

"HEY, THE COLONEL'S BEEN HIT!"

Prologue:

I was promoted to Regimental Staff on June 29th, 1945 as Liaison Officer for Colonel H. H. McClune, Regimental Commander whose Command Post was stationed in Strakonice, Czechoslovakia. I was billeted in the town of Klatovy, about 12 miles from Strakonice and 92 miles from the large and beautiful town of Pilsen. There weren't enough accommodations available in Strakonice for all the Officers in Regimental Headquarters so a number of the Junior Officers were put up in Klatovy. This suited us fine for we felt very uncomfortable around too much "Brass". I wrote "Hey, the Colonel's Been Hit" the third week in July, 1945.

Quoted from the "History of the 376th Infantry Regiment" of the Historical Committee and printed by Carl Weddtngen in Wuppertal-Barmen, Germany, December, 1946:

"During the months at St. Nazaire the only real offensive action that could not be classed as a patrol was a push undertaken in the Third Battalion area with the objective of straightening the lines north of Bouvron. Center of activities during this advance was the area along the Brest-Nantes Canal in the vicinity of La Pessouis.

"It was on the morning of October 6th that Company I jumped off along the south bank of the Canal in the face of shelling and small arms fire which was particularly heavy in the vicinity of the old Chateau just east of La Pessouis. Late in the afternoon they passed through the town, which the Germans had hurriedly evacuated in the face of the advance, and occupied the high ground beyond the town. Here their troubles really began. As they started to dig in on the slopes of the hill, artillery began pouring in from both directions. Apparently the artillery with the 302nd Infantry across the Canal had spotted the digging and had mistaken Company I for enemy troops.

NOTE: In "Letters Home from the Second Platoon" written by Sgt. Robert K. Adair, his account is very accurate except that Lt. Jacques (who was with me) used the radio and called the 302nd Commander telling him who we were. His reply was "Don't try to fool me, you Krauts!" So we had to withdraw, which eventually cost us more lives the next day.

"Under fire from both sides they (I Company) were finally forced to withdraw east of La Pessouis again, and to allow the Germans to re-occupy the town."

Col. Benjamin Thurston was our Battalion C.O. -- a great man, fearless, brave, understanding, compassionate, battlewise, cunning, a West Point graduate and loved by all the men who had the privilege to serve under him in combat.

Quoted From Col. Thurston's Journal, 1946:

"Shortly after being notified that the 2nd Platoon, Co. I, led by Lt. Arenaz, a new-comer only recently assigned to Co. I, had been driven out of the hamlet La Pessouis by heavy and accurate mortar and artillery fire and because I had heard nothing extraordinary from that direction, I asked Capt. Watkins how many men had been killed, wounded or captured. The answer was 'None'

NOTE: The Col. was given a wrong report for Sgt. Mike Matyuf was killed by enemy mortar fire.

"It appeared that the inexperienced officer (not that the Battalion was battle-hardened) had been stampeded by a routine firing exercise and harassment."

There was a lot of grumbling among the men as to why we had to withdraw and three of my men in the 2nd Platoon (I was then Platoon Sgt.) saw our inexperienced Platoon Leader cowering in a shallow slit-trench, trembling and crying out: "Retreat, everyone -- retreat!" At least seven of the Platoon

did complain bitterly to me as to "why should we leave the ground we just took" for our own artillery and mortar fire had stopped.

Col. Thurston: "I reported this affair to Major Kelley who must have stirred up Col. McClune; he soon ordered me to recapture the ground without fail."

Staff Sgt. Vogt: During that night, word came to me to report to Capt. Watkins and Lt. Jacques. They informed me that they anticipated an order to recapture La Pessouis and the high ground beyond and that my Platoon (2nd) would lead the attack. I went back to my men, woke up Bob Adair and told him his 3rd Squad would be the point following behind the two Scouts and that I would be following the point.

Sure enough, Col. Thurston joined I Company early in the morning and met with Capt. Watkins, Lts. Jacques, Kelly and Arenaz and again I was informed of our leading the attack. Col. Thurston told us that in support we would have Battery C of the 919th Field Artillery Battalion plus another Battery from the same Battalion as well as a Battery of assault guns, in addition to 60 and 80 mortar support.

Col. Thurston: "In essence, the same Platoon that had skedaddled the day before would move forward about 3-400 yds. behind overwhelming fire-power (when needed) and re-occupy its former positions. So I told Watkins to start off his men and slipped into the column near the head as observer rather than wait at the assembly position until Arenaz reached his objective."

I was directly behind the point and to my surprise Col. Thurston joined me as we followed the road leading into the hamlet. We passed over the stone bridge spanning a brook and I observed movement to my right. Spotting a German machine gun nest I whispered to the Col.: "Sir, there are Germans to our right flank." With that, the Col. turned to his right and with his M-1 started firing, standing there like General Custer. I yelled out a warning and the men dropped to the left side of the ditch and began firing. I pulled the Col. into the ditch for he had been hit. Our Platoon Leader was back with the main body so I had Col. Thurston's radio-man call Lt. Jacques for a flanking movement.

Col. Thurston: "Most of the Platoon flopped on the left side of a "dirt viaduct leading from the bridge and began to fire at the machine gunners as more Germans began to pour out of the farm houses -- perhaps as many as twenty of the enemy. A few of our men had now reached buildings in the hamlet and sheltered in them while firing, but most of us lay out in the open against the viaduct and firing excitedly at the enemy darting about and at the machine gun which still had its troubles and was not yet firing."

"Two men immediately to my right (Thelan) and two men immediately to my left (Santelli and Phillips) were hit on the spine (and killed), the bullets' 'thunks' being unmistakable. At almost the same moment, I had a narrow call, the shot landing between the legs and spattering me with gravel in the crotch. I reared up to return the fire coming from our back and as I arose and turned about a bullet caught the tip of the .45 pistol and was deflected down. However, the shock of this blow on the barrel set off the round in the chamber and I was cut on the leg and penis, a previous wound (received while he was standing, shooting at the Germans a la Gen. Custer) having cut the flesh of the right arm. In addition there were other scratches and furrows."

Staff Sgt. Vogt: "Medic! Medic! The Col.'s been hit!" The Medic followed the Col. around for the Col. would not stay put until all was in order. The Col. yelled for Arenaz to move the men across the brook but he was nowhere to be found. Ray Singer told me that the Lt. disappeared! So I led the Platoon to the other side of the stream. Much to our sadness, we had lost Dick Phillips, Joe Santelli and John Thelan when they were hit with the Col. I was happy though that Bob Adair and Schenks were okay and ready to fight another day. The Col. rejoined us in a few days despite his wounds. You couldn't keep him away from "his" Battalion! We were glad to see him once again, a bit pale, but ready for action.

Then Col. Thurston thanked me for spotting the German machine-gun nest and shortly thereafter I received my Battlefield Commission. When I

reported to Captain Emeis, Battalion Adjutant, he told me that all of this came about because of Col. Thurston's recommendation. I was ushered into the Regimental Commander's office (Col. McClune) who, when I entered, never looked up as I came to attention, saluted smartly and received in return a "wave" salute. McClune set me "at ease" then gruffly said, "Sgt. Vogt, you have been put in for the Congressional Medal of Honor or a Commission. What do you say?" "Sir" I replied, "I can't eat a medal so I'll take the Commission." He looked up, grunted and said, "That's what I thought -- you're excused." Again, I saluted, smartly made an "about-face" and left him, to be greeted by Capt. Emeis who p~t his arm around me and gave me a 2nd Lt. Bar -- then I was back to my Unit.