

by Sergeant Allen.

No One Smiled on Leyte

By Deane E. Marks - HQ2-511 PIR

These events took place starting early November 1944, on the island of Leyte. They cover action of a Light Machine Gun Platoon that was assigned to HQ2-511th Parachute Infantry Regiment. The exact dates are almost impossible to reconstruct due to the length of time and the fact all track of time was lost on the day by day actions taking place. We knew when Thanksgiving Day took place, also Christmas, but in between, each day was like the one before. On Leyte, there was rain, rain, rain, mud and a wet jungle, or I guess more like a rain forest in a high mountain terrain.

On November 18, 1944 we went ashore on Leyte in landing barges, between Dulag and

Abuyog at a place called Bito Beach, having departed from Oro Bay, New Guinea on November 7, 1944. The ship we sailed on from New Guinea, was an APA (Attack Personnel Transport) named the "Golden City." The Golden City was a navy transport, that was quite comfortable compared to the Sea Pike which we sailed on from San Francisco to New Guinea five or six months previously.

We loafed around the beach area for a day or two getting our equipment in order and unloading barges and generally just following this order or that. There were no Japanese in the immediate area. Early one morning the entire 511th PIR was sent up the road by truck to a town called Burauen, which was located about ten miles due west of the beach. We took over positions of another unit (the 7th Infantry) which had been holding the area. At this point it was sort of a phony war, such as existed on the French-German border in 1939. We had sort of sat around all day shooting the breeze, eating our "C" rations and improving our fox holes for better sleeping. Still haven't seen any Nips, nor signs of them. Lots of Filipinos wandering around telling tall tales of their fierce resistance during the Japanese occupation, most of which was "bull shit. Everyone was a guerrilla, now that the U.S. Army was back. No doubt there WERE many guerrillas, but I suspect they kept a low profile.

The equipment we carried amounted to six or seven pair of socks, some handkies, a few sets of shorts and underwear tops and an extra set of fatigues. We wore jump boots, which we would soon find them to be, not so great in the wetness of Leyte. As for combat equipment each man had a rifle of some kind. I, like a dummy, traded my M-1 Carbine for a M-1 Garand rifle. Boy! What a mistake that was. I traded a 5 pound weapon for a 9 ½ pound weapon, plus a bayonet. Most everyone had carbines. Some of the noncoms had Thompson submachine guns and there were a few M-3s

around. Everyone had from four to six hand grenades. We kept the handles taped down most of the time. Grenades could be very dangerous if handled carelessly. At night, while in defensive positions, grenades were used out front of one's foxhole, as booby traps. We would tie or tape the grenade to a tree at about hip level, tie a trip wire to the ring, tie the wire to another tree and secure it. If one walked into the wire, he is dead or mortally wounded. The big problem was the next morning going out to pick up the grenades. Gees! You had to remember EXACTLY where you rigged them up or you were in just as much trouble as some Nip trying to infiltrate. There WERE cases of people getting tangled up in these things, and in panic just took off in any direction and then hit the dirt when they would hear the "pop" of the firing pin.

Then there were the gas masks. I would guess there are no less than two thousand of those things scattered over the trails from Burauen to Ormoc. Some of the guys saved the carrying case and used it for a musette bag, after they had discarded the large d get the shivers. Sometimes my teeth would chatter so much I would have to bite a handkerchief to keep my fillings from vibrating out, but still the poncho was indispensable.

During the day time, (as we sat in those 7th Infantry positions) when it would begin to rain a little bit, we built little bench-like beds to keep our fannies dry. Sometimes it worked, other times you would sag into the mud. I guess it was three or four days when word came down that we were to move out. We had been under intruder air attacks at night, since we sailed into the Leyte Gulf. As a matter of fact, the day we landed at Bito Beach, six or seven "Betty" Mitsubishi medium bombers tore into the convoy. The Navy fired its 40mm and other "Ack Ack." There was shooting all over the place with nothing getting hit. Soon some P-38s and P-47s came to the rescue, like the cavalry and shot three down. Our fighters, would bore into a bomber and soon you would see a wisp of smoke, (black) then an orange-red blob of flame would envelop the whole plane. Then off towards the horizon, we could see the bomber splash into the sea. The other "Betty's" skedaddled over the coast line west toward Cebu Island. During the night, raids were fun to watch because the search lights would pick up the Nip bombers, at around eight or nine thousand feet and then the Army would start shooting. Never saw them hit a thing. One day, maybe the second day after landing at Bito, this Nip twin engine bomber came in from the sought, right on the deck heading for the ships in the Gulf. The Army shore guns, 20s and 40s started shooting. It was noisy as hell. Here this Betty was twenty feet off the deck at about 300 mph, again missed by the Army gunners, then Wham, in come a P-38. One pass and the Betty cartwheeled in the Gulf. That Betty was probably one of first Kamikazes, as I found out years later. It was during this action that the Nips started their Kamikaze raids.

Getting back to our present situation. Rumors started to come down that our First Battalion, from the 511th PIR, had advanced in a blind draw and was ambushed with heavy casualties. We heard that a couple troopers were dropped in from L-4s. Hell! We didn't even know what our objective was. We still hadn't seen a Nip, dead or alive. Then one day, we started up a hill into the jungle, I dont know the date, but we were on our way to relieve the First Battalion, wherever they were.

