

## **WW II: Character Changes in Battle**

### **Howard Schlossman**

During my 4-1/2 year military service, at the time of the invasion of Normandy, I was the Medical officer of a tank battalion in Patton's 3rd Army. My battalion fought from the breakout of the German Ring in Normandy (July, 1944) to the meeting with the Russians in Saxony (late April, 1945).

A gradual and ultimately sharp change in morality occurred in the shift from military camp to battle bivouac. There were no angels among the soldiers, and only a few genuine devils. Within the military unit - a squad, company battalion, intense loyalty developed at the expense of general loyalty to the country, Army, or even other units, as though each soldier joined a newly structured family with fierce pride and competitiveness. In detail, when a tank with a crew of five was hit and a man was killed or wounded, the entire crew was out psychologically, even when a new and better tank was issued. It didn't serve to break up the crew and add them as needed to other tanks. Only when the replacement was accepted by the group was the tank battle ready again.

Bonding, the formation of an intense friendship to the point of risking one's life to protect this friend, was the antidote for homesickness, loneliness, and a general feeling of abandonment. It was the story of Damon and Pythias repeated millions of times. The most intense was to a buddy, the man with whom you shared a pup tent; the next level was to one's unit, tank, squad and platoon. Finally, the fierce loyalty spread to the company, battalion and division. As I just mentioned, a tank crew ate together, slept together, foraged together, and laughed and lived together. If a man was lost, especially by death, the whole crew was out of action.

Sphincter morality was a battle casualty and slowly became very feeble. Attempts to stay clean, shave, privacy of toilet function and eating habits blipped with each battle. It was easier to regress relative to how far forward the soldier was. The division rear was spit and polish; the front

was grungy. The forward units prided themselves on their dirt. When pulled out of the dirt for rest and rehabilitation, each man wore his muddy helmet, combat boots and stained uniform as a battle star with a tolerant contempt for all those "clean guys". Early in the Normandy campaign locals laundered our socks and underwear and French village women ended up with a lot of underwear. Arrangements were made when we pulled into an area for the night. We found that a chocolate bar could buy a lot of clean laundry. However, on a few occasions, we pulled out just before dawn for an attack, and never saw our shorts again. The Army finally solved the problem with shower and laundry platoons. We would arrive in groups, deposit helmet, rank insignia, personal items and boots (most important) in a secure place, strip, shower and draw fresh, clean uniforms from the laundry window. Clothing was no longer personal. Officers and enlisted men drew the same clothing, differing only in size, and added Insignia of-rank. The procedure was very welcome. Privacy had been long forgotten. In the winter of '44-145, a literally bogged down offensive in November and the Bulge in December-January, I never got my clothes off for weeks, except for my shoes. I couldn't sleep with my shoes on.

In the same winter, combat exhaustion or battle fatigue similar to the shell shock of WWI became an important casualty factor. The cold was unforgettable and unrelenting. The Germans weren't running and the expected end of the war by Christmas didn't happen. Suddenly a war that was going so well wasn't going anywhere. In spite of reassuring intelligence reports of the sorry state of the German Army, no one had told the Germans. On December 16, 1994 the Germany Army in the Ardennes almost destroyed us—the biggest battle of the Western Front which raged about 6 weeks.

I began to see men led in by others with a "2,000 yard stare" on their faces. They were out of focus, whimpering, and unresponsive. A psychological death was as effective as a bullet. Some hot liquid, food, sodium amytal and a litter in the basement of the fortress-like French farmhouse of Lorraine and Souther Luxemborg usually brought them around in about a day or so. Most were ready to rejoin their units going forward with the next jeep sent to pick up wounded. If a soldier, had to be

sent to the rear, we usually never saw him again. The battalion aid station had to be forward to maintain morale. Conversion symptoms and other complex anxiety manifestations did not appear on first contact. They would surface in some men when return to their squad was imminent.

The concept of property rapidly deteriorated; it had the quality of college fraternity pranks. Once I was given a detail of men to build an entry point for trucks and other vehicles at a new post—a pre-war training camp. Large ditches had been scooped out by bulldozers to drain off rainwater. This made any vehicle entering the encampment to descend, and then climb up the far side, which was annoying to all. I recalled seeing a construction site some miles away where large, concrete tube sections were stacked for some county project (probably drainage) The first Sunday morning at dawn, my detail and I arrived at the County Construction site with heavy trucks and tackle, and we had our entry way before the day was over - all covered over.

Taking personal property was considered stealing, and no decent soldier would do that, but the property of other units, government especially, and enemy property, were fair game. The jeep was a most desirable vehicle. It was small, maneuverable, and could cross or climb any kind of terrain. Front line troops at rest in a rear area had no compunction for driving off with an unattended jeep. The "liberating" got so bad that any driver with experience would remove the rotor inside the carburetor if he had to leave the jeep, even briefly. I heard a story of a U. S. Navy submarine who would periodically put in for supplies, etc., to a French port for a day or so and have some freedom for most of the crew - but no transport. One day a jeep was left on the dockside by some unfortunate. Within a short time the submarine- crew dismantled the- vehicle into its smallest possible particle and stored it somewhere in the submarine. At the next port of call, with a little gas and oil, it was reassembled and available for recreation.

