ERNIE PYLE

BRAVE MEN

INTRODUCTION TO THE BISON BOOKS EDITION BY
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Hedgerow Fighting

I want to describe to you what the weird hedgerow fighting in northwestern France was like. This type of fighting was always in small groups, so let's take as an example one company of men. Let's say they were working forward on both sides of a country lane, and the company was responsible for clearing the two fields on either side of the road as it advanced. That meant there was only about one platoon to a field, and with the company's under-strength from casualties, there might be no more than twenty-five or thirty men.

The fields were usually not more than fifty yards across and a couple of hundred yards long. They might have grain in them, or apple trees, but mostly they were just pastures of green grass, full of beautiful cows. The fields were surrounded on all sides by the immense hedgerows—ancient earthen banks, waist high, all matted with roots, and out of which grew weeds, bushes, and trees up to twenty feet high. The Germans used these barriers well. They put snipers in the trees. They dug deep trenches behind the hedgerows and covered them with timber, so that it was almost impossible for artillery to get at them. Sometimes they propped up machine guns with strings attached so that they could fire over the hedge without getting out of their holes. They even cut out a section of the hedgerow and hid a big gun or a tank in it, covering it with bush. Also they tunnelled under the hedgerows from the back and made the opening on the forward side just large enough to stick a machine gun through. But mostly the hedgerow pattern was this: a heavy machine gun hidden at each end of the field and infantrymen hidden all along the hedgerow with rifles and machine pistols.

We had to dig them out. It was a slow and cautious business, and there was nothing dashing about it. Our men didn't go across the open fields in dramatic charges as you see in the movies. They did at first, but they learned better. They went in tiny groups, a squad or less, moving yards apart and sticking close to the hedgerows on either end of the field. They crept a few yards, squatted, waited, then crept again.

If you could have been right up there between the Germans and the Americans you wouldn't have seen many men at any one time—just a few here and there, always trying to keep hidden. But you would have heard an awful lot of noise. Our men were taught in training not to fire until they saw something to fire at. But the principle didn't work in that country, because there was very little to see. So the alternative was to keep shooting constantly at the hedgerows. That pinned the Germans to their holes while we sneaked up on them. The attacking squads sneaked up the sides of the hedgerows while the rest of the platoon stayed back in their own hedgerow and kept the forward hedge saturated with bullets. They shot rifle grenades too, and a mortar squad a little farther back kept lobbing mortar shells over onto the Germans. The little advance groups worked their way up to the far ends of the hedgerows at the corners of the field. They first tried to knock out the machine guns at each corner. They did this with hand grenades, rifle grenades and machine guns.

Usually, when the pressure was on, the German defenders of the hedgerow started pulling back. They would take their heavier guns and most of the men back a couple of fields and start digging in for a new line. They left about two machine guns and a few riflemen scattered through the hedge to do a lot of shooting and hold up the Americans as long as they could. Our men would then sneak along the front side of the hedgerow, throwing grenades over onto the other side and spraying the hedges with their guns. The fighting was close—only a few yards apart—but it was seldom actual hand-to-hand stuff. Sometimes the remaining Germans came out of their holes with their hands up. Sometimes they tried to run for it and were mowed down. Sometimes they wouldn't come out at all, and a hand grenade, thrown into their
hole, finished them off. And so another hedgerow was taken and we were ready to start on the one beyond.

This hedgerow business was a series of little skirmishes like that clear across the front, thousands and thousands of little skirmishes. No single one of them was very big. Added up over the days and weeks, however, they made a man-sized war—with thousands on both sides getting killed. But that is only a general pattern of the hedgerow fighting. Actually each one was a little separate war, fought under different circumstances. For instance, the fight might be in a woods instead of an open field. The Germans would be dug in all over the woods, in little groups, and it was really tough to get them out. Often in cases like that we just went around the woods and kept going, and let later units take care of those surrounded and doomed fellows. Or we might go through a woods and clean it out, and another company, coming through a couple of hours later, would find it full of Germans again. In a war like this everything was in such confusion that I never could see how either side ever got anywhere.

Sometimes we didn't know where the enemy was and didn't know where our own troops were. As somebody said one day, no battalion commander could have given you the exact location of his various units five minutes after they had jumped off. Gradually the front got all mixed up. There were Germans behind us and at the side. They would be shooting at us from behind and from our flank. Sometimes a unit got so far out ahead of those on either side that it had to swing around and fight to its rear. Sometimes we fired on our own troops, thinking we were in German territory. It was hard to see anything, or even tell from the sounds, for each side used some of the other's captured weapons.