It was still daylight, but raining as we moved along. To keep my old M-1 rifle dry, I slung it upside down with a condom over the muzzle. We were relatively dry, our feet were dry, but we stunk, mainly from sweat and mosquito repellent. The trail was heading up a slight grade, that was muddy and slippery, but the smokers kept puffing away. Some of the guys were eating , issued the day before. It was still raining. We had no idea of where we were going. Someone mentioned Ormoc, wherever that was. Now, we heard that somewhere ahead, part of C-511th was surrounded by the Nips. We didn't have any idea of what the hell was going on. After a day or two of walking, sleeping along the trail at night, we arrive to where C-511th had been. Now, I see my first dead man. I didn't know who he was. All I heard was that, he was a C-511th trooper, just laying along the trail face down in a crawling position. One pant leg had come out of his boot and his calf was laid open. Probably from a motar shell. Now, I realize what was going on. It was real, real real. Somehow, the mud seemed wetter, the rain colder and the stomach emptier. I felt that butterfly feeling you get; before the kickoff or before you are asked to make that speech in school! We saw several C-511th troopers, they looked pale and tired. I do not know exactly how many casualties they had. We just kept on tramping up and down on this six or eight foot wide path or trail, or whatever you want to call it. Up until now we had made an attempt to keep dry and clean. But after hitting the deck, whenever the lead scout would see something, or thought he had seen something, you were really covered with mud from head to toe -- literally. It rained all day.

I dont know the date, but while we were coming up to the crest of a hill, it was mid-morning and we were tired and wet. All of a sudden a grenade popped. Everyone hit the dirt. A few seconds later that metallic "blang" rocked the area. Then I heard this sorrowful moan, not a scream, a moan. It was HQ2 Battalion's first casualty. Ivan Benderwald, a mortar gunner from Ellendale, ND. Ivan's hip, was blown away. He had a six inch diameter and four inch deep hole where his hip once was. He was conscious. I looked at him and felt he couldnt possibly survive. A medic scrambled up and poured sulfa powder into the wound and put a huge pressure-pad bandage on it. While all this was going on, we just laid around along the side of the trail. I gave up my poncho to make a litter for Ivan. Six of us picked up Ivan and lugged him back

towards Burauen to an Aid Station. I guess we carried him a half mile. By that time Ivan had been given plenty of morphine and was felling no pain. At the aid station, the surgeons, probably Capt. Matt Platt, operated on Ivan's hip. Being that he was about 190 pounds plus, he was to heavy to be evacuated from the field hospital by an L-4, so he had to lay around for a week or so until he lost a few pounds so the L-4 could take off with him from a short landing strip. (I found this out years later.)

Anyway, Benderwald was gone and we all felt good that it wasn't one of us. To this day, nobody knows where that grenade came from. There certainly were Nips in the area, as every now and then they would open up with their "woodpeckers." (This was the name given the Japanese Nambu 6.5mm light machine gun.) When this would happen, the only thing you could do was drop to the ground and roll over a time or two so that when you lifted your head to peek ahead and around, you would not be in the sights of whoever was shooting at you. Generally, a Nip "woodpecker" was always protected by infantry. As this Nip was giving us sporadic bursts, ole Vigbert D. Sharpe, starts wiggling up the side of the slope to where we were with his M-1. Sharpe was the LMG platoon Sgt.. He stopped, peered up ahead, saw a sniper in a tree, then another, and with two quick shots, using Kentucky windage, he got both of those Nips. When this happened, Sherlock (John Sherlock, our Sqd. leader) had us wiggle up behind Sharpe with the LMG. We wiggled and crawled up this slope for about fifty yards. We means: Dub Westbrook, Dave Bailey, D'Arcy Carolyn, Bill Porteous and myself, which constituted a machine gun squad. Everyone luggered two boxes of ammo, plus their personal ammo and weapons. In other words, we were loaded down. It is hard as hell to set up a LMG on an upward uneven slope. Unlike the movies, it is very difficult to fire a LMG from the hip. The first problem you have, is that the cooling jacket gets so hot you can't touch it, much less hold it. We did have some big asbestos mittens, which were intended to be used when the gun had to be moved to a different position, but they were never around when you needed one. The second problem was, the ammo belts held 250 rounds and were in a metal box, mainly to keep it clean and in a position that would allow it to be fed into the left side of the receiver. The third and most important item, if you did fire from the hip, you had to stand and anyone who stood up in any kind of fire fight, was usually dead before long. Anyway, we kept wiggling up this slope to what was the C-511th perimeter and made contact. There were a few dead Nips laying around and several wounded C-511th troopers. The Nips, the first I'd seen, were flopped around in grotesque positions. They wore leggings and tennis shoes that had one "big toe" partition. All the dead Nips had their shirts ripped open and their pants half off due to searches by S-2 and anyone looking for souvenirs. Their helmets were sort of like ours, except not quite as low in the back. Their mess gear amounted to one quart, kidney shaped aluminum can with a cover. In this, they cooked rice, which was their main staple. Some Nip cigarettes (Anchor Brand) were strewn around. I didn't smoke

then, but the smokers said they were very strong. Each cig. had its own stiff paper holder, so they could be smoked down to nothing. Their fatigue pants and jacket were like ours, although the color was brown. So far, after all the shooting getting up to where C-511th was, no one in our platoon or company, for that matter, was hit. We pushed on, I don't know to where. Just follow the guy in front of you and hope you don't get ambushed.

A day or two later, the sun came out. Elmer Trantow was climbing up the side of a river bank towards a small hut, when all of a sudden a Nip came flying out of the door toward the "Tumbler." (Elmer Trantow was known as Trantow the Tumbler," due to his expertise in gymnastics done in Camp Mackall and New Guinea.) The Tumbler brought his M-3 to bear and emptied it into this unfortunate. Elmer later said, "he just froze on the trigger." You have to imagine what a person looked like after absorbing about twenty .45 caliber low velocity slugs. By day's end, it grew gray and started raining again.

