

STORIES BY DEAN W. BETZ

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Frenchy

It was in a muddy, shell-torn orchard in Normandy where I first saw Frenchy. About 30-40 others, like myself, had been sent up to this particular infantry company as replacements. The losses had been heavy in the hedgerows and Company K had not been spared. As I lay in the Norman mud I looked up at the torn and twisted apparition above me which at one time had been a lovely apple tree. Machine gun and rifle fire continued unabated while mortar shells dropped spasmodically around us. Rain dripped from the mangled tree as I examined the deep well-spaced foxholes dug into the hedgerow in front of me. A few grimy haggard spectators watched us as we lay there. I concluded that they were all that was left of the company command post. These spectators, who peered at us, seemed very inquisitive as though we were from a different world. They inquired as to our number and asked what part of the states we were from. However, they never ventured from their holes, but merely stared at us with blank and pitiful expressions on their faces. We were lying in the mud and rain waiting to be assigned to a platoon. Twice, a mud-caked GI came and took about half of our number. Then from a narrow hole in the hedge came a bearded, hunched figure. He approached our group and selected about a dozen of us and then introduced himself: "My name is Frenchy. I'm your platoon sergeant – second platoon. Follow me through this hole in the hedge at a ten-yard interval. Keep low and move fast. As soon as you find an empty hole, hit it and remember to keep low cause Jerry has our whole area covered and knows we're bringing up replacements. After things quiet down, I'll come and talk to each of you personally. Let's go."

I was off on the greatest adventure of my life and followed the man in front of me through the hole in the hedge. I dashed for a vacant hole that was half full of water, but it provided a welcomed covering from the fierce firing of the enemy. Later I became better acquainted with Frenchy and from that time on was a keen observer and worshipper of the most courageous and indomitable person I have ever known.

In that first lonely and strange night of combat, I was overwhelmed with a terrible case of nervousness and jitters like most newcomers to the front lines. I had been standing guard behind a thick protective hedgerow for perhaps a half-hour while a steady barrage of shelling continued from both sides. Now and then a German plane droned lazily overhead discharging flares, which illuminated the countryside. Up and down the line from me, grenades could be heard exploding while I stood peering out into the inky blackness ahead of me. Then, from behind, I heard someone moving about. It was Frenchy, checking the guard. He approached me and began talking in a low voice. "Try to relax kid. This is nothing compared to Africa. We had to pull guard all night long by ourselves. We had to dig in out in front of our lines and sit there all night with fixed bayonets. Sometimes we had to pull the pin out of a grenade and sit there and hold it to keep from falling asleep." He also told me that our outfit would be relieved soon and we would go back to the rear for a few days where we could sleep and eat all we wanted. I found out later that all rookies were given this false information to boost their morale. So you see, Frenchy was not only a master tactician but a psychologist as well. A few minutes later he snuck off to another position and left me standing there behind the hedgerow alone and wondering how, with all the horror around me, Africa could have been worse.

On the second day of the titanic battle for St. Lo, after meeting fanatical enemy resistance, Frenchy was hit. He got "his" while in the process of clearing out a machine gun position over in the far corner of the hedge. After being knocked down by the blast, he rose to his feet and tried to continue the job, which he had already started. Instead, he collapsed at the feet of our medic, who hurried over to give him aid. I found out later that shell fragments had torn through both his legs. Afterwards, it was rumored that both legs would have to be amputated. Like the hundreds of others that horrible day, he was sent back to the hospital and was never expected to be seen again.

After Frenchy left the outfit many legends concerning his adventures began to circulate. In Africa and Sicily, he accompanied the battalion commander on secret patrols at night behind the enemy lines. He walked up in the middle of a street just after D-day firing his Browning automatic rifle and slaughtered at least a dozen of the enemy. He brought about the surrender of an entire German company. After his old comrades had either been killed or wounded, Frenchy fought on. (Losing one's close friends, watching them "get theirs" and going on for a great length of time unscathed is one of the mysterious and heart rending factors of war.)