The tanks and the infantry had to work in the closest cooperation in breaking through the German ring that tried to pin us down in the beachhead area. Neither could have done it alone. The troops were of two minds about having tanks around them. If you're a foot soldier you hate to be near a tank, for it always draws fire. On the other hand, if the going gets tough you pray for a tank to come up and start blasting with its guns. In our break-through each infantry unit had tanks attached to it. It was the tanks and the infantry that broke through that ring and punched a hole for the armored divisions to follow after. The armored divisions practically ran amuck, racing long distances and playing hob, once they got behind the German lines, but it was the infantry and their attached tanks that opened the gate for them. Tanks shuttled back and forth, from one field to another, throughout our break-through battle, receiving their orders by radio. Bullozers punched holes through the hedgerows for them, and then the tanks would come up and blast out the bad spots of the opposition.

It was necessary for us to wreck almost every farmhouse and little village in our path. The Germans used them for strong points or put artillery observers in them, and they just had to be blasted out. Most of the French farmers evacuated ahead of the fighting and filtered back after it had passed. It was pitiful to see them come back to their demolished homes and towns. Yet it was wonderful to see the grand way they took it.

In a long drive an infantry company often went for a couple of days without letting up. Ammunition was carried up to it by hand, and occasionally by jeep. The soldiers sometimes are only one K ration a day. They sometimes ran out of water. Their strength was gradually whittled down by wounds, exhaustion cases and straggling. Finally they would get an order to sit where they were and dig in. Then another company would pass through, or around them, and go on with the fighting. The relieved company might get to rest as much as a day or two. But in a big push such as the one that broke us out of the beachhead, a few hours' respite was about all they could expect.

The company I was with got its orders to rest about five o'clock one afternoon. They dug foxholes along the hedgerows, or commandeered German ones already dug. Regardless of how tired a man might be, he always dug in the first thing. Then they sent some men looking for water. They got more K rations up by jeep, and sat on the ground eating them. They hoped they would stay there all night, but they weren't counting on it too much. Shortly after supper a lieutenant came out of a farmhouse and told the sergeants to pass the word to be ready to move in ten minutes. They bundled on their packs and started just before dark. Within half an hour they had run into a new fight that
lasted all night. They had had less than four hours’ rest in three solid days of fighting.

The afternoon was tense, and full of caution and dire little might-have-beens. I was wandering up a dirt lane where the infantrymen were squatting alongside in a ditch, waiting their turn to advance. They always squatted like that when they were close to the front. Suddenly German shells started bouncing around us. I jumped into a ditch between a couple of soldiers. Shells were clipping the hedgetops right over our heads and crashing into the next pasture. Then suddenly one exploded, not with a crash, but with a ring as though a high-toned bell had been struck. The debris of burned wadding and dirt came showering down over us. My head rang, and my right ear couldn’t hear anything.

The shell had struck behind us, twenty feet away. We had been saved by the earthen bank of the hedgerow. It was the next day before my ear returned to normal. A minute later a soldier crouching next in line, a couple of feet away, turned to me and asked, “Are you a war correspondent?”

I said I was, and he said, “I want to shake your hand.” And he reached around the bush and we shook hands. That’s all either of us said. It didn’t occur to me until later that it was a sort of unusual experience. And I was so addled by the close explosions that I forgot to put down his name.

A few minutes later a friend, Lieutenant Colonel Oma Bates, of Glaster, Mississippi, came past and said he was hunting our new battalion command post. It was supposed to be in a farmhouse about a hundred yards from us, so I got up and went with him. We couldn’t find it at first. We lost about five minutes walking around in orchards looking for it. That was a blessed five minutes. For when we got within fifty yards of the house it got a direct shell hit which killed one officer and wounded several men.

The Germans started to rain shells around our little area. We couldn’t walk ten feet without hitting the ground. They came past our heads so quickly we didn’t take time to fall forward—I found the quickest way down was to flop back and sideways. In a little while the seat of my pants was plastered thick with wet red clay and my hands were scratched from hitting rocks and briers to break quick falls. Nobody ever fastened the chin strap on his helmet in the front lines, for the blasts from nearby bursts had been known to catch helmets and break people’s necks. Consequently, when I squatted quickly I descended faster than my helmet and I left it in mid-air above me! Of course in a fraction of a second it followed me down and hit me on the head, and settled sideways over my ear and down over my eyes. It made me feel silly.