One day we climbed up a very large plateau and moved up the LMG. We didn't know why, shucks we never knew WHY we did anything. We just kept putting out feet in the mucky brown foot print in front of us. Our feet seemed to be always soggy. About two or three hours after we set up our LMG, we looked out into this valley and "holy cow" here came this C-47 barreling at eye level at perhaps a thousand yards to our front. Right in front of us a slew of red and yellow parapacks dropped and troopers started jumping out of the plane. We could actually see their little white faces. They couldnt have been higher then four or maybe five hundred feet. This went on for some time. At the time we did not know what unit they were from, because we knew where the rest of the 511th PIR (the 1st and 3rd Bn.) parachutists were at. We finally figured it out that they were the 457th Airborne Artillery from the 11th Airborne. Their asses were soon soaking in the mud like ours. We were glad to see them bring in their 75mm pack howitzers, but wondered how they were going to move them. (They probably are still there in the mud.)

One day, in the rain and sloppy stinky mud, we went traipsing around an area called Anonang, looking for a C-47 that went down in the forest due to engine failure. We found the wreck late in the afternoon. All aboard were dead, but the Nips had gotten there before and stole everything of value and/or food to eat. As we headed back to our perimeter around another place called Lubi, we heard a number of planes overhead. We looked up to see at least six C-47s flying at six to eight hundred feet overhead. It was dusk and we could see the blue exhaust trail from the engines. In a few seconds they were gone. We assumed they were bringing in planes into the area and that we had a jump coming up. I found out much later that they were Japanese (a

licensed DC-2 built in Japan) loaded with a few hundred Nip paratroopers headed for the airstrips around Burauen. They jumped on the San Pablo and Buri airstrips where they burned up a bunch of our planes, raised hell for a few days and nights and were finally driven off by the 11th Airborne Division Headquarters troops, cooks, etc.

Up and down the mountain trails we went. Wet to the bone and being ambushed just about daily. Bumbling into the Nips here and there. Part of HQ2-511th got themselves caught in a potato patch near a place called Mahonag. We lost some good troopers: McGraw, Fleming and Yeager. We couldn't get them out during the firefight. That night Baldy (Baldy was the code name for our C.O., Capt. Charles Jenkins) took a squad down looking for the three causalities. He went through the area calling "Dave, Dave." It was to no avail, they were all dead. It looked like Yeager may have died from exposure, but the other two were hit many times. We found it hard to accept, but had to. You didn't get any "madder" at the Nips, just hated them a bit more. As we hiked along the trails, we noted many dead Japanese and also some Filipinos. We passed a Filipino farmer laying along the trail, with a couple of half dead chickens tied to him. Laying next to the farmer was a basket full of the largest bananas. This was a case of someone being in the wrong place, when the Nips went by or perhaps he was a mortar victim.

At about this time, some problems started to make themselves obvious. Our jump boots weren't standing up to the wear of being soaking wet twenty-four hours a day. The tops were fine, but the soles started to come off. You just had to tie or tape them to your shoe. Some troopers had real bad problems with their boots, but only a few were fortunate enough to have them replaced. Socks were also getting scarce. You would wash them and try to dry them out in your musette bag, but without the sun, it was a losing battle. Most of the troopers had two piece coveralls, which kept you a little cleaner in that your top would not come out of your pants while crawling around in the goop. At this point, we really begin the smell like a sewer. It was a combination of sweat, mud and mosquito repellent, the latter we showered ourselves with, to keep the skeeters away. We had mosquito nets, but most of us shied away from them, as it cut down on hearing what was going on. At night you needed your ears. Personal sanitation was a chore, with the coveralls. You had to strip to the knee, when nature called, which meant you had to remove your web harness to which your musette bag, canteen, first-aid kit, trench knife (or bayonet) was attached to. This became a big problem about halfway through the Leyte campaign, when just about everyone had dysentery. We also carried an entrenching tool, usually a small shovel, which had two uses: one to dig a foxhole with, and the other to dig your own private latrine. If you were on the move and had to go, you just ran off the trail a yard or so, did your thing, then ran to catch up with your squad. All this time it is raining, but everyone was in

the same boat, including the Nips. Taking a leak was easy.

When dusk approached, we generally would halt and start to dig in. The more time you spent digging, the more secure you felt when it started to get dark. I mean black dark, there were no shadows, no moon, no nothing. We usually dug in by two, or in some cases, threes. With all the rain, there was always a couple of inches of water at the bottom. Our foxholes were a good four feet deep. We would pose in the thing, half sitting, half leaning and peering out front into the total blackness. Dub Westbrook, Dave Bailey and myself usually shared “watch” out of our foxhole. Dave was a couple years younger (about 18) than Dub and myself. Dave was a replacement that came in just before we went overseas. He was very naive and trusting. The idea of watch at night was to always have someone awake in the hole. If everyone slept, you had a potential break in security of the perimeter you were holding. Each guy was supposed to stay awake two hours: then wake the next guy, sleep four hours, then watch for another two hours, and so on till day break. We did this by passing a watch, with a luminous dial, back and forth. I would watch for a period, set the watch ahead, wake Westbrook, give him the watch and go to sleep. I later found out that he was doing the same thing. Dave never did catch on. Perhaps he couldn’t tell time. Maybe that was why he was tired all the time.

