

Drinking Wine and Taking Up Mines by George Smith Jr.

German Teller Mines were the shape of a dinner plate and about 4 inches deep, slightly thicker in the center where the detonator fuse screwed into it.

The day started with my squad being dropped off at a crossroads somewhere in France. It was the summer of 1944 when Patton's 3rd Army was making fast movement across France, several spearheads heading for strategic points to capture.

The Germans tried many methods to slow the advance. Nothing worked well at this time. A Frenchman came to greet us with a large basket, which held bottles of wine and traditional dark bread. He said he lived up the road a short way. We made short work of the basket of treats. I volunteered to take the big basket of empty wine bottles back to his house. This took me an hour or two. The Frenchman and his wife were anxious to visit with me. By this time, I had learned enough to "*parlez dans le français*" and "*compris*".

In a large room of his house he showed me the caskets that he crafted. He was a casket maker by trade. The Frenchman kept filling my glass and I began to feel dizzy. I shook hands and made a fast retreat back to the crossroads. The other men were gone, except for maybe two or three. A sergeant suddenly appeared in a jeep. "*Come on, Smith. We've got mines to take up.*"

We arrived at the retrieval site in very short order. The rest of the squad was already there but had not started the removal operation.

I was amazed to see mines placed in a checkerboard fashion in the blacktop road, covered with gravel and pieces of blacktop. No one was anxious to begin the chore of removing the mines. They handed me a 100 foot rope and said, "Get busy." I removed the loose fill around one mine and found the handle. I attached the rope. Next, I screwed out the detonator and moved back below the embankment along the road, and gave the end of the rope a hard jerk. Out it came.

Two French civilians came toward us, their wives trailing behind. "*Nix, Nix ...le mien!*", they were yelling. They wanted to alert us to the danger. The men were well ahead of their wives by the time they reached a gate near the road. They accidentally set off a concealed antipersonnel mine. The gentlemen lay there moaning, riddled with shrapnel. The women were

hysterical and screaming.

Lt. Ralph Hurlbutt shouted, "*Come on, we've got to get these mines up. This is the route to the hospital.*" I estimated that there were 75 Teller mines in the road that day. The wine I'd consumed made my mind forget the proper procedure for lifting anti tank mines. I mechanically pushed away dirt, screwed out detonators, grabbed the handles and rushed to the squad truck where we gently stacked the mines in the truck.

Following in my footsteps, a dozen other men set to work and we had the mines removed in about 15 to 20 minutes.

Other help arrived and removed the wounded Frenchmen. I don't know if they survived or not. Lt. Ralph Hurlbutt was injured very badly by a Bouncing Betty mine about a month after this incident. I wrote about Lt. Hurlbutt's injuries in "Looking for Stones".

The men in my squad rode around with those mines in the truck, some of us with our feet atop the mines for about 10 days. We complained among ourselves about the mines not being disposed of properly. Finally, the mines were taken to a special site and detonated. It was said that they made one hell of a hole in the ground.

Word came back instructing us—NEVER use the fast removal method again because the Krauts were putting activating devices under the Teller Mines to set them off if anyone tried to move them.

This is a memory of an incident that occurred while I was with Company B of the 167th Combat Engineer Battalion.