

Snow Patrol

Buck Marsh

The temperature was below zero. There was no moon, but we were walking in 20 inches of snow, so you could see fairly well from the snow reflection. After walking 200 yards or so, I glanced to the rear and here came our engineers, each carrying tank mines – all in dark olive drab overcoats that were visible in the snow for miles, it appeared. It concerned me that we had to come back through the minefield area, but I didn't worry long because I had more concerns about what lay ahead than what lay behind me. The engineers followed for a little longer, then placed their mines and returned to our lines. Remembering that in our briefing Major had said the engineers would advance their minefield to a "safe" distance, I assumed that we were now in an "unsafe" area.

It was 1944, I was 20 years old, and we were stationed in Belgium fighting what would be dubbed the "Battle of the Bulge." Earlier that evening four of us were summoned to Company Headquarters and introduced to a Major from Battalion Headquarters. He first stated that we were a reconnaissance patrol and not a combat patrol; we were not to engage the enemy. I liked what he said, but he could have saved it: we four GIs had no intention of going out there in the pitch black dark night to challenge the whole German army in its own back yard. They would probably be upset if they even knew we were there, much less if we started shooting at them. Our Major proceeded to tell us that we were to go across the 500 yards of fairly open terrain to our front. This area was covered by our dug-in machine guns as our MLR. After crossing this terrain, we were to intersect a small sunken road, proceed 1000 yards along this road, go through an iron gate, climb a hill, "get comfortable" and look and listen for German movement. This would put

us approximately a half mile into enemy territory. The Major also told us that our battalion engineers would be following us at a “safe” distance to extend their tank minefield. He then instructed each of us to remove all personal items from our pockets, keeping our dog tags only. Now this doesn’t sound like any big deal – but as you pile up a knife, wallet, ring and other incidental items, it dawns on you that he is doing this in case you are captured. All of a sudden, these items become very, very personal as you wonder if you will ever see them again.

We were all ready to go, except for one thing. Unlike the Germans, who had been planning this offensive for some time and whose equipment was thoroughly winterized and many of them had snow boots as well as white, camouflaged snow-suits, we had no winter gear to speak of.

So, some GIs back in supply took white bed sheets and improvised a “snowsuit.” They sewed a hood onto the sheet and sewed strips to tie around both arms, both legs and the waist, covering our entire uniform. I noticed the guy helping me tie my sheet around my arms and legs kept smiling. I asked him what was so dang humorous; it seemed very serious to me. I looked to my rear – there must have been six feet of sheet following after me on the floor. I looked like a 5’5” bride coming down the church aisle with a ten foot train! We remedied that by cutting some off. Now we were ready for our “non-combat” patrol.

We were given a ride to our last machine gun outpost and as we walked through this line, were given the sign and countersign for that night. This would be very important on our return to be able to identify ourselves as friendly troops.

Shortly, we came upon the sunken road, just as our Major had said. It was about 6 feet wide, but the snow had blown in and was deep. Along each side were earthen banks about head high, covered with thick bushes weighted down with icicles. Our Sgt. Dave Knarr and another GI

were in front—one at each side of the sunken road—and the other patrol member and I to their rear, maybe 20 feet. Walking was terribly slow, with snow up to mid-thigh. I suppose we had gone over halfway toward the iron gate when we heard other people walking toward us. They were not in the sunken road, but at the top, knocking icicles off the bushes as they brushed against them from the outside of the road. All of us melted into the deep snowdrift down along the sides of our road and waited. Our worst fears were realized as they passed within ten feet of us, mumbling and whispering in German. As I lay in that deep snow, I was most thankful for the GI who had made our funny snowsuits. They were funny no more. It must have taken the German soldiers some five minutes to go by our position – probably there were 25 or 30 of them (although one of our patrol members later said there were at least a hundred!) We were careful that all had gone by before we crawled up to Dave Knarr's position. We only looked at each other and, finally, someone asked about a drumming noise. It was my heart beating, I told him.

We discussed our situation in very quiet tones and then one guy told Dave Knarr that if Dave wanted to go to that iron gate, as per the Major's instructions, it would be a three-man patrol because he felt that we had accomplished our mission. I pointed out that our Major, during briefing, had designated us a reconnaissance patrol and not a combat patrol. I didn't care about "ambushing" these Germans on their return. We had all been told that the Germans were moving swiftly and not taking any prisoners.

In a short time, all hell broke loose back at our machine gun emplacements. It was obvious that the Germans had made contact with our troops. This firefight with burp guns, machine guns and hand grenades must have lasted half an hour. While this fight was taking place, we moved 100 yards or so down the sunken road toward the iron gate, finally finding a place to get out of the sunken road on the side opposite from the Germans' path. We went only

40 feet and came upon a rock wall built around a well or spring. This provided us with cover, plus got us out of that road in case the Germans came back down it. We had a clear view of the road and bushes from here. As we sat behind this stone wall in two feet of snow, no one mentioned being cold; in fact, if the truth were known, all of us were probably sweating. We didn't have to wait too long before we could hear the Germans coming back the same route; only this time, they were not too quiet. The wounded were groaning and talking, while the ones carrying them were grunting and fussing. In their snowsuits, it was hard to see them from our vantage point of 60 or 70 feet. We gave them plenty of time to go by and then Knarr insisted we wait another ten minutes or so. I was ready to get back to our friendly lines, but I'm sure his decision was the correct one. No other Germans came after this ten minute wait, so very carefully and quietly we re-entered the sunken road and proceeded toward our lines.

As we came out of the sunken road and started across the open terrain, I completely forgot the minefield. We were all anxious to get into our company area, but concerned about our own GIs shooting us. We came upon a few dead Germans and, at this point, Knarr had us all lie down and he shouted in a very loud voice toward our lines that we were friendly troops. The sign and countersign were exchanged, but still our troops had him give the names of the people in our patrol. Knarr only knew me as "Buck" and when he asked my last name, I told him loud enough to be heard in Liege! Finally, we were told to come forward. In our beautiful "snow-suits" we could *not* have been mistaken for Germans, with all the flaps, ties, knots and excess material. I shouldn't laugh about those old bed sheets because they probably saved our lives in that sunken road.

We were hustled off to Company Headquarters to report our recon findings. On the short walk to Headquarters, one of our patrol asked Knarr what he was going to tell the Major we saw. Knarr replied, "Whatever they wanted us to see, we saw!"

As we entered the briefing room, everyone there seemed surprised that we had gotten back with such a fight having taken place. Not many questions were asked. I guess the fight proved that the enemy was close by. And as I walked out of that briefing room and out the door to my foxhole, the most important thing to me was putting that old knife back in my pocket.