Harry Briggs got hit in the thigh today from a sniper. A sniper also hit Martin Offmiss, a radioman, in his shoulder. We called them snipers, but I suppose they were just Nips in a good, well-concealed position near the trail. During this period, Pete Kut, a squad leader was hit badly from a “woodpecker.” He later died from loss of blood and exposure. When someone was killed, we would bury them, but some of the dead we never did find. The wounded we carried on litters. (The troopers that we did bury were exhumed after the campaign and sent to various military sites. This was done by a special unit of the U.S. Army. Most of our guys were buried on “Rock Hill.”) This whole affair was really getting rough on us, but our morale was high, because we knew we were winning. Each day, we would move further west toward our objective, Ormoc.

We established a good size perimeter at a place called Mahonag. This really was not a town or anything like that. It was a relatively cleared area on a slightly sloped field. I would guess the area was about 150 to 200 yards long and maybe 100 to 125 yards wide, at its widest place. It was sort of egg-shaped. The center of the area was pretty free of activity during the day, because you could get yourself picked off by snipers that were in trees outside the perimeter. The 2nd Bn. of the 511th was dug in just inside the tree line around the entire circumference. Our foxholes were 10 to 15 yards apart. Most of the guys dug in deep enough so they could add a sitting step. Baily,

Westbrook and myself dug a three-seater with the LMG staked in for night shooting. (Staking in, meant plotting your field of fire in the day time and pounding a stake in the ground at the extreme traverse of each side, right and left. Next to this stake, you drive in another for elevation. This worked well even in the blackest of the night you could cover your field of fire with the gun next to you. This type of staking in" took place around the entire perimeter, making busting through by the Nips next to impossible.) All the time the rain kept falling. We are all half damp, not soaked, just damp and cold. After dark, one's eyes got as big as saucers. You couldn't see five feet in front of you and your imagination would run rampant. You would visualized a Nip right out in front of you, getting ready to lob a grenade at you. There were Japanese out there and one consolation was, they were just as wet, muddy and cold as we were. I always felt that they were "scared" of us. We certainly were not afraid of them, but felt eager to search them out and do them in. Sitting in your foxhole at night and waiting to see if they would try to slip through was something else. You just were full of anxieties and had the feeling that a particular Nip was out to get you. Anyway, this particular night, it was raining exceptionally hard and my morale was getting low. Westbrook and I spent the night playing our "watch" game with Bailey; but even at that I didn't sleep at all. I was cold and as I sort off slumped down, leaning against the sloped rear of our three seated foxhole and wondered if I'd ever get out of this alive. It was a case of just feeling sorry for one's self. The only consolation was, everyone was in the same boat, although we heard that some of the higher ups had been sleeping under canvas and on cots. It could have been possible. I even heard rumors of some guys heating water in their helmets for certain higher ups so they could take warm baths. I feel that most of these reports, were just old fashioned "shit house" rumors.

Morning finally came, so we dug out our Ks and started thinking about breakfast. The best way to heat water for coffee (Nescafe Powder) was to start the fire with the heavily waxed cardboard box that the K-ration came in. These boxes burned well. The mosquito repellent was also flammable and could be used to get a good hot fire going. Dry twigs were hard to come by, but once the K-ration box was going good, small twigs would start to burn. Once you had the fire going, you could increase the diameter size of the twigs and soon have a good sized fire. I used to get a canteen cup of water boiling, pop an envelope of bullion powder in and then put all the saltine crackers into the boiling bullion, along with whatever meat I had. Sometimes it was chopped pork with egg yolk added, other times it was spam. The meat came in an O.D. colored can about the size of a tuna can seen today. It was good and had plenty of nutrition and would stick to your ribs. For dessert, the Ks contained a fruit bar (dried raisins, apricots, pressed together in a bar about 3/4" square and 3" long) to munch on. Another menu had a Hershey Tropical Chocolate "D" Bar. A solid

chocolate (hard as a rock) lump which you could chomp on or could melt it in boiling water and you'd end up with a cup of rather flat cocoa. There were also six little rock hard candy wafers, about 3/4" square x 3/16" thick that you could suck on. Half of these were plain dextrose pills and the other three were chocolate flavored. They gave instant energy, neas they were pure sugar. Also, in one of the menus was a little tuna can of American processed cheese. Dub Westbrook loved this stuff and always toasted it on the end of his G.I. fork. The cheese menu also had an envelope of grape powder or lemonade mix. I remember these well as they were made by "Miles Laboratories" who brings us Alka-Seltzer. You topped all this off with a stick of Wrigley's gum in an O.D. wrapper, as you sat back and enjoyed your Luckies or Camels, which were also included. There were only 4 cigs. in a box, like the ones we used to get on the airlines. I didnt smoke, so mine were up for grabs. Also included, was a little packet of O.D. colored toilet paper, which you would tuck into your breast pocket for later use.

When Kut, McGraw, Yeager and Fleming were killed (around December ninth or tenth), Captain Jenkins declared a private war against the Japanese. Patrols were actually like little squirrel or rabbit hunting trips. He would take a patrol out towards the west to reconnoiter the trails to Ormoc. There never was trouble finding the Nips. The forest was full of them. We knew we were better then they were in offensive movements. It seemed they were good, when hiding alongside of the trail or in some other kind of ambush position. In a face to face confrontation, they would beat it into the bush. I remember Dub Westbrooks first confrontation with a Nip near Mahonag. All of a sudden Dub was face to face with one, no warning. The guy just appeared on the trail. He just looked at Dub in terror. Dub plugged him with his carbine, firing from the hip. Capt. Jenkins, our C.O. was ecstatic. He, himself must of bagged a half a dozen during the several "patrols" he had conducted.