Once more shells drove us into a roadside ditch. I squatted there, just a bewildered guy in brown, part of a thin line of other bewildered guys as far up and down the ditch as the eye could see. It was really frightening. Our own shells were whanging overhead and hitting just beyond. The German shells tore through the orchards around us. There was machine-gunning all around, and bullets zipped through the trees above us. I could tell by their shoulder patches that the soldiers near me were from a division to our right, and I wondered what they were doing there. Then I heard one of them say, “This is a fine foul-up for you! I knew that lieutenant was getting lost. Hell, we’re service troops, and here we are right in the front lines.” Grim as the moment was, I had to laugh to myself at their pitiful plight.

Once I left a command post in a farmhouse and started to another about ten minutes away. When I got there, they said the one I had just left had been hit while I was on the way. A solid armor-piercing shell had gone right through a window and a man I knew had his leg cut off. That evening the other officers took the big steel slug over to the hospital so that he would have a souvenir.

When I got to another battalion command post, later in the day, they were just ready to move. A sergeant had been forwarded about half a mile in a jeep and picked out a farmhouse. He said it was the cleanest, nicest one he had been in for a long time. So we piled into several jeeps and drove up there. It had been only about twenty minutes since the sergeant had left. But when we got to the new house, it wasn’t there. A shell had hit it in that twenty minutes and set it afire, and it had burned to the ground.

We drove up the road a little farther and picked out another one. We had been there about half an hour when a shell struck in an orchard
who lost the main point of the war by getting involved in details—the main point, of course, being to kill Germans. His philosophy of war was expressed in the simple formula of "shoot the sonsabitches." Once I was at a battalion command post when we got word that sixty Germans were coming down the road in a counterattack. Everybody got excited. They called the colonel on a field phone, gave him the details and asked him what to do. He had the solution in a nutshell. He just said, "Shoot the sonsabitches," and hung up.

Another of my favorites was a sergeant who ran the colonel's regimental mess. He cooked some himself, but mostly he bossed the cooking. His name was Charles J. Murphy and his home was at 225 East State Street, Trenton, New Jersey. Murphy was red-haired, but he had his head nearly shaved like practically all the Western Front soldiers—officers as well as men. Murphy was funny, but he seldom smiled. When I asked him what he did in civilian life, he thought a moment and then said:

"Well, I was a shyster. Guess you'd call me a kind of promoter. I always had the sort of job where you made $50 a week salary and $1,500 on the side."

How's that for an honest man?

Murph and I got to talking about newspapermen one day. Murph said his grandfather was a newspaperman. He retired in old age and lived in Murph's house. "My grandfather was nuts reading newspapers," Murph said. "It was a phobia with him. Every day he'd buy $1.50 worth of three-cent newspapers and then read them all night. He wouldn't read the ads. He would just read the stories, looking for something to criticize. He'd get fuming mad. Lots of times when I was a kid he'd get me out of bed at two or three in the morning and point to some story in the paper and rave about reporters who didn't have sense enough to put a period at the end of a sentence."

Murph and I agreed that it was fortunate his grandfather passed on before he got to reading my stuff, or he would doubtless have run amuck.

Murph never smoked cigarettes until he landed in France on D-day, but after that he smoked one after another. He was about the tenth soldier who had told me that same thing. A guy in war has to have some outlet for his nerves, and I guess smoking is as good as anything.
All kinds of incongruous things happen during a battle. For instance, during one full I got my portrait painted in water colors. The artist sat cross-legged on the grass and it took about an hour. The painter was Pic. Leon Wall, from Wyoming, Pennsylvania. He went to the National Academy of Design in New York for six years, did research for the Metropolitan Museum and lectured on art at the New York World's Fair. Artist Wall was then, as it were, a cook and KP in an infantry regiment mess. He hadn't done any war paintings at all since the invasion. I asked him why. He said: "Well, at first I was too scared, and since then I've been too busy."

Soldiers are made out of the strangest people. I made another friend—just a plain old Hoosier—who was so quiet and humble you would hardly know he was around. Yet in a few weeks of invasion he had learned war's wise little ways of destroying life while preserving one's own. He hadn't become the "killer" type that war makes of some soldiers; he had merely become adjusted to an obligatory new profession.

