

In memory of Papa Les (Lester Lawrence Misch 1923 – 2015)

A WORLD WAR II VETERAN REFLECTS

On the Winter of '44 – '45

*“It was the coldest winter Europe had seen
In over a hundred years.
My gun – the fifty caliber –
I'd set up on the edge of a farm
With a clear field of view
Over this German town.
I shut the gun down,
At night time,
Pulled the back plate,
You know,
So it couldn't be fired.
A catholic church
stood across the road, and
The priest peeked out the big wooden door,
And he called me:
'Komm, komm'
Looking right and then left.
“Es ist kalt, ja?” he said
And rubbed hands together.*

So I went on inside.

In the frost-bitten cube of the sacristy
Hands wrapped in rags,
The priest poured a tumbler
of sweet red wine,
and they shivered together
as they drank in the dark.

On the Spirit of Christmas

Lester sits up in his hospital bed,
Frail as a rickety bundle of sticks.

*“Our outfit fired the Long Toms,
he says,
“with a range of fifteen miles.
We didn’t hang back way behind the lines,
They’d send us right up to the front.
Our old man, the captain,
was a really good shooter.
In Germany once
we hit a moving train.
Another time
a ship on the Rhine.
On Christmas Day German troops in line
at the mess
for their Christmas dinner.”*

Lester looks up
And out a ways
to a distant wintry landscape;
he plucks at the blanket,
and over his bony chest
he draws the thin hospital gown.

“We laid one right down in there,”
he states with a mournful frown.

Fireworks

*“Well the rivers were a natural barrier
of course
just like the Rhone
And the Rhine after that.
So we’d lay down a big old artillery barrage.
And we’d try to improve on our TOT score.
Time On Target it was,
That’s what we would call it.
Send a shell over -- it hits and explodes.
If they’re down in a fox hole
they might still survive.
Other times we’d set it high overhead,
Fifty feet, hundred feet over their heads
Shrapnel come raining down into the hole.
Shrapnel and fireworks down onto their heads.*

*I remember when we went to cross the Rhone River,
That was a big one - some fireworks display!
On the other side that’s where the Germans were waiting,
and we’d just keep moving it up
Just like that.”*

On the Sweet Scent of Victory

*"My one and only confirmed kill
Was an ME-109, and
My gun wasn't the only one firing
But I'm sure I'm the one who
took him out."*

The German fighter flew low
For strafing.
Streams of fifty-caliber lead
Lit by tracers
Converged on the plane.
No smoke,
No fire,
No furious blast.
Just the Messerschmidt
suddenly dropping fast,
It careened and dove
Nose first into the snow-covered field,
Just the crash,
Just the chilling crunch of crying steel as it
Crumpled around
The dying pilot.

*"That's why I know
I hit the man."*

The soldiers rushed over
To gawk at the wreck.
The reek of fuel spread
But they still saw no flame.

*"Hey, come on, Les!
They said,
'Don't you want to see?'*

But I didn't."

Spoils of War

*"In Germany once,
A town near Kassel..."*

The combat had stopped
But the ruins still smoldered.
A rusty chain of soldiers trailed
From a building's burned-out rubble.

"Hey, what's going on?"
Lester wanted to know.

A guy in the doorway grinned wide and agreeably
Cocked his head in toward the
Shadowy alcove
Where a skinny girl sprawled on the filth of a mattress,
Ravaged by thrusts of a soldier
Obscenely,
Her pale arms and legs jerking limp and enfeebled.
"Got any chocolate?" somebody asked.
Another one said, *"Hit the back of the line!"*

*"She may have been sixteen, maybe twelve, even younger.
Dirty and naked..."*
Lester saw somebody's daughter, a child.
"I thought about Sissy back home,"
He recalled.

"Ah, Jesus, what's wrong with you guys?"
"She's a kid!
This is sick! Let her be!" he implored.

Somebody called, "Hey, who won the war?"