All of our wounded at Mahonag were grouped together under cargo chutes. Most were laying on litters covered with ponchos. There were some blankets, but not many. Some of the wounded that could still walk, were gathered, on one of those numberless days. Capt. Jenkins got a squad to walk them back to a field hospital at another clearing called Manarawat. There was a short airstrip (home made) for L-4 and L-5 cubs. Some of the guys were flown out in special cubs from Manarawat. I was picked for one squad, where my job was "ass-end Charlie", the last scout down the trail to cover any sniping etc. from the rear. We started about nine in the morning, a two hour walk each way. A lot of the wounded, understandably, would tire after a few hundred up and down yards. It was difficult with the mud without being wounded. So one can imagine how tough it was on the guys that had lost blood or had chunks out of their arms, shoulders or other parts of their anatomy. Some of the

"limpers" had homemade canes of sorts. The last guy, who was in front of me, had a bad flesh wound in his left upper thigh. They had cut his fatigues off all the way up, and when he would stagger or slow down (when we were going uphill) my face was practically in his bandage. Around noon we arrived at Manarawat with our wounded. Fearless Fosdick (that was our nickname for 1st Romain T. Alsbury) our platoon leader. He got us up on our feet around one o'clock and started us back to our perimeter, but on a different trail than what we had come in on. It didn't make any difference to us, because the rain was coming down and who cared. It did not take long before our attitude changed and we felt whoever decided that we should go back another route must have been nuts. We walked up this side of the mountain, down the other side, up another one etc.. The trail was an ooze of mud and the trees and vegetation along the sides of the trail, was not as thick as the other one. This was good in one sense as you could see perhaps twenty-five yards to the front and both side of you. We had a decent field of fire BUT the Nips did also. We walked for four hours and had no idea how far we were from Mahonag. Fearless Fosdick kept saying "It's coming up." Now it started to rain harder, and we're wetter and "madder" (if there is such a word). It started to get dark. Moving along any trail in the jungle is scary; because when it starts to get dark, the shadows play tricks on you. It is plain and simple suicide to walk along any trail at night. By this time, we had been on the march since one o'clock and now it was around six or six-thirty. We were dead tired, wet, muddy and pissed off at Fearless Fosdick. I guess we were what would be and under strength section (two squads). There was Ray Brehm, Dave Bailey, W.C. Westbrook, Bill Porteous, Red (Pete) Peters, D'Arcy Carolyn, Elmer Burgett, John Sherlock and Jay V. Florey plus our Fearless Fosdick. Finally Fearless told us to fall out on one side of the trail for the night. We did not dig in. There didn't seem to be any point to do it. Our plans were to continue on the next morning. Most of the guys rolled up in their ponchos. I half-slumped against a tree trying to hide under my helmet. As usual, it was raining. Soon it was pitch black and the rain finally stopped. The jungle at night is usually very noisy, with the various types of animals, birds and insects. For some reason, there was none of that this time. It seemed and felt that someone was around. I froze all night and it was a long night. Just before dawn and there after, we could periodically hear noises that sounded like voices. We didn't eat when we got up, just fell in a single file and started down and up the trail again. We didn't walk more than five minutes when we ran into our Mahonag perimeter. We had slept about a hundred yards from our line. Live and learn. When we arrived in our area, Baldy (code name for Capt. Jenkins) was getting a patrol together to go and try again to bring back McGraw and Fleming (from the potato patch) where the ambush took place. I was sitting on a log eating a K-ration when Jenkins came over looking for a couple of guys to go out with him. He said, "Come on Marks let's go." I got up and started to follow him and then for no reason I could think of, he turned around

and said, "Go on back and sit in your hole and get some rest." Which is what I did.

Along about four o'clock, a day or so later, the battalion set off on a trail to push through, to where the 3rd Bn. 511th PIR was positioned. They were located on another hill closer to Ormoc. Evidentially, we were sitting on and blocking the main Nip supply line for their attack across the island towards Burauen. We route marched up and down the trail till night fell., then we pulled off to the side of the trail for the night. It was black, but at least it wasn't raining. Some idiot decided that it was time to have a cup of hot coffee or soup so they actually got a fire going. As soon as the flames shot up, I heard Jim Wentink scream out, "Put that fire out or I'm going to shoot it out.The fire WAS put out. As we tried to sleep that night, we heard L-4s going over but thought nothing of it. The next morning at dawn, we got up and ate on the move as we headed for Rock Hill. We were about five or ten minutes down the trail when three huge explosions hit our area. Shit, we were being shelled by artillery. The first salvo, which we didn't hear coming, were all tree bursts. Casualties were high and very selective. Ship (LTC Norman Shipley's code name) had a leg ripped half off. Dr. Platt cut it off on the spot. Captain Jenkins was hit in the upper chest. He lived about a minute. We then heard a distant muffled "boom, boom, boom." This was salvo number two. We all hit the deck. I hit an undercut in a stream bed right next to a half rotted out carabao. The three rounds came in, but up the trail a hundred yards or so. It was SHZZZ-BLAM, almost like a snarl rather then an explosion. That was all we took, just six rounds. Sherlock was hit in the leg. Burgett was severely wounded in the leg. Dr.'s Platt or Chambers cut it off. A trooper from F-511th lost an arm and a leg. His name was James Hard. I remember him from a boxing match he was in with a guy named "Jonesy" from D-511th. Hard died. I cant remember all of the wounded. We had to abandon our attack towards Rock Hill. We had at least a dozen dead and close to forty wounded, some very gravely wounded. Platt and Chambers saved a number of the seriously wounded. We assembled litters with ponchos and tree limbs and started back to Mahonag.

