

My "Close Encounters" in World War 2 Combat

By Thayer Greene

Abstract: As a 19-year-old young man, Thayer Greene had his "close encounter" with the great world conflict at the end of winter of 1945, as he was deployed as an infantryman to Europe and took part in the battle for Cologne. In this article, the author recollects a few of his relevant close encounters with war and with the emotions that characterised those moments, from fear to hilariousness, up to sheer terror that eventually haunted him for decades as PTSD. This long-suppressed spiritual suffering urged him to train in Jungian psychotherapy in the 1960s and finally to deal with his traumatic memories in the late 1970s. This text tells the story of that journey from trauma to healing.

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Now that I am in my 95th year on the planet, I welcome the opportunity to reflect on traumatizing wartime experiences that I experienced in my eighteenth and nineteenth years. While it is hard to remember the minute details of my formative years in World War II combat, even after nearly a century of life certain images and feelings never leave.

As a young man of the World War II generation I was drafted. I was hoping to be assigned to a military government unit as I had studied both French and German at my New Hampshire preparatory school. But at my induction the bored corporal at Fort Devens had another idea. "Do you have flat feet, bud?" he asked. "No," I replied. "You're in infantry then," he barked as he stamped my admissions papers.

I had the peaceful personality of a preacher's son; the death dealing tasks of an infantry soldier did not seem where I belonged. But you don't get to choose, and we have less control over our fates than we might wish. "it is what it is" is one of the main lessons of military service. Accepting this lesson helped me survive during my most difficult times in combat. Though the army is a huge organization that successfully coordinates the actions of all military personnel, in fact the archetype of an infantry soldier is a solitary experience.

My boot camp was abbreviated from 13 to 9 or 10 weeks because of the immediate need for "grunts," infantry soldiers on the front. Thus I had little time to prepare for the life-and-death determining experiences I would soon face. The casualty rate was astronomical for all contenders and there was an overwhelming need for more bodies at the front even after the Allies had

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gained the upper hand and I joined the fight. I did not, perhaps nobody could, grasp the intensity, enormity, darkness and terror of the situation I was being trained for.

I became an infantry soldier in the U.S. 3rd Armored Division. Our first mission was to secure control of Cologne. Riding in a troop truck from Belgium to Germany I heard 155 howitzers exploding in the distance. With every yard of chewed earth we crossed, war became more real and concrete. We heard the sounds of battle in the distance. We passed dead and mutilated bodies on the sides of the road, both American and German. The late adolescent bravado that I had felt at the beginning of my war journey was quickly draining from me. Seeing corpses and large artillery holes in the landscape rendered the magical war movie images from back home obsolete. A wounded vet returning to the fighting in the front with us newbies said, "OK, boys, it's no longer make believe, it's real. You're in a war where Germans want to kill us. Wake up. Take it seriously." This warning from the tried warrior propelled me into the survival mode that I then maintained at all times.

In Cologne the Western Allies controlled the west side of the Rhine and the Germans the east side. Once there we received two days of "safety" training, subjecting us newbies to limited enemy firing. We rode on the back of tanks behind the turrets as bullets whistled by us, but we were safe as long as we stayed put. We bivouacked in a safe bunker on the west side of the Rhine. We greatly outnumbered our adversary on the East. I pulled guard duty every other day along the river, but there were plenty of downed buildings to protect me from the occasional spray of German bullets.

We remained in Cologne for a few weeks as the attack of the Ruhr pocket was being set up. The Western Allies had captured the Ludendorff Bridge in Remagen. The Germans had done their best to destroy it, but it remained intact. We used it along with pontoon bridges to get our massive numbers of troops across the Rhine. As soon as I crossed the Rhine, I approached an older infantry man, not part of my unit. I said, "You don't seem to be scared." "Boy," he replied, "Are you mistaken. You don't understand. I've survived three months of fighting unwounded and I'm scared shitless."

My combat duty lasted about two months. I had close calls of German gunners spraying bullets a few feet from my heels while I scrambled behind abandoned deserted jeeps or large rocks in the field as we advanced. During one particular advancement of my squad I had scrambled behind a large boulder. The shelter of the stone house I needed to get to was 30-40 yards away. The Germans knew I was there. A large artillery shell landed about 50 yards

behind me. I stayed put. Shortly thereafter a shell landed about 50 yards in front of my boulder cover. I was being bracketed. Move soon or die! With my 65 pounds of radio and other military gear I made a beeline for the stone house. Luckily the German gunner didn't see me for the first 25 yards. By the time he got a bead on me there was only a spray of bullets at my heels as I got in house. I didn't feel invincible but had the strange impression that it did not seem that hard to survive if I kept my wits about me.

Another close call I witnessed was of a humorous in nature since no one was physically hurt. A 30ish redheaded West Virginia hillbilly was in my platoon. He was well liked and appreciated by his fellow younger infantry soldiers. "Red" as we called him was a true character with his cultural uniqueness. He thought and talked much different than us city folk. He was everybody's friend and buddy.

