

WHAT'S A FOXHOLE LIKE

By Bob Pocklington

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For starters they don't come in a box, and don't roll out like a sleeping bag; you dig it with your teeny-weeny combo pick and shovel or look around for a hole left by the retreating enemy. You don't sleep in a foxhole; you pass out in a semi-sitting position with your feet immersed in cold water, knees jammed against the wall and your neck bent by the weight of your steel helmet. Being six feet five, then, I usually hit ground water before my head was protected. But even if one were deep enough to avoid bullets, overhead bursts of artillery could still get you. Invariably I opted for diving under a truck or bulldozer and I was never alone under there; that added protection. Even the rubble of a bombed-out building was safer than a hole in the ground, and a dry horizontal culvert was like the Waldorf. A member of my squad was five-feet-two and could dig like a mole; the only wounds he ever received were blisters on his hands.

There were times when a foxhole was the modus operandi, plenty of pre-dugs available when the Germans scrambled and we expected to be there awhile. Not exactly like a hotel but a chance to find water and clean up a bit, brush the teeth and all that. Somewhat like Saturday night bath back in the thirties, we kids were last to use the same water. Rain was our main source, from the sky or collected anywhere it was reasonably clean. We had time in those rare situations to enlarge, or amend our foxhole with abandoned pillows found in the wrecked homes; even a soggy mattress could soften rocks and concrete. And a lid for the hole would be nice if thick enough to withstand artillery bursts. These were considered luxury accommodations. Consider this, we were tourists traveling in scenic Europe, drinking their best wine and scrounged liquors, and dining on ducks, geese, or the fattest chicken we could hustle. And everything was on the house.



My worst experience with a foxhole was in the city of Aachen, Germany. We had taken the city three times, twice driven out by Tiger tanks and 88-artillery. On the third try the advance captured the city but it was truly a mess. The streets were blocked with rubble and deserted German military equipment, and it was raining. We could not tell where we were in the city but it was obvious the greatest action had moved on and we would be unable to help anyone until daylight. We were ordered to dig in. I could see very little and my G. I. glasses were wet and steamed. I picked a soft spot and dug with what we call our entrenching tools, these carried on our backs. By the time it was deep enough I was exhausted, crawled in and immediately went into a coma.

At first light I realized my hands were covered with blood and I searched my face, head, and what of my body I could reach but found no wounds. I thought it strange and my feet were in what I assumed was water even though it had stopped raining before I finished the hole. Then one of my squad seeing me hollered, "Where the hell are you hit?" Then when there was enough daylight we could both see I had nicked the belly of a dead horse and its blood had leaked in on me during the night. The boys had great fun guaranteeing I would receive a Purple Heart. I prayed for a cleansing thunderstorm. Before the war was over I was an expert on the different types of European soils.