Other parts of the Sixth Army had landed at Ormoc and chased a good portion of a division of Nips back towards us. When we arrived at Mahonag, we found Nips in the perimeter we had earlier vacated. D and F-511th pushed them out in a short fire fight with help from HQ2's eight-one mm mortars. We flopped back into our holes and dragged the dead Nips out into the jungle away from the perimeter. The next day we found out that we did not drag them far enough, the stench was almost overwhelming.

We made an aid station, in a high ground area, in a patch of trees. Cargo chutes were used to cover the aid shelter. The day we took the walking wounded back to Manarwat, we carried Sgt. Stewart (from the mortar squad) back. He was very sick

and later they found it was his appendix. He died from peritonitis at Manarawat. Being our 2nd battalion was now understrenght, we pulled our perimeter in by twenty-five or thirty yards. This brought our foxholes closer together. Naval gunfire and pressure from the U.S. 77th Division landings had forced more Nips in our area than we could handle. There were enough of them around, and they had our supply trails back toward Burauen, Lubi, Anonang and Manarawat cut.

The next morning it was pretty quiet along the foxhole line of our perimeter. About nine in the morning the rain stopped, but then the fog rolled in very thick. You couldn't see more than twenty-five yards out into the jungle. Sometime during that morning, our scouts reported that trails to the other two 511th PIR battalions were jammed up with Japanese. During the first week, prior to the morning the artillery got us, most of our supplies, in fact all of it was dumped in from C-47s. We were able to retrieve most of our supplies, but a few of the cargo chutes drifted out into the jungle and the Nips got to them before we did. They, of course couldn't use our ammo, but they sure could eat our food. We found evidence of this on some of the dead ones later on. With the heavy fog, the planes were grounded as far as supplying the 2nd Bn. of the 511th PIR. We could hear them droning overhead and they would try drops, but were never successful. We had on hand about two days of supplies, this included both food and ammo. The mortars were low on anti-personnel rounds, but all us troopers had a good solid unit (a unit of fire was 120-150 rounds) of ammo. We had about two thousand rounds for our LMG. That sounds like a lot, but under heavy defensive fire you could eat it up in a hurry. The fog hung around for another two days, by this time the K-rations, for the most part were gone. The "wiser misers" had a can of this or that or a cracker or two; but for the most part, we were out of food. The potato patch yielded a few nice sweet potatoes called "camote," but soon they were all eaten up. There had been rumors floating around for years later, that dog was eaten. I don't think anyone was hungry enough to eat a dog. No one was any hungrier than I was and I sure as hell count not eat a dog. We did try some tiny wild red peppers. They did not have much food value, but it gave us something to chew on.

The fog hung on for four or five more days. After about two days of nothing to eat, the pangs of hunger begin to disappear. We would sit around and fantasize on what we were going to eat when we got home. Malted milks, ice cream, T-bone steaks and thousands of those greasy "White Castle" hamburgers were high on the list. Our morale was not at its highest and being most of the guys, myself included had dysentery, which did not help either. When you had to have a bowel movement, you just passed a lot of hot water. We used halazone tablets to purify our drinking water. We obtained it from a small stream below our perimeter. Once I remember filling my canteen, when I noticed a dead Nip a few yards up the stream rotting away. Some of

the guys picked up worms and liver fluke and got sicker than all hell. We were still shaving everyday and would wash daily. On occasion, we would just wade into the stream, clothes and all and wash up. Hell, we were wet anyway.

There were a lot insects creeping around. If you tried to sleep and felt something crawling on you, and could not reach it with your hands, you'd just roll on it until it was crushed or moved on. We never saw any snakes.

As quickly as the fog rolled in a few days ago, it dissipated. Within an hour, C-47s and L-4s started to drop food and ammo into our perimeter. Many cases of various items came loose from the cargo chutes and plummeted down into the trees. One person was killed from a falling case of food. We laid out panels (colored fluorescent plastic strips about a foot wide and 10-12 feet long) and from then on, the C-47s and L-4s hit the drop area much better. We all got sicker than hell from overeating, although we had been warned not to gobble too much food - there was a lot of puking and belly aches. The next day we moved west towards Ormoc, to hook up with the 3rd Bn. of the 511th PIR at Rock Hill.

During our "siege" at Mahonag, the Nips made nightly probes into our perimeter, for some reason these movements were by squads and could be easily repulsed. We even captured one of 'em and used him to help lug our mortar shells. Had the Japanese attacked in force, at one particular place, they may have very well been able to break in. We were only one foxhole deep. From what I saw, the Nips lost a lot of men at Mahonag. Between Mahonag, Lubi, Manarawat and later Rock Hill, I'd say I saw three to three hundred and fifty just laying around. We lost most of our men to snipers, around the potato patch and the water hole.

