

WHO WILL VOLUNTEER TO GO FIRST?

by George Smith Jr.

This is my view of the Combat Infantry. Being an officer or noncommissioned officer doesn't necessarily mean they will lead or be up front to become the first visible target. In my company, the platoon leader, a 1st Lt. told the platoon Sgt. what the object was and how to accomplish it. Some led the mission themselves on rare occasions. They didn't last long, but were fondly remembered.

During the last fighting in The Ruhr Pocket (a large area where the Germans were surrounded), my company was given the task of taking a large iron bridge spanning the Lippe River. The first platoon was to cross first. My platoon was to follow. We were hunkered down near the bridge and close to the stream. We stayed in that position, seemed like hours. On our right was some sporadic gun fire. We even had some 60mm mortar men nearby. An explosion happened nearby. No one was injured. Some men may have been as close as 30 feet.

Word passed down the line that it was one of our own which the fin had come off and landed short among us. Meanwhile off to our left, maybe 400feet was a similar bridge. We could see American soldiers in a line running across that bridge and surrendering German soldiers running across to our side. Word came down the pipeline that's "I" company. I thought "wow" this is unbelievable, how wonderful. Awhile later, white flags went up across the river from us. Apparently the first German to expose himself was fired at by someone in our company.

Meanwhile two men from the 1st Platoon volunteered to run across our bridge. They were killed when they reached about the center. Everybody is still hunkered down. An American Tank Destroyer on our right assumed a position right next to a house and fired white phosphorous shells at the dug in Germans. The shells caused a cascade of burning fire fragments. A terrible thing to be exposed to. Water cannot extinguish them. About this time farther to the right, not far from the stream, an American soldier is walking ram rod straight with a hand gun to the back of a German soldier. Word came down the pipeline that is Col. Kelly our battalion commander.

Sometime later, unknown to us, Col. Kelly met with the German commander on the bridge. Col. Kelly spoke German very fluently. All of a sudden Col. Kelly appeared among us with a real sharp looking German officer. Our commanding officer, Capt. Sunberg, appeared also. Col. Kelly barked out orders to Capt. Sunberg to have men break down doors in nearby homes to bring back severely wounded Germans; he also said to get your men across the bridge right now.

Our platoon Sgt. Moody said let go men. So now the same thing occurred as with "I" company. We were running one way across the bridge and the Germans were running toward us in a hurry, probably as ordered. We were in the left lane, Germans in the right. They were heavily bandaged and looked pretty seedy compared to the German officer. We continued down the road maybe a mile or two. Sgt. Moody called a halt. He asked me to proceed ahead with the bazooka man and dig in an emplacement to shoot at any German tanks that might come our way. I think this was sometime late in March 1945.

What an exhausting a nerve wracking day. We sat there all night. The sound of roaring motors persisted all night. My thought was "enemy tanks" waiting to pounce on us.

Daylight was appearing. I was more relaxed; guess I will lie down and rest. Next thing I knew my partner was shaking me. Get up! We're moving out. I got up and was blind for a minute or two. Then my sight came back. We marched that day, met no one. We had chow from the company "L" kitchen and were allowed to sleep in the deserted houses. Everyone rushed in the houses to grab a mattress. Not everyone got to sleep on a mattress. A tall man by the last name of Posey ran upstairs opened a door, and dashed outside in his hurry to secure a mattress, where he fell on a cream separator. Never heard anymore about him. I assume he probably survived.

Col. Kelly received the Distinguished Service Cross for his bravery and remarkable achievements that day. This award for combat ranks next to the Medal of Honor. His brilliant and brave actions that day probably saved many American and also German lives. A close friend, whom I corresponded with, Warren J Kenney "the medic", said he met and had lunch with the retired Col. Kelly (he retired as a General).