germans: less than 300 yards. What would happen next would not be my business, but that of the 30 men carrying M1 and Browning Automatic rifles. At this range, the two Germans were easy targets for a rifle platoon.

The blond played his harmonica again, the tune recognizable now as "Lili Marlene." The man with the cap walked with his hands clasped behind his back. He looked young and small, perhaps a teen-ager like many of us.

Because machine guns were probably in the forest in back of the cabin, we couldn't cut the two off

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## A STRANGE ENCOUNTER

with a patrol and take them prisoner. And a shout to surrender would send them dashing to safe cover. Even now their steps brought them closer to the stone hut.

The lieutenant looked behind him at his waiting squad leaders. "Fire," he ordered.

Everyone began shooting. Below, the two Germans ran desperately up the path. The boy with the cap fell, scrambled to his feet and ran again. A limb was clipped from a birch beside the path, and shattered shingles flew from the cabin's roof. They plunged through the door, and the firing stopped. One of our riflemen chuckled.

Moments later, the two Germans emerged from the back of the hut and raced through the trees up the opposite slope. The firing began again, but the men quickly disappeared into the forest.

When we moved down the slope toward the cabin, I paced off the distance—a habit all mortar gunners form to improve their skill at estimating range.

The lieutenant noticed my pacing. "How far was it?" he asked.

"About 270 yards from where I was standing," I said. "You think we need target practice?"

The lieutenant laughed. "I don't think so," he said, making a sweeping gesture that took in sunlight, mountains and all of autumn's colorful beauty around us. "I think we can blame it on the weather."

Within a month, the lieutenant was wounded and replaced. Most

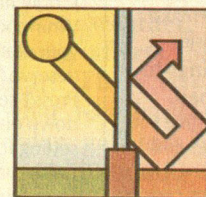
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## A STRANGE ENCOUNTER WITH THE ENEMY

of the men who had stood on the ridge that day went down in nameless battles up the Rhineland and along the Saar River. Some must have wondered, as I often did, if the German shooting at them was the blond with the harmonica or the boy with the cap.

At the end of February, a German hand grenade ended my career as a soldier. By then I had accumulated many memories of combat—incidents of fear, bravery, brutality and self-sacrifice witnessed in that bitter final winter of the war.

Most of those faded long ago, to return only rarely in a bad dream. But the memory of that November afternoon lingered, because it was unresolved. Why did an entire platoon of riflemen apparently choose to miss their targets?

In July 1985 I went to a division reunion, where I met with five former members of my platoon. In conversations held then and later I found that each still recalled the incident. I raised the troubling question. Had we lost anyone because of the Germans we didn't shoot?

Then we spoke of something

that had happened four months later, during a night raid into the village of Neifern. Of 40 men in that party, 30 were casualties. I was left in a mine field with broken legs. A German machine-gun position was less than 30 yards away.

"When we came to get you, we could hear them and they could certainly hear us," my friend said. "Whether or not they would put up a flare and shoot us was simply a matter of choice." For whatever reason, the Germans hadn't shot.

At last I understood what the lieutenant had meant by mentioning "the weather." Sometimes something affects the weather of the heart. There was even a name for what had happened that autumn day: gallantry, an attitude of honor and humanity applied to the inhumane business of combat.

On that ridge, American soldiers had looked over their sights at two enemy soldiers and decided not to kill them. A bad tactic; impractical; no way to win a war. But when you think about it for as many years as I have, it was exactly the sort of human decency that we were fighting to preserve.



### Sound Proof

SHORTLY AFTER being promoted, our overzealous young production manager instructed us that in the future all communication with him must be in writing. The following morning he met a veteran staff member, who silently produced from his vest pocket a small card and presented it to the manager. On it were engraved two words: "Good morning."

—Contributed by W. H. Carswell