In November, to everyone's surprise, the invincible Frenchy returned to the outfit. We discovered later that he had escaped from the hospital in England and had somehow made his way back to our division. Was love of war so strong in him that he would deliberately rejoin his outfit where death and destruction early awaited him? Was he out of his mind? I came to

the conclusion that it was probably the atmosphere of close comradeship and understanding, the mutual aims and unity of effort that drew him back. Something that couldn't be found anywhere else. Whatever it was, he was given a hardy welcome. Once again the company had that extra spark of superb leadership given by Sergeant Frenchy.

By July, however, things had changed. There were new faces and new surroundings. No longer were we in the hedgerows but instead we were now situated in the wooded and rolling country of the Ardennes near the German town of Munchow in the Siegfried line. One quiet afternoon, after renewing my acquaintance with Frenchy, I sat and talked with him about old times. We talked about the big air show at St. Lo, the bombardment and about how terribly hot it was that day. We joked about some of the incidents that happened and then Frenchy began telling me how it felt when he got hit. Motioning to his legs, he proudly said, "Feel the lead in my legs, here below the knees. They didn't get it all out." I felt, and sure enough there were hard lumps under the skin of both legs. He told me they were planning on taking it out just before he left the hospital. What was he trying to prove? Why didn't he remain in the hospital and let them take the rest of it out? Why, he might even have been sent home. These were some of the thoughts that ran through my mind as I sat there on the edge of the hole talking to him. Then he began to tell me all about his brother who was in high school back in New Jersey. He had sort of a fanatical but remorseful look in his eyes as he talked. His greatest ambition was that his brother would never get mixed up in the war. He was always thinking about someone else and never himself. He was funny that way. He also told me how he despised killing Germans but went on because he could do the job just as well as the next guy. "Why brush a dirty, lousy job like this off on somebody else when you can do it yourself?" he said. I nodded my head in agreement but at the same time wondered if other people could even begin to realize just what kind of hell some men were going through for them. Here was a man who had been in the thick bitter fighting for two whole years but hadn't given up. Here was a man with almost supernatural courage and strength. Here was the personification of the ideal American soldier. The next day I saw Frenchy for the last time as I was sent back to the hospital. Sometimes I wonder if he lived through the war or if his brother ever got involved in the conflict. Sometimes I close my eyes and think of all the other "Frenchy's" who fought in all parts of the world. Sometimes I wonder where we would all be today without all those "Frenchy's".

On Patrol

We had been fighting without a rest for three weeks and the company was not up to full strength. Around noon we crossed the French border into Belgium territory. It was growing late and would be dark in another two hours. Our long column of dusty men stopped and spread out along the side of the road. Up ahead lay a series of hills and surely the Krauts were up there waiting for us. A deadly silence filled the air. It was a silence that was abnormal, like the proverbial calm before a storm. Our Lieutenant gave our platoon a signal to move off the road. Five minutes later we were ordered to dig in. I began to dig a hole with Chuck Fry, our assistant squad leader. Chuck was twenty years old and had joined the division the same day as myself. We were the only two men left in our squad after St. Lo and had become very close friends.

We hadn't been digging long when the Lieutenant came over and wanted to know if Fry would lead a three-man patrol into a village up ahead. Fry told him he would and asked me if I would join the party. I told him to count me in and he smiled and told me to get ready while he went to get another man. I sat next to the partially dug hole and talked to the Lieutenant for only a few minutes before Chuck came back with a guy by the name of Hartman who completed our trio. The Lieutenant told us to proceed up to the village and get as much information as possible concerning German V1 rocket launching sights which were believed to be in the vicinity. He also warned us to be on the lookout for the Krauts and to be sure to return before dark.