His name was George Thomas Clayton. Back home he was known as Tommy. In the Army he was sometimes called George, but usually just Clayton. He was from Evansville, Indiana, where he lived with his sister at 852 Covarr Avenue. He was a front-line infantryman of a rifle company in the 29th Division. Out of combat for a brief rest, he spent a few days in an "Exhaustion Camp," then was assigned briefly to the camp where I worked from—a camp for correspondents. That's how we got acquainted. Clayton was a private first class. He operated a Browning automatic rifle. He had turned down two chances to become a buck sergeant and squad leader, simply because he preferred keeping his powerful B.A.R. to having stripes and less personal protection.

He landed in Normandy on D-day, on the toughest of the beaches, and was in the line for thirty-seven days without rest. He had innumerable narrow escapes. Twice, 88s hit within a couple of arms' lengths of him. But both times the funnel of the concussion was away from him and he didn't get a scratch, though the explosions covered him and his rifle with dirt. Then a third one hit about ten feet away, and made him deaf in his right ear. As a child, he had always had trouble with that ear anyway—earaches and things. Even in the Army back in America he had to beg the doctors to waive the ear defect in order to let him go overseas. He was still a little hard of hearing in that ear from the shellburst, but it was gradually coming back.

When Tommy finally left the line he was pretty well done up and his sergeant wanted to send him to a hospital, but he begged not to go for fear he wouldn't get back to his old company, so they let him go to a rest camp instead. After a couple of weeks with us, he added that the correspondents didn't drive him frantic, he set to return to the lines with his old outfit.

Clayton had worked at all kinds of things back in the other world of civilian life. He had been a farm hand, a cook and a bartender. Just before he joined the Army he was a gauge-honor in the Chrysler Ordnance Plant at Evansville. When the war was over he wanted to go into business for himself for just once in his life. He thought he might set up a small restaurant in Evansville. He said his brother-in-law would back him.

Tommy was shipped overseas after only two months in the Army, and when I sat him he had been out of America for eighteen months. He was medium-sized and dark-haired, and had a little mustache and the funniest-looking head of hair I ever saw this side of Buffalo Bill's show. While his division was killing time in the last few days before leaving England, he and three others decided to have their hair cut Indian-fashion. They had their heads clipped down to the skin, all except a two-inch ridge starting at the forehead and running clear to the back of the neck. It made them look more comical than ferocious, as they had intended. Two of the four had been wounded and evacuated to England.

I rattled off and on with Clayton for several days before he told me how old he was. I was amazed; so much so that I asked several other people to guess at his age and they all guessed the same as I did—about twenty-six. Actually he was thirty-seven, and that's pretty well along in years to be a front-line infantryman. It's harder on a man at that age. As Clayton himself said, "When you pass that thirty mark you begin to slow up a little."

This Tommy Clayton, the mildest of men, had killed four of the enemy for sure, and probably dozens he couldn't account for. He wore
an Expert Rifleman's badge and soon would have the proud badge of Combat Infantryman, worn only by those who had been through the mill. Three of his four victims he got in one long blast of his Browning automatic rifle. He was stationed in the bushes at a bend in a gravel road, covering a crossroad about eighty yards ahead of him. Suddenly three German soldiers came out a side road and foolishly stopped to talk right in the middle of the crossroads. The B.A.R. has twenty bullets in a clip. Clayton held her down for the whole clip. The three Germans went down, never to get up. His fourth one he thought was a Jap when he killed him. In the early days of the invasion lots of soldiers thought they were fighting Japs, scattered in with the German troops. They were actually Mongolian Russians, with strong Oriental features, who resembled Japs to the un-traveled Americans. Clayton was covering an infantry squad as it worked forward along a hedgerow. There were snipers in the trees in front. Clayton spotted one, sprayed the tree with his automatic rifle, and out tumbled this man he thought was a Jap.

Do you want to know how Clayton located his sniper? Here's how: When a bullet passes smack overhead it doesn't zing; it pops the same as a rifle when it goes off. That's because the bullet's rapid passage creates a vacuum behind it, and the air rushes back with such force to fill this vacuum that it collides with itself, and makes a resounding "pop." Clayton didn't know what caused this, and I tried to explain. "You know what a vacuum is," I said. "We learned that in high school."

And Tommy said, "Ernie, I never went past third grade."

But Tommy was intelligent. A person doesn't have to know the reasons in war—he only has to know what things indicate when they happen. Well, Clayton had learned that the "pop" of a bullet over his head preceded the actual rifle report by a fraction of a second, because the sound of the rifle explosion had to travel some distance before hitting his ear. So the "pop" became his warning signal to listen for the crack of a sniper's rifle a moment later. Through much practice he had learned to gauge the direction of the sound almost exactly, and so out of this animal-like system of hunting, he had the wits to shoot into the right tree—and out tumbled his "Jap" sniper.