The hike to the 3rd Bn. of the 511th was about a half days march. During our advance, we ran into a Nip perimeter on one of the hills. It was here, that D-511th, with our LMG squad made the famous "Rats Ass" banzai attack. (See the "Rats Ass Charge" by Capt. Steve Cavanaugh on the Dropzone.) We stayed on the trail that night. It was here that the Nips would holler down at us, shoot firecrackers and shine flashlights. Some guys would shoot towards the noise and lights, but within a minute the Nips would start dropping 81mm mortars shells (their 81mm mortars were identical to ours, our ammo was interchangeable) into us. Jim Wentink was laying on the side of the hill when an 81 landed about five feet in front of him. Fortunately for Jim, it was a dud that buried itself in the mud. Early the next morning our Bn. Commander, Hacksaw Holcomb wanted a no nonsense attack up towards the 511th 3rd Bn. The Nip small arms and heavy machine gun fire was very heavy, but not accurate. We were pinned down. We were in one hell of a fire fight. Out of the blue

someone hollers "RATS ASS, who's with me? The trooper was John Bittorie from D-511th. John was from Brooklyn, NY and was about 6 foot 2 inches and skinny as a rail. His two front teeth were missing, courtesy of a brawl at Scotty's in Southern Pines, NC. Johnny's hair was brown, long and scraggly like the rest of us. He had no helmet, at this point, and his fatigues were rotted off at the boot tops and split on side up to his shoulder. The two or three inches of leg that was showing, between his boot tops and raggedy fatigues, was full of jungle ulcers that were bleeding. (We were given gentian violet for these ulcers, but that didn't seem to do as good as Barbasol Brushless Shaving Cream, that came in a tube. It was medicated, felt cool and there was a lot of it available.) Bittorie had slung his LMG over his shoulder with a piece of webbing. He had split a belt of .30 calb. ammo and on his left he was wearing an asbestos mitten to hold the barrel. As he advanced, he hollered and began shooting. He was defying the Nips and certainly inspired us, as we were hugging the ground. He cut loose with two long bursts. Spontaneously the whole line jumped up and started laying down fire and hollering, "RATS ASS." A couple Nip "woodpeckers" opened up but our fire power overwhelmed them. When we got passed the Nip M.L.R. (Main Line of Resistance) we could see them laying all over the place and in grotesque positions. Half in and half out of their holes. Most were dead, some convulsing and some just moaning. A number of them did get away. One was pretty badly wounded in the upper thigh, and was taken prisoner. The medics bandaged him up and gave him sulfa. The whole fire fight lasted, just three or four minutes. We did not have a single KIA. Most of the Nips looked in worse shape than we were. They were as wet as us, their tennis shoes were soaked and rotted. Some had cast off their leggings. The only food they had was a little rice. They looked pretty young, but so did we. A lot of the Nip casualties (most likely previously wounded from our mortar fire) were laying on litters of a sort, under shelters. That was the end of the "Rats Ass" charge. We moved through the mess and kept pushing forward to some of their deep holes. Some of these holes were 10 - 12 feet deep with bamboo steps in them. During our mortar or artillery barrages, they could go down their bamboo pegged poles to the bottom and be completely safe from shrapnel. We found a number of them dead on the bottom of their holes. Dirt was kicked over these and my guess is they are still there. We settled down at this perimeter. We had our holes (at the crest of a hill) straddling the trail that led to Ormoc which couldn't be more than three miles away. The place was a place of the dead. The Japanese dead lay strewn all over and only a few in the deep foxholes were buried. All of our dead were buried on the hill with grave markers, for future retrieval by grave registration. Bodies exposed to the elements deteriorated to skeleton in just a few days. There was some kind of beetle larvae that appeared by the millions and ate the flesh clean to the bone. These insects didn't eat the cloth material, so the skeletons laying around were still in uniform - very macabre. The stench, the first day on Rock Hill was electrifying, but we got use

to it. What else could you do?

Right in the middle of the trail, in front of our foxhole was a dead Nip. He had been hit early in this skirmish and fell in the middle of the very, very muddy trail. The mud was 8 to 10 inches deep. The trail at this point was at about a 15 degree upward angle. As people would go up and down the trail, they would step around or over this guy. After a day or two, only his back was protruding out of the mud. His legs, arms, shoulders and head were completely covered. The brown uniform and greyish-brown mud had turned this body into a perfect stepping stone to people going up or down the trail. We would sit there and watch the look on the faces of people that, thinking it was a stone, would step on it, thus causing the most sickening noise you ever heard. This was especially gratifying when we were told to sit tight and let the 187th Regt. pass through the 511th (About every other person would step on supposed rock.) and be the first 11th Airborne troops to get to Ormoc, down by the west coast.

The Battle of Leyte was finally over for the 2nd Bn. of the 511th. The next day, we formed up, picked up our wounded, who were now all on G.I. litters. Six guys were used to carry each - two in the front, two in the middle and two in the back. It took about 250 troopers to carry our wounded. LTC. Norman Shipley was one of my patients for some of the way. He was in great pain most of the time and complained a lot, when we would slip and jostle him. At one point, I remember him saying, Platt! I'm giving you a direct order to stop the pain." I can't remember whether he was given morphine or not. Being it was very tiring walking in the mud, we would exchange off quite often. I spent the last mile helping to carry someone from E-511th. Our battalion stretched out at least a half mile as we came down the trail into the flatlands that adjoined Ormoc. There was a gathering place where we deposited the wounded and turned them over to the Medical Corps. I would say that there were a couple hundred people milling around to greet us. Most were curious Filipinos, some army brass and a few GIs from the 7th Division that we linked up with in the hills. There also was one newsreel cameraman, but I never did get to see the movies.

We then moved down the beach to a bivouac area, where we were issued new fatigues and jungle hammocks that were really neat. They were completely water and mosquito proof. The first night, in one of them, was better to us than in a feather bed. We also took a good swim that day. It felt so good to be clean and alive. Our company left twelve troopers in the jungle, including our Commanding Officer. There always was that feeling of, "I'm glad it wasn't me." We all felt bad, for a short time, when a buddy was killed, but deep inside, you were thankful to God that the shrapnel or bullet didn't take you. I never saw anyone who was willing to trade places with a corpse. We so tired and burned out that all we wanted to do was to be left alone.

