

Looking for Stones

By George Smith

I remember B Company had just completed a small steel bridge. The next morning we went back to tidy up the job.

It was a bad day. An especially bad day.

Lt. Frank C Hurlbutt, Sergeant Gall and Private Truman Foster (a soldier from Michigan) were down by a small stream looking for stones. Private Truman unwittingly stepped on a buried German S mine, or a “Bouncing Betty”.

The steel cylinder was less than 5 inches long and about 4 inches in diameter. A steel rod protruded from the top and this is where the trigger was attached. The main mine used TNT as the explosive and black powder was the propelling charge. The main fuze delayed the firing of the propelling charge for about 4 seconds after the mine was triggered. The explosion sent the mine upwards into the air and then three short-delay pellets delayed the mine’s detonation long enough for it to reach about waist height before exploding.

A lethal shower of steel balls and fragments sprayed in all directions. It exploded near Private Truman Foster’s head, killing him instantly. Sgt. Gall and Lt. Hurlbutt were hit by the flying shrapnel and were wounded. I screamed at the other men to attend to Sgt. Gall’s gaping puncture wounds while I knelt to take a look at Lt. Hurlbutt’s severely wounded leg.

In the meantime, another Lieutenant arrived and ordered mine detector men. Private Salvatore P. Procopio appeared with a mine detector. He immediately stepped on another mine and his leg was blown off and he suffered multiple puncture wounds.

Salvatore lay near by bleeding profusely and screaming for help. Operating on pure human instinct, I started toward the injured man.

“Get back here – you dumb son of a bitch.” A loud voice rang out and I froze in my tracks. Sergeant Franco appeared and threw a large plank down ahead of himself. In this way he and the Lieutenant proceeded to make their way to Procopio.

Meanwhile a medic from an artillery unit arrived to help. He set his medical kit down on a third mine and was killed before he could assist anyone. Sergeant Franco and the Lieutenant were close enough that their faces were blackened with the propellant powder in the mine. They managed to bring the mortally injured Private Procopio out.

I have often wondered throughout the years if Sgt. Gall and Lt. Hurlbutt survived their injuries.

I recall eight of the men of Company B who were killed and are now listed on the honor roll. It is something you don't forget.