

CHRISTMAS 1944/1945

By Hank Frese

CHRISTMAS 1944 IS DRIVEN INTO MY MEMORY! TED GAWLICKI WRITES HOW OUR FEET WERE SO COLD THAT THEY LOST ALL FEELINGS WHEN WE ARRIVED ON ATTU CHRISTMAS EVE 1944 ("SMB" MARCH 1988). THIS WAS VERY LATE IN THE DAY ON DECEMBER 24th, WE WERE IN TRANSIT WITH ALL OUR BELONGINGS. WHEN WE DISEMBARKED FROM THAT VICTORY SHIP FOR OUR BRIEF STAY ON ATTU WE WERE TO STAY IN THE TEMPORARY HUTS UP THE VALLEY. WE WERE NOT DRIVEN BY TRUCKS BUT WE HAD TO TRUDGE THROUGH THE SNOW AND ICY TRAILS EVEN THOUGH IT WAS ALMOST DARK. WE HIKED AND SLIPPED WITH OUR GEAR UP THE VALLEY IN AN ARRAY OF GENERAL DISORDER. OUR GUIDE, A CORPORAL I BELIEVE, LED THE WAY AND WITH A POINTING GESTURE SAID "YOU MEN WILL TAKE THE HUTS DOWN THE HILL FROM THE MESS HALL" AND THEN HE DISAPPEARED.

WE HAD BEEN DIRECTED TO A SHELTER THAT HAD ICE AND SLUSH ON THE FLOORS. MOST OF THE HUTS ON THE HILLSIDE HAD THEIR DOORS STANDING OPEN AND OTHERS HAD SNOW DRIFTS HIDING THE ENTIRE DOORWAYS. WE HAD TO DIG OUT THE SNOW WITH A FIRE BUCKET THAT WAS NEARBY. THE OTHER DOOR WAS BLOCKED WITH FOLDED AND STORED COTS. THE SNOW HALF COVERED THE OIL STOVES WHICH I WORKED ON UNTIL I GOT IT SOMEWHAT DRY. SINCE THE WAR WAS STILL VERY "ACTIVE" NO LIGHTS WERE ALLOWED TO BE USED.

THROUGH THE DARK AND SNOW I WENT BACK TO THE MESS HALL TO GET SOME OIL. UPON RETURNING I WAS ABLE TO GET A FIRE GOING AND THE HUT BEGAN TO WARM UP A BIT. THE OTHER GUYS HAD CLEARED OFF THEIR BUNKS AND FELL ON THEM, FULLY CLOTHED, IN THEIR PARKAS. MOST OF THEM HAD BEEN SEASICK IN THE PAST FEW DAYS AND THEY WERE DEAD TIRED. I HAD THE WORST SNOW COVERED BUNK IN THE HUT WHICH I TRIED TO CLEAR OFF BEFORE THE SNOW HAD A CHANCE TO MELT AND WET IT.

AFTER LAYING DOWN AND FALLING ASLEEP FOR WHAT I THOUGH WAS A SHORT TIME IT STARTED TO GET COLD SO I GOT UP TO CHECK WHY THE FIRE HAD GONE OUT. WHILE I WAS WORKING ON THE STOVE A BIG MESS SERGEANT PUSHED OPEN THE DOOR AND POINTED AT ME, AS I WAS THE ONLY ONE AWAKE, AND SAID "YOU ARE ON CHRISTMAS K.P." AND THAT HE NEEDED ME EARLY BECAUSE IT WAS CHRISTMAS!

MY COMBAT ENGINEERING TRAINING KEPT ME GOING ...

AFTER THE CHRISTMAS MEAL AND BEFORE THE EVENING MEAL I GOT A BREAK TO HURRY BACK TO THE HUT AND CHECK MY LUGGAGE PLUS "ADMIRE MY BUNK!" (I CONSIDERED GOING A.W.O.L. BUT WHERE COULD YOU GO ON ATTU?)

MY NEXT CHRISTMAS (1945) WAS ON SHEMYA AND WAS QUITE DIFFERENT. THE 400th MESS WAS IN FINE SHAPE AND UP TO DATE WHICH WAS A FAR CRY FROM THE ONE ON ATTU. NO K.P., A MEAL AND JUST WAITING TO BE SENT HOME WAS THE ORDER OF THE DAY.

WHILE WE LIVE THROUGH ALL THE EXPERIENCES THAT WE HAVE HAD IN OUR LIFETIME THE TWO CHRISTMASES THAT I SPENT IN THE ALEUTIANS WILL BE REMEMBERED FOR A LONG TIME.

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