Clayton's weirdest experience would be funny if it weren't so filled with pathos. He was returning with a patrol one moonlit night when the enemy opened up on them. Tommy leaped right through a hedge and, spotting a foxhole, plunged into it. To his amazement and fright, there was a German in the foxhole, sitting pretty, holding a machine pistol in his hands. Clayton shot him three times in the chest before you could say scat. The German hardly moved. And then Tommy realized the man had been killed earlier. He had been shooting a corpse.

All his experiences seemed to have had no effect on this mild soldier from Indiana, except perhaps to make him even quieter than before. The worst experience of all is just the accumulated blur, and the hurting vagueness of being too long in the lines, the everlasting alertness, the noise and fear, the cell-by-cell exhaustion, the thinning of the surrounding ranks as day follows nameless day. And the constant march into eternity of one's own small quota of chances for survival. Those are the things that hurt and destroy. And soldiers like Tommy Clayton went back to them, because they were good soldiers and they had a duty they could not define.

In wandering around our far-flung front lines—the lines that in our rapid war were known as "fluid"—we could always tell how recently the battles had swept on ahead of us. We could sense it from the little things even more than the big things: From the scattered green leaves and the fresh branches of trees still lying in the middle of the road. From the wisps and coils of telephone wire, hanging brokenly from high poles and entwining across the roads. From the gray, burned-powder rims of the shell craters in the gravel roads, their edges not yet smoothed by the pounding of military traffic. From the little pools of blood on the roadside, blood that had only begun to congeal and turn black, and the punctured steel helmets lying nearby. From the square blocks of building stone still scattered in the village streets, and from the sharp-edged rocks in the roads, still uncrushed by traffic. From the burned-out tanks and broken cars still unremoved from the road. From the cows in the fields, lying grotesquely with their feet to the sky, so newly dead they had not begun to bloat or smell. From the scattered heaps of personal gear around a gun. I don't know why it was, but the Germans always seemed to take off their coats before they fled or died.
From all these things we could tell that the battle had been recent—from these and from the men so newly dead that they seemed to be merely asleep. And also from the inhuman quiet. Usually battles are noisy for miles around. But in the fast warfare after our break-through a battle sometimes left a complete vacuum behind it. The Germans would stand and fight it out until they saw there was no hope. Then some gave up, and the rest pulled out and ran for miles. Shooting stopped. Our fighters moved on after the enemy, and those who did not fight, but moved in the wake of the battles, would not catch up for hours. There was nothing left behind but the remains—the lifeless debris, the sunshine and the flowers, and utter silence. An amateur who wandered in this vacuum at the rear of a battle had a terrible sense of loneliness. Everything was dead—the men, the machines, the animals—and he alone was left alive.

One afternoon we drove in our jeep into a country like that. The little rural villages of gray stone were demolished—heartbreaking heaps of still-smoking rubble. We drove into the tiny town of Le Mesnil-Pont, a small stone village at the “T” of two gravel roads, a rural village in rolling country, a village of not more than fifty buildings. There was not a whole building left. Rubble and broken wires still littered the streets. Blackish-gray stone walls with no roofs still smoldered inside. Dead men still lay in the street, helmets and broken rifles askew around them. There was not a soul nor a sound in the village; it was lifeless.

We stopped and pondered our way, and with trepidation we drove out of town for a quarter of a mile or so. The ditches were full of dead men. We drove around one without a head or arms or legs. We stared, and couldn’t say anything about it to each other. We asked the driver to go very slowly, for there was an uncertainty in all the silence. There was no live human being, no sign of movement anywhere.

Seeing no one, hearing nothing, I became fearful of going on into the unknown. So we stopped. Just a few feet ahead of us was a brick-red American tank, still smoking, and with its turret knocked off. Near it was a German horse-drawn ammunition cart, upside down. In the road beside them was a shell crater. To our left lay two smashed airplanes in adjoining fields. Neither of them was more than thirty yards from the road. The hedge was low and we could see over. They were both British fighter planes. One lay right side up, the other on its back.