The village was no more than a mile away. Behind it lay rolling hills and on either side were pine forests. Leading into the village was a narrow winding road and around one of the curves we met a group of people who were sitting along the side. We found out that they were headed toward the village and there was an English speaking man there. We told them we were in a hurry and started walking while they followed. We had no sooner entered the village with its brown stone buildings when the inhabitants swarmed upon us like bees escaping from a hive. We were completely surrounded by a mob of deliriously happy people who began to hug and kiss us and shake our hands while they shouted "Viva la Amerique." We finally broke loose and raced for one of the nearby houses for protection. After the people quieted down we were able to locate the man who we were told could speak fluent English. He could not speak English any better than the other fellows we had met on the road but he seemed to understand us better than anyone else. He told us that we were the first Americans they had seen in four years and they acted like it. After drinking many toasts and eating cakes which looked and tasted like cold waffles, some of the people began to leave, but not before we had signed autographs. It was some feeling to be a celebrity and it certainly made me feel good to see these people so happy. Some of them came up and touched us as though they were in a dream and couldn't believe their eyes. One old peasant woman told me that I looked too young to be in the army. Others came up and lifted my steel helmet, tried it on and groaned at the weight of it. The two men who spoke a little English acted as interpreters and had all they could do to answer and explain questions to the villagers and to the three of us.

One time two women who had been talking in a corner of the room got into a fight and Hartman had to go over and break it up. We told Fry that they were fighting over him. The owner of the house brought three bottles of wine out of the cellar and told us he had saved them especially for the liberation. After many toasts and after signing what seemed like hundreds of autographs we remembered that we came to find out about rocket sights. We were having such a good time that we had forgotten all about our mission.

By this time, it was very dark outside so it made little difference if we stayed there until morning I thought to myself. Fry, however, had different ideas and decided to go down the street with Hartman and see what they could find. He told me to remain in the house and see if I could uncover some facts about the rocket sights. A lot of people went with them and I was left with the family who owned the house and a handful of others who wanted to hear about America. The owner wanted me to spend the night with him and the rest of the family. They had a buxom daughter about my age, three younger boys and a small baby girl. I told them we had to start back and it was impossible to remain with them overnight. It was hard to explain to them, but I think they understood even though the old man seemed to be mad at me for not accepting his hospitality.

Then I heard one of the boys mention something about the Germans and found out that some Krauts had been seen in the hills behind the village not more than a kilometer away. I began to get worried and sent the boy down the street after Fry and Harman. I was afraid the Krauts might have been attracted by the noise and suddenly realized that we might be in a very dangerous spot. In a short while the boy returned with Hartman and Fry who were obviously drunk. They had flowers draped around their necks like Hawaiian Leis and were carrying a bottle of wine and singing at the top of their voices. By shaking each one violently I finally brought them to their senses and both agreed it was time to return. We bade goodnight to our hosts and walked off down the road into the darkness leaving the little village and the happy people behind.

Snuffy

Albert Devinus was a big, good-natured guy, who stood over six feet tall in his khaki-colored GI socks. His weight was evenly distributed throughout his massive big boned body and nowhere, not even around his mid section, were there any traces of flabby folds or fat. After having a few drinks or being out in the sun most of the day, his round face used to light up like a red hot stove in a dark room. His straight straw colored hair was thinning on top and caused him considerable worry. "My wife used to run her fingers through my hair," he'd often say with a tinge of sadness in his crisp, Bostonian accent, "but when I get back she's going to be mighty disappointed because instead of hair, there will be just this shiny dome."

After supper, he would pull out a cigar from his pocket, light it and take a couple of deep drags and then sit back like a Wall Street broker and say, "There's nothing like a good cigar with the evening meal, even if it is lousy army chow." He would sometimes smoke two cigars in a row and then pull out a small round box of Copenhagen. He would offer some to anyone nearby, place a small pinch of the stuff under his lower lip, and say, "Ah, just what I needed, sure you won't have some?" I guess this is how he came to be called "Snuffy."

I first met Snuffy in the Cathedral City of Amiens, France where we had both been sent to join a military police detachment. He was an old combat man who had landed in Normandy just after D-day and had miraculously lived through those first few hellish weeks of fighting in the swamps and hedgerows. Evenings, we would sit around in a crowded smokey café drinking Vin Blanc, Vin Rouge, Cognac and Champagne. We would sit and listen to American tunes played by a three-piece band in the snappy French style. We would talk about wine, women and the war.