With the enemy, some of this liberating strained the morality of some of us; however, morality is in the eye of the beholder. A man I knew was a violinist and music teacher. His liberating specialty

was violins, but he only took fine violins. Like the jeep, he would take the violin apart, securely package it, and send it home through the division postal officer. one Colonel collected antiques. on occasion, the parcels were so big that the postal officer complained about the obvious looting.

The Wehrmacht had depots all over Germany, stocked with all sorts of delicacies that they had liberated. We acquired a small German panel truck which was repainted with U.S. Army colors and my medical unit markings. It was our butler's pantry and each day my mess sergeant would confer with me about the additions to the standard Army fare, such as pate', pickles, or excellent sausages. Once, on some gauleiter's estate, two deer came to the edge of the forest. We had fresh venison that day.

However, there were limits. Money was one—that is, big money. A Major of the Artillery captured a German paymaster carrying the equivalent of approximately \$50,000 in French francs. Foolishly, he tried to send the money home through the postal officer. He was court martialed, stripped of his rank, sent home, and immediately drafted as a Private.

Revenge was another destroyer of morality. It served as a license to release viciousness. Some units who felt outraged by the Germans—like a killing of wounded after a-surrender—or an individual who lost a close friend—sought revenge. They had trouble waiting for the next encounter—no taking of prisoners. Any enemy who showed up was gunned down. Officers had to restrain the men sometimes because Intelligence needed live prisoners to interrogate. The Malmedy massacre during the Bulge was a time like that. Everyone was mad and wanted to get even.

In the European Theater, sexual activity was not suspended, but moral restraint was. Given a mixture of young men acutely concerned about death or injury having a larder of goodies and young women deprived of any luxuries for years without men, the instinctual drives took over. Again, the chocolate bar was all the language necessary. Sex was life, and death was in the next battle.

The American Army with its Calvinist Baptist indoctrination was different from the French,

German and tolerant British, who made arrangements for soldiers, sexual gratification. Our G.I. had to make his own arrangements. Generals even decreed nonfraternization with the enemy in Germany; a rule only honored in its breach. I know personally that the Generals didn't follow their rule. Like looting, I had to lecture my company - "not in my face, or you force a Court Martial."

One sexual activity was highly censured by the men themselves.:That was In the Army it was a capital offense. All the moral outrage suspended in all . other sexual activity was concentrated here; certainly a-displacement that softened any sense of guilt.

The rightness of killing had to be learned with the commandment of childhood and religion, "Thou Shalt Not Kill" set aside. A British author in his review of the war stressed the difficulty American troops in Normandy had with killing in contrast to the battle -hardened, killing-hardened German troops. Americans would move down a hedgerow covered road waiting for the first shot and then respond, as though they wanted assurance there was an enemy there. Those first shots killed a lot of our point men. The Germans moving down a covered road would spray the building or hedges with bullets indiscriminately without regard to what or whom was on-the other side.

In time the Americans learned. The enemy became dehumanized and faceless. Then it was easier to kill. once a German patrol at night wandered into a field we occupied. I was asleep on the ground between my jeep and a thick hedgerow, characteristic of Normandy. Suddenly I awakened and saw a group of men silhouetted against the night sky. I was aghast! They were speaking German. Now I was fully awake. They were conferring and one man pointed to the next field. I thought I heard "Americaner." Then night turned into day with tracers and flares from the guns. Some of the tankers were also awake. I guessed that the Germans did not know they were in an American bivouac area and that they wanted to surrender. I was afraid the gunners might shot some of our own men in the cross fire, so I jumped-up and yelled at the Germans in.my best Yiddish-German, to lie down on the ground.and at our troops to stop shooting.. The Germans surrendered. These Germans

when I spoke with them were simple,-- frightened men, delighted at being captured by Americans; all except one poor fellow who had a heart attack and died from the fear and exertion just as his war was over. As prisoners, they were human again.

But then there was that German Major incident. He was badly wounded but fully conscious and spoke a well-educated English. As I was treating his wound and preparing him for travel to a hospital unit, he began patronizing me as follows: "We officers are gentlemen. War is the ultimate gentleman's game. These men around us are the pawns with which we play our game. This time you win -next time we will win." This, of course, is a condensed version of our discourse. He came from an old, landed East Prussian family. His father was a general in the German Army . I was getting furious as he spoke. Finally, I let go and I yelled at him in choice Army language that if he spoke that way at the hospital, some enlisted man would kill him. I know of an event, in an evacuation hospital about an arrogant, belittling German who, unfortunately for him, required an X-ray of a fracture. The X-ray technician trained the tube over his genitals and left the area for a long while with the machine on. At best, he was a castrated German.