We were just ready to turn around and go back, when I spied a lone soldier at the far side of the field. He was standing there looking across the field at us like an Indian in a picture. I waved and he waved back. We walked toward each other. He turned out to be a second lieutenant—Ed Sasson, of Los Angeles. He was a graves registration officer for his armored division, and he was out scouring the field, locating the bodies of dead Americans. He was glad to see somebody, for it is a lonely job catering to the dead. As we stood there talking in the lonely field, a soldier in coveralls, with a rifle slung over his shoulder, ran up breathlessly and almost shouted: “Hey, there’s a man alive in one of those planes across the road! He’s been trapped there for days!”

We ran to the wrecked British plane, lying there upside down, and dropped on our hands and knees to peck through a tiny hole in the side. A man lay on his back in the small space of the upside-down cockpit. His feet disappeared somewhere in the jumble of dials and pedals above him. His shirt was open and his chest was bare to the waist. He was smoking a cigarette, the only immediate relief the two soldiers who had discovered him could offer. The pilot turned his eyes toward me when I peered in, and he said in a typical British manner of offhand friendliness, “Oh, hello.”

“Are you all right?” I asked, stupidly.

He answered, “Yes, quite. Now that you chaps are here.”

I asked him how long he had been trapped in the wrecked plane. He said he didn’t know for sure as he had got mixed up about the passage of time. But he did know the date of the month he was shot down. He told me the date. And I said out loud, “Good God!” For, wounded and trapped, he had been lying there for eight days!

His left leg was broken and punctured by an ack-ack burst. His back was terribly burned by raw gasoline that had spilled. The foot of his injured leg was pinned rigidly under the rudder bar. The space was so small he couldn’t squirm around to relieve his own weight from his pinning back. He couldn’t straighten out his legs, which were bent above him. He couldn’t see out of his little prison. He had not had a bite to eat or a drop of water. All this for eight days and nights. Yet
when we found him his physical condition was good, and his mind was
calm and rational. He was in agony, yet in his correct Oxford accent
he even apologized for taking up our time to get him out.

The American soldiers of the rescue party cussed as they worked,
cussed with open admiration for this British flyer’s greatness of heart
which had kept him alive and sane through his lonely and gradually
hope-dimming ordeal. One of them said, “God, but those Limeys have
got guts!”

It took us almost an hour to get him out. While we were ripping
the plane open to make a hole, he talked to us. And here is what
happened—in the best nutshell I can devise from the conversation of
a brave man whom we didn’t want to badger with trivial questions: He
was a RAF flight lieutenant, piloting a night fighter. Over a certain
area the Germans began letting him have it from the ground with
machine-gun fire. The first hit knocked out his motor. He was too low
to jump, so—foolishly, he said—he turned on his lights to try a crash
landing. Then they really poured it on him. The second hit got him
in the leg. And a third bullet cut right across his right-hand fingers,
clipping every one of them to the bone.

He left his wheels up, and the plane’s belly hit the ground going
uphill on a slight slope. We could see the groove it had dug for about
fifty yards. Then the plane flopped, tail over nose, onto its back. The
pilot was absolutely sealed into the upside-down cockpit. “That’s all I
remember for a while,” he told us. “When I came to, they were shouting
all around me.”

Thus began the eight days. He had crashed right between the
Germans and Americans in a sort of pastoral no man’s land. For days
afterwards the field in which he lay passed back and forth between
German hands and ours. The pasture was pocked with hundreds of
shell craters. Many of them were only yards away. One was right at
the end of his wing. The metal sides of the plane were speckled with
hundreds of shrapnel holes.

He lay there, trapped in the midst of that inferno of explosions.
The fields around him gradually became littered with dead. At last
American strength pushed the Germans back, and silence came. But
no help. Because, you see, he was in that vacuum behind the battle,
and only a few people were left. The days passed. He thirsted terribly.
He slept some; part of the time he was unconscious; part of the time
he undoubtedly was delirious. But he never gave up hope.

After we had finally got him out, he said as he lay on the stretcher
under a wing, “Is it possible that I’ve been out of this plane since I
crashed?”

Everybody chuckled. The doctor who had arrived said, “Not the
remotest possibility. You were sealed in there and it took men with
tools half an hour to make an opening. And your leg was broken and
your foot was pinned there. No, you haven’t been out.”

“I didn’t think it was possible,” the pilot said, “and yet it seems in
my mind that I was out once and back in again.”

That little suggestion of delirium was the only thing that remarkable
man said, during the whole hour of his rescue, that wasn’t as dispassion-
ate and matter-of-fact as though he had been sitting comfortably at the
end of the day in front of his own fireplace. We didn’t know whether
the flyer would live or not, but the medic thought he had a chance. It
was one of the really great demonstrations of courage in this war.