

Speirs

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12 June 1990

Dr. Stephen E. Ambrose
Director
The Eisenhower Center
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Dear Dr. Ambrose,

For about a year I have been carrying on a warm correspondence with an old friend, Jack E. Foley of Pittsburgh, PA. Jack and I were brother officers in the 2ndBn, 506th Parachute Inf Regt, 101st Airborne Division during WW II. In a recent letter Jack asked me if I could confirm or deny an account you had passed onto him about an officer in the 506th who supposedly killed a drunken GI during the Normandy campaign. Jack used the word "murder".

Jack asked me to "help search out the truth" of this story. As a historian myself I know how elusive a quarry "the truth" can be. And I also know how damaging "the truth" can be if it is uncovered many years after the event and is used in a reckless manner. I am a fan of yours, having a copy of your excellent book "The Pegasus Bridge". I will presume therefore to request that what I am going to say be treated with caution. The officer from the 506th, who has been accused by former First Sgt. Lipton as a murderer was a friend and a brother officer serving in the same rifle company in which I served. That being Company D or as we called it then "Dog".

His name was Ronald C. Speirs, then a 1st Lt.. He was known in the company as "Sparky". Speirs was a tough, aggressive, brave and resourceful rifle platoon leader. Since he was a veteran of the Normandy Campaign with a Silver Star and the Combat Infantry Badge when I first met him I looked up to him and envied him. We served in "Dog" Co. from my joining, in mid-June, 1944, until he was transferred to Jack Foley's "Easy" Company during the Bulge. Sparky was the only "Dog" Company officer to be decorated during the whole of WW II which says a lot. The standards for individual decorations were absurdly high in the 101st, especially after Normandy. Sparky took command of "Easy", was promptly promoted to Captain, and served as its commander for the rest of the war as best I recall. He remained in the Army after the war, as I did, and we both transferred to the 82nd Airborne Division after the 101st deactivated in Europe in November, 1945.

We served with the 82nd in Europe and at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and lived in the same BOQ until I left the Army in 1947. I never knew what became of him after that.

Former 1st Sgt Lipton's story is new to me. I never heard of any officer in any division killing a drunken GI in Normandy. However, one very persistent story I did hear from the beginning is even worse.

What I am going to relate is hearsay since I did not serve in Normandy. However, the story was told again and again in the company Sparky and I both served. It was usually told with an air of confidentiality as though the teller either could not, or did not want to, believe it. Some of the men in the company were afraid of Sparky and it was hard for officers to warm up to him although he was a warm, easy going guy with a good sense of humor. Whatever is true, Sparky had a stain on him.

The story was that one day during the Normandy Campaign Sparky was walking down a road by himself and passed a group of 8 or 10 German POW. The POW were underguard and were digging in a roadside ditch. Sparky stopped and after a moment broke out a pack of cigarettes and by gesturing to the Germans indicated he would give a cigarette to each. They were very receptive so he stepped down in the ditch and passed the pack around. He then took out a lighter and gave each a light, that done he stepped back up onto the roadway. For a moment he watched them smoke and chatter to each other. Suddenly and without any warning he unslung the Thompson 45 caliber submachine gun he always