On Christmas, General Swing (the 11th Airborne commander) had them serve us turkey with all the trimmings and pineapple ice cream, and it was probably the best Christmas dinner we ever ate. I can't recall all the names, but there was Ray Brehm, Merlin Guetzko, Dub Westbrook, Bill Porteous, Jim Wentnk, Rocky Shuster, Peter Peters, Bill Townsly, Bud Alsbury, Bill Demory, Pete Allisi, D'Arcy Carolyn, to name a few that walked across Leyte. Capt. Charles Jenkins, Lt. Robert Norris, Peter E. Kut, Robert F. Fleming, William A. Yeager, Donald Stewart, David F. McGraw, George W. Andrews, Walter R. Schmidt, Eugene H. Ladd and Lt. Evan W. Redman did not make it. James W. Outcalt, Dennis Hogan, Anderson Peters, Jack L. Hauser, Fred J. Liscum, Norman Jennings, George A. Spangler and a kid named Leonard R. Miller, who came all the way across Leyte, only to die on Luzon six weeks or so later. I will never forget the many friends that took that walk over Leyte, from Dulag to Ormoc, with a stop along the way, at Mahonag.

Then there were Dr.'s Capt. Matthew Platt and Major Wallace Chambers, that did serious surgery, during the day, night and in the rain. Sometimes they were shielded by only a poncho, being held up by a few guys and the only light being a flashlight.

This sums up the activities that one light machine gun platoon had with the Japanese (on Leyte Island) during November and December of 1944. I'll never forget the agony caused by the rain, mud and terrain of the Mahonag trail and the troopers who gave their lives, to an enemy suffering just as much as we were. Official records showed, that about 45 Japanese were killed for every single 11th Airborne Division trooper that was KIA on Leyte.

About the Author: He was born, raised and educated in St. Paul, MN. He enlisted in the army at Fort Snelling, MN. After WWII he settled in Milwaukee, WI, after he retired he moved to Columbus, GA. Deane passed away on March 27, 2000.

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Hunger, Leyte-1944

by Ralph Ermatinger

An imposed fast began after the troops moved high into the mountains and

re-supplying them became difficult because of the terrain and the monsoon-like rains. Men gnawed bark and roots, dug commodes overlooked by the enemy and attempted to hunt deer and wild boar. But game was difficult to procure, for always the wily boar and wary deer slipped out of their resting places with the approach of the hunter. Birds, monkeys and reptiles appeared not to be present, and there were no Filipinos hawking fruits and vegetables. Friend and foe had the battlefield to themselves.

Early in the campaign, socks filled with polished rice often were recovered from the bodies of slain enemy soldiers, but as the campaign lengthened, even that uncertain source of food disappeared when the isolated Japanese army itself faced starvation and was forced to forage. The fast was broken for a few minutes one day when each soldier was issued one bite of red meat from two small deer carcasses and a wild boar captured in pits excavated on a game trail by Filipino guerrillas. Each soldier received about one once of meat which was his alone to cook or eat raw, nibble or wolf down in a gulp, or share with the wounded. Nothing was wasted. Even the bones were broken and boiled into a broth.

Troops daily heard the sound of Mosely's engine overhead as the intrepid pilot searched day after day for a hole in the clouds to plunge into and topple a box of rations to the hungry men below. Mosely knew the approximate location of the troops he sought to feed, but they were in the clouds that surrounded the mountains, and he dared not attempt a drop without a visual sighting lest it fall into the hands of the enemy. The rain persisted. But, one day the clouds parted slightly for a few minutes and in the brief interval of sunshine, Mosely swooped in as the troops dived into foxholes or took cover behind the trees. His plane was followed by others which kept up the bombardment until the clouds closed again. By this time, however, enough food had been dropped to feed the battalion and the fast was broken. Two men were struck and killed by the falling boxes. Mosely became an instant hero to the troops, and his name was known to every man.

Men function effectively after missing several consecutive meals; indeed hunger sharpens the senses - up to a point. But when hunger extend into starvation a pall of gloom settles over the mind and the body becomes listless. As a hungry day follows hungry day, the empty belly begins to bloat, the jowls swell, and a pervasive lassitude sets in. Eating is such a regular habit. Hunger subtly alters moral values instilled from childhood as the mind concentrates upon food for survival. Men were heard to mutter, and not in jest, "I'm going out and get some 'meat'." There is no doubt about the meat

that they had in mind, but it is unlikely that any of them followed through on their threats. The Japanese had fewer qualms, however, for they savaged two troopers they slew in a fire fight. The hunger experience illuminates the answer given by a 19th century mountain man in the American West when chided by his companions for eating flesh. "Meat's meat," he said.

To add to the woes of the troops, dysentery struck at the same time - the "squitters," it was called - while others were afflicted with malaria and dengue fever. Dengue was known also as "breakbone fever". It was particularly distressing to host dengue and dysentery simultaneously, for when a man stood up to "go", his bones would fail him and he would crumple to the ground - with the inevitable - and a trip to the creek became necessary. Yet, in the deepest trough of mental depression on "Hungry Hill" when ill and hungry men would say, "the enemy would do me a favor if he put a bullet through my head," the mere appearance of a Japanese soldier galvanized them into instant action. In the adrenaline of a fire fight, lethargy vanished and hunger and bodily ailments were forgotten as the troops set about accomplishing the mission for which they were so well trained - destroying the enemy.

Sources:

Courtesy of "WINDS ALOFT" quarterly publication of the 511th Parachute Association