It was on one of those nights when Snuffy was in rare form and told some of us about the exciting things that happened in those first few weeks of combat in Normandy. After two days and nights of bitter fighting, his platoon dug in along a thick, tree covered hedge. Since it rained every night, he covered his hole with a captured Jerry shelter-half for protection against the inclement weather. Not long after he had been relieved from guard, he went back to his hole and fell into an exhausted slumber. The pattering of rain on the shelter-half awakened him and something seemed to be crawling along outside of the hole. As he raised his arm to lift the covering he felt a body. Immediately he thought of the week before when most of the second platoon was slaughtered in their holes by Krauts who had snuck through the lines. For what seemed like hours of tortuous waiting but was only seconds he got up enough courage to throw off the shelter-half and leap out of the hole. As he stood there in the rain he saw a frightened, wet, shaggy dog instead of a Kraut. Snuffy said he was so happy to see the dog that he put the dog inside the hole with him where they slept the rest of the night. Not all of us believed the end of the story but we all agreed that Snuffy was one of the best storytellers in the entire world.

One day our outfit got orders to move to a staging area in southern France near the city of Arles, which took three days. During most of the trip we sat in the doorway of our boxcars with our feet dangling over the sides. One time, Snuffy had his

big toe stubbed as we went through a tunnel and for weeks after that did a lot of complaining. The medics told him to soak the injured toe in water as often as possible. Since it was very difficult to obtain water in the company area, we looked for it elsewhere and found a glistening silver lake not more than seven miles away. Every afternoon, Snuffy and I would sneak off from the company area and go swimming. Getting away from the company wasn't too difficult because nothing was done at that time of day due to the severe heat. We were always lucky enough to get a ride in a GI truck. Sometimes we would travel about forty miles southeast to the special GI resort on the Mediterranean. The Red Cross served doughnuts and coffee, cold beef sandwiches, hot dogs and hamburgers all without any charge. To Snuffy and me, this spot was paradise and we would swim in the blue waters of the sea. It was a pleasure to lie on the fine white sand, after visiting the refreshment stand and enjoy the warm rays of the sun. Snuffy liked this resort because of the abundance of good food. Even after eating enough food to feed three men, he was always ready to eat some more when we returned to camp around suppertime.

Sometimes on particularly hot days, if we could get transportation, we would go to the Mediterranean in the afternoons and the lake in the evenings. Any time we had to do laundry we would take a bar of soap with us to the lake, wash our clothes and hang them to dry on a branch of a tree while we swam or just sat on the rocky shore and talked. There weren't many guys that took advantage of this small lake and not very many went to the Mediterranean. Snuffy and I knew of no better or more enjoyable way to spend the blistering hot summer afternoons even after his toe was as good as new.

What I liked about Snuffy was his simple philosophy of life. More than anything else in the world, he wanted to save up enough money to buy a good dump truck. At night he would talk about dump trucks in his sleep. Some of the guys thought he was nuts but, like everyone else, he wanted to get home to his wife. Instead of making a fortune, he just wanted a dump truck of his own. Life had been difficult for him and he had been around enough to realize the world didn't owe him a living. Even though he had killed many of the enemy, he still didn't really know why he killed, except for self-preservation. Basically, he didn't believe in war and often told me that he thought people would live together happily and peacefully after the war. "Surely people could settle their differences in some other manner than killing off thousands of fine men, slaughtering helpless animals, tearing up rich productive farm land, separating wives and husbands and loved ones, spending billions of dollars for war instead of for peace. Why not have the rulers fight it out between themselves instead of mixing everybody up and confusing the whole world," he'd say. "Then maybe we wouldn't have wars."

I don't know whether Snuffy got his dump truck or whether he ever got back to the states because I was sent home ahead of him. But, whatever he did, no matter how dirty or how difficult his job, I'll be willing to bet that he was happy because he always found the brighter side of life.