The fear of cowardice, I believe, is universal in man. We are all worried about being found wanting in our adolescent and young adult years; that is, at the military age, and it is hard to tell which is greater, the fear of opinion of self or the opinion of peers. Counterphobic activity began to appear. There was a Major Brown in my tank battalion or rather the tank battalion in which I was the Medical officer. In England, before the Normandy crossing, we had an officer's club in an old Pub. On a number of evenings, as we sat and socialized, in came Major Brown staggering and roaring drunk. With an automatic pistol in his hand he would announce that he would shoot any son of a bitch who I never could quite hear what the offense was. I was frozen with fear as the muzzle passed by me. One of the other officers would come up behind him and knock the gun out of his hand, and everybody laughed while Major Brown was carted off to his quarters. I did not laugh.

It was difficult to tell who would be the hero. In battle, Major Brown never got drunk. He was a soldier's soldier and received every battle medal we had and was recommended for a Medal of Honor. In one battle we were surrounded and heavily shelled in a town in Lorraine. He had been wounded in a counterattack that he had led and came to my aid station. A bullet had gone through his jacket and skidded across his ribs. Another bullet had gone right through the calf of one leg. I cleaned and dressed his wounds and wanted to hold him for some rest. He refused and limped back into the fray.

Another soldier did not fare as well. He was a sergeant commanding a tank. In England, he told everyone repeatedly that he was going to get medals. In the approach to the German lines around Brest in Brittany, he came to a concrete pillbox and apparently wanted to bring those Germans in as his prisoners. He dismounted from his tank, walked toward the machine gun, ordering them to surrender. The gun swung around and cut him in two.

Of course, I had my own doubts about my manhood at a particular time which, as I later learned, was my counterphobic response to increasing anxiety. My coping capacity was getting low. A battle was going on at a small river crossing and town in Lorraine. (We had many battles in Lorraine). A radio call came for a little jeep. It was a clear day. Impulsively, I decided to go with the jeep and see the action and pick up the wounded. As my litter bearers were putting the wounded on the jeep, I spoke with an officer at the side of the tank while watching the shooting just across the creek. Suddenly, a man at my side dropped to the ground with a yell, shot in the thigh. A German sniper was in an outhouse just across the creek. A tank shell finished him. But what was I doing there? As a medical officer, I was in the wrong place. I needed that exposure, stupid as it was.

There was a gradual decline in all super ego goals and moral values as the war progressed. At the beginning, in the U.S.A., civilians would have nothing to do with the black market. Rationing was adhered to. Everything was for the soldiers, and all the soldiers were noble. In England, at war for 4

½ years when we arrived in February of 1944, the rules were obeyed in the small towns while in London, "anything went". In France, under occupation for four years in the summer of 1944, testing the authorities was a game - testing all authorities. The procedures developed --under the Germans were employed against the Americans, but without animosity. In Germany, there was no loyalty and very little morality in the civilian population. Everything, including sex, was in the service of survival. In providing for my troops, I had to deal with the local man in charge of a farm complex or village. Once, close to the end of the war, as senior officer, I was the military governor of a town in Saxony before the arrival of Allied Military Government. I never met a Nazi. The Mayor insisted he had never been a Nazi and on learning that I was a Jew reassured me that he always knew Hitler was wrong about the Jews.

An added anxiety appeared in the last few months of the war. In March of 1945 after we crossed the Rhine and the days were longer and warmer, it was clear that the war was ending and we had beaten them. Again, as in the Battle of the Bulge, no one had told the Germans. There were many small pockets of resistance often SS troops. We developed anxiety about being the last man, that is, the last man killed at the end of the war. Being killed during the course of the war was part of war, but to be the last after all we had been through was unbearable bad luck.

A comment about religious adherence. Each division had one or more chaplains. We had a Protestant Lieutenant Colonel, a Roman Catholic Major, and a Rabbinical student sergeant who drove for the division chaplain. When in rest areas, services were held. I was not aware of any increase in religion with battle experience. The aphorism "There are no atheists in foxholes" was pure propaganda. It was not true. Each person dealt with his conscience and his fear in his own way, which he carried with him.

There was an intensive bonding of men in battle. Friendship flourished greater than any sibling relationship. Men literally died for one another. One would think that the relationship would persist into

peacetime. In spite of Hollywood depiction with the cooling of passions after the war, the friendships faded in the main. Not all, some veterans have made the war a life's work and joined the American Legion, VFW, Division organizations, etc.

In conclusion, I would like to comment about the personal changes that took place. I felt myself a different person after the 4 ½ years, not just older. I understand people and myself more than ever before. One of the effects was a career change. Before the Army I had planned on OB-GYN as my specialty, but on terminal leave I called Bellevue and hoped for acceptance as a resident in psychiatry. Thanks to a neurologist in England, I learned about Freud and unconscious conflict. In battle, I learned how true that was.

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