

FOOTNOTES OF A WWII GI



by Edward M. Saraniero

FOOTNOTES
OF
A WORLD WAR II GI

BY
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Kindest Regards, E. S., July 23, 2010

Dedicated To

Anna Marie Congdon Saraniero

My wife of 57 years

Who died peacefully in the Lord

February 21, 2008

and

To the Soldiers of

the 48th Engineer Combat Battalion

I am proud to call you my brothers.

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Introduction

The idea of writing my essays about World War II (WWII) came from my eldest daughter. She claimed that I, like many WWII veterans, hardly talked about their war years. She thought the stories could serve as good records for future generations. After several years of interruption, due to caring for my wife during her illness, I resumed writing as a way of helping me cope with her death.

While writing, reminiscing all the while about life during the war years, the word footnotes kept coming back, accompanying my thoughts. Thinking of the various activities of the soldiers, made the word become more vivid. The word footnotes seemed to take on the resemblance of the usually short notes at the bottom of book pages: so-called footnotes. Perhaps these thoughts harbored on my mind excessively because the quick notes I wrote on small pieces of scrap paper were also short notes. The short notes eventually found their way home with me; they were useful in writing the essays.

The word footnotes also made me think of the foot-soldier, the GI, the infantryman. Their feet walked in Europe from Africa to Germany.

Combat engineers, sometimes referred to as pick-and-shovel men, also served as infantry when needed and did their share of walking.

Such were my thoughts that gave birth to a home-made version of footnotes
for the title of the book.

Edward M. Saraniero

Columbus, Ohio

March 15, 2010

February 1999

A Spiritual Journey

The first time I saw a monastery was in the winter of 1944 as a soldier during World War II in Cassino, Italy. The monastery I saw in the distance was an archabbey of the Order of Saint Benedict. The abbey was founded by Benedict in 529 A.D. at about the time he wrote his famous Holy Rule. It was here that the Benedictine Order, a Catholic monastic religious order, came into being.

There it was, situated atop Monte Cassino, approximately 1,700 feet above the Liri Valley floor. We often referred to the mountain as Monastery Hill and to the monastery as the fortress-in-the-sky. The mountain had a character of its own, beholding a monastery that seemed to be rooted in its bowels. The mountain and the monastery together formed a stable landscape from the valley floor to the rugged rock-laden cap. The town of Cassino spreads out along the lower slopes of the mountain. The swift Rapido River, heavily mined on both sides by the enemy, flows through the town. Cassino is about halfway between Naples and Rome.

I was in Company A of the 48th Engineer Combat Battalion. We were bivouacked in a field near the base of Mt. Lungo. Mt. Lungo was one of the many typical hills and mountains, one after the other, that formed the terrifying landscape near the town of Mignano, not far from Cassino. Our daily field assignments often brought us within uncomfortable proximity of our forward infantry positions and those of the enemy, and within view of

the monastery. Enemy fire from artillery emplacements dug in rock on the slopes, and machine gun fire from positions at various lower levels, made our engineering tasks vulnerable. General Kesselring's forces looked down at us from well-entrenched positions in the mountain. Our heavily concentrated artillery pieces, often positioned hub-to-hub, together with enemy shells coming in at us, filled the air with overwhelming thunder. The enemy's 88mm shells were appropriately referred to as "screaming meemies" because of their classical celebratory sounds shrilling in concert as they approached us. Unfortunately, the abbey was ultimately demolished by heavy Allied air bombing on February 15 and March 15, 1944, in an effort to reduce the enemy's effectiveness. Prior to its crushing blows during World War II, the monastery experienced three other military destructions but was reconstructed and restored each time.

I saw the heavy air bombardment and destruction of the abbey from a lone foxhole. At the time, I was guarding unassembled Bailey Bridge equipment and material placed on the ground in a storage area a few yards from my foxhole. The storage area was near enough to the Rapido River to enable the 48th to promptly transport, assemble and launch the bridge across the river when the situation was right for an infantry river crossing.

Years went by and in 1954, still curious about the Benedictine Order, I began reading about the life of Benedict, his rule and his Order. While reading about the monks, I learned something about their lay members called Oblates. Oblates are men and women who affiliate themselves with a Benedictine monastery, offering themselves to God and promising to reform their lives according to the ideals proposed by the Holy Rule of St. Benedict.

By a formal "Act of Oblation," they become members of a monastic community and share the blessings obtained by the monks of the monastery. Their purpose is to seek God under the guidance of the Rule of St. Benedict.

In 1994 I made a solemn Act of Oblation, thus becoming an Oblate of St. Benedict. Reflecting back on this journey of many years, I feel that some of the monastic mentality rubbed off on me and gives me moments of special peace of mind. The monk Thomas Merton in his book, *The Silent Life*, says not all of us are called to be monks, but all of us need silence and solitude in our lives to enable the deep inner voice of our true selves to be heard.

Benedict is a man for all times and for all religious followings. Many people of various religious denominations have become Oblates without departing from their particular denomination of choice. One example is Kathleen Norris, a married Protestant writer and an Oblate who writes beautiful works of nonfiction such as "The Cloister Walk." Benedict's simple lifestyle gives us a holiness and happiness direct from God. He warns, however, that as Oblates our faithfulness to small things as changing diapers, repairing the gutters and cleaning the house, that is, performing the duties of our state in life must be fulfilled with the utmost fidelity. We must not neglect what is necessary in order to take upon ourselves extraordinary deeds.

Although I tried to follow my Christian faith as far back as I can recall, it was not until as late as 1944, in Italy, that I became conscious of God's presence and importance in my life. It seems as if the Hound, referred to in

the poem, *The Hound of Heaven* by Francis Thompson, prevailed. Then too, battlefields have caused many of us to become suddenly devoured by the hunger for a life whose joy was to come in finding God. For some of us, finding Him comes more clearly through a role model like Benedict. Since then Benedict has been comfortable for me as someone I could hang my hat on.

January 2001

From a Wayside Brook

Our 48th Engineer Combat Battalion Headquarters Company was located somewhere in southeastern Germany. One quiet day I hastily slipped away from our bivouac area to try some fishing in a nearby brook. The brook meandered through a meadow of tall grass. The grass was so tall, dense and dry like unmown winter rye, and the brook flowing quietly was so nestled into the landscape that it was hardly visible until one approached dangerously near its edge.

I used a tree limb for a rod and grasshoppers for bait. I brought along some string and a safety pin but forgot my knife. When I cast the safety pin the short distance into the water, the trout wasted little time in attacking the bait. It wasn't long, perhaps an hour or so, when I decided to stop fishing, having caught more trout than I expected. To continue would make me feel greedy and a sense of disregard for this environment, an area relatively undisturbed by the war.

To gather up the fish for handling and carrying, I pierced the underside of the mouth as I had seen in fishing magazines in the U.S., using sharp-ended limbs from brushwood; I didn't have a knife or other cutting implement with me. I used the same limbs for stringing the fish. Then I took the catch to our company kitchen and there, that night, the cooks prepared a very tasty meal that was enjoyed by fellow G.I.s.

The apparent success of this experience was quite likely due to the fact that the brook had not been fished for a long time and was thus well stocked. It certainly wasn't due to any expertise on my part, a city boy who had never fished before.

January 2001

Measuring the Neckar River

Headquarters Company of the 48th Engineer Combat Battalion was located in Eberbach, Germany on the Neckar River. The time was the spring of 1945.

One evening I was told by the Battalion Commander that we needed to get some idea of the distance across the Neckar River in the vicinity of Heidelberg. He said ascertaining this measurement would give us some idea of the amount of pontoon bridge equipment we would require if and when we were ordered to launch a bridge for the forthcoming river crossing.

At first I frankly didn't know how this could be accomplished under blackout conditions. A jeep driver and I drove to the river and chose a site along the shore. I took with me our surveying (transit) instrument and tripod, a plumb bob, a flashlight, a dark-colored, somewhat opaque cloth and two circular reflectors which I borrowed from the rear end of our Headquarters Intelligence and Operations mobile office trailers.

A fortunate thing happened at the site. On the other side of the river, among a row of buildings along what I presumed could be the typical river road, I could see a spire similar to that atop a church. The spire was neatly silhouetted against a clear moonlit sky.

The area around us was relatively quiet. The only activity going on sounded like intermittent burp-gun or machine-gun fire.

Briefly, to determine the distance across the river, we set the two reflectors firmly on the ground as far apart as my bespectacled vision would permit. Then I set up the transit tripod and plumb bob alternately over one reflector and then the other, each time sighting on the other reflector, then rotating the transit scope to sight on the spire (at each reflector position), each time reading and recording the angle turned (on the transit dial) of the triangle thus formed, all by the light of the moon. Using the approximate distance between the reflectors (which I got by pacing) and the angles turned, I calculated by geometry the length of the three legs of the triangle. The length of the leg crossing the river, the important leg, gave me some idea of the distance across the river; this distance would be considered on the plus (conservative) side because the triangle included the distance from the opposite shoreline to the spire located inland of the opposite shore. To see the reflectors through the transit scope, the jeep driver cautiously cast the flashlight beam closely upon the reflector with a prayer (by both of us) while covering as much of the light beam as possible with the cloth to maintain blackout conditions. I recorded the data obtained in my field notebook and we departed the sight promptly. Upon our arrival at Headquarters, I mounted the reflectors on the trailers from where they were borrowed. The method used to solve this problem turned out to be relatively easy. We were fortunate.

Last but not least: the jeep driver who assisted me was Pfc. L. Riney of Piper City, Missouri.

This story does not end as I had expected. Recently, in order to learn more about the story, I contacted an Army friend who, in 1945, was the Executive Officer; he was second in command of our battalion. It's good that I did. His generous response, attached hereto, provides the ending to this story. It's hard to imagine what a difference a decimal point can make. I don't know how this error occurred since, oddly enough I didn't remember how the story played out after I submitted my results to the C.O.

I never intended the story to be for self-exaltation. Now that I know about my error, I am proving the point. I'm really writing about it because I think it was a unique experience.

The consequences of my error were corrected by our Executive Officer. He certainly exemplified the motto of our battalion which was:
"Open The Way."

Letter from Bill Munson, received January 2, 2002:

"Dear Ed,

I enjoyed talking to you today and hope we have an opportunity to chat eyeball to eyeball in the not to distant future.

Let me start by saying I am pleased that you want to write about some of your experiences. It has been my joy the last two years to assemble facts that could interest some of my grandchildren. Even great-