Our squad was safely ensconced in a sturdy German house, offering good protection from the bullets a random German sniper was shooting our way. Red had a large handlebar mustache that he immaculately maintained, and which was an immense source of pride and identity. We often enjoyed him enjoying his creation. A German sniper had a bead on a glass window of the house we were in. Red walked by the window. A split second later a bullet flew through the window and sheared off half of his beloved mustache but did not touch him. His mustache was his achievement that helped to define him. He had escaped a sniper's bullet by a razor's edge, but that was low on his level of concern. Losing half of the finest handle-bar mustache we'd ever seen was all he could think of. He pontificated about it with colorful hillbilly swearing, the likes I'd never heard before. He elaborated about several different ways he would like the sniper's mother to suffer and die. We sensed his insecurity for losing his claim to fame. "A fucking "catastrophe," Red said. Our whole squad felt his psychological hurt from the loss of his perceived identity and validity. We let him know that we were glad he survived unscathed. Our support made a great difference to him even though he knew it would take years to regrow his beloved mustache.

In another close call I was saved by accidentally oversleeping, through no fault of my own. I was assigned to carry the radio for our new platoon leader, a Second Lieutenant, but the higher-ups decided that no radios were to be used to prepare for our next mission. Along with other company messengers I was sent to headquarters. We slept outside and were to be awoken at 4:00 am to get back to our units. I found a secluded tree to sleep behind before our wakeup call. I woke up at dawn with the sun shining on me. I looked around. Everyone was

gone. No one had found me curled up in the dark. I made my way to the company HQ office and told a clerk my problem. He said "Well I wouldn't call it a problem. It's your liberation today, Greenie, because your lieutenant stepped on a mine and was killed." He realized as did I that I would have likely been standing next to him when that happened. Somewhat dazed I asked him "What do I do now?" He said, "Find an ambulance heading to the front and get a ride to rejoin your unit." That's what I did. My teenage brain still couldn't fully comprehend how close I had come to dying with my officer.

My worst traumatic experience that registered at the time occurred about a month before the end of the war. It was a blessing that it did not come earlier because it was so profound in its terror and power compared to the other close calls I'd had shortly before. At the time I could not recognize or acknowledge how this shelling experience would affect my very being for over thirty years.

The Germans were getting rid of their heavy artillery in a final ditch effort before surrendering. Their artillery was comparable to our 155 Howitzers, giant shells producing huge holes and violent explosions. At the time I had only been in combat for a month and a half. We were in the woods in a large stone house. I felt a false sense of safety in there. This was my only time subjected to heavy German artillery fire landing in our immediate area. Each explosion created a large foxhole while anything within fifteen yards was obliterated to powder. Though in a sturdy stone building we were not safe. I completely dissolved from an adult male into a shaking, anxiety-riddled little boy. I fell into a major regression from the increased level of terror and vulnerability surrounding me. Overwhelming fear paralyzed me. I was scared shitless. I felt irrational, not functional. Thinking about it now three quarters of a century later I can still feel the vibrations and tremors. I lost my adult sense of control and maturity. I had been able to cope with near-misses of enemy gunfire, but not devastating artillery shelling. It lasted about an hour but seemed like an eternity.

I had other close encounters during my service – liberating the Nordhausen concentration camp and encountering freed inmates; guarding captured SS officers overnight knowing they might overwhelm me. But these events seemed to go underground for decades, only to surface and be excavated and cleansed in later life. They were an additional clue to how traumatic events from combat can become lodged so deeply in our psyches that they only leak out over long periods of time like psychic shrapnel. The artillery bombardment was my source of traumatic wounding that got stuck in my unconscious.

I didn't deal with the helpless rage trapped inside me from that shelling until I went to a healing center in California some thirty years later. I attended the

retreat thinking on a conscious level it would be good for me learn something while staring at the Pacific Ocean and relaxing. My unconscious had a totally different agenda. It turned out I was in the hands of an excellent therapist specializing in Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. He knew it was time for me to release the unrecognized traumatic explosion trapped inside me. I had intense archetypal dreams the first three nights I was at the retreat – one night a hurricane, another a huge obliterating explosion, a third an earthquake unleashing tidal waves. Archetypal dreams go beyond human capacity. These three overwhelming dreams each had a tremendous amount of affect connected with them.

The therapist realized I was about to explode. He pulled the cork when I got on the hot seat. He got me talking about my artillery shelling experience. I unloaded layers of affect that had been blocked in my rational world. I screamed and yelled and cried, unloading years of repression of my true feelings. Boy did I unload!

I released paralyzing terror that I had repressed for thirty years. Only then did I start to become my real self again. We had only been bombed for under an hour, but my reaction lasted much longer, my psyche successfully burying the trauma for decades. After that release I easily dealt with any "mini-terror" that life threw at me. I took that opportunity to acknowledge and release the past.

Hundreds of my clients are glad I survived. I'd been to a dark place they needed to go, and they had to find somebody who had been there. I wouldn't have been there if the Board corporal had put me in military government where I thought I belonged. His primary need - and it turned out to be my need too - was for infantry soldiers. I didn't have flat feet; my fate was sealed. God didn't want or need me to be a government man; I needed to be where I was sent. The cumulation of my war experiences and learning how to process them made a positive difference in lots of peoples' lives. I feel blessed to have been able to help them make sense of their own lives. I loved helping people get beyond their trauma. Some could return to themselves after dealing with a lot of loss and pain. It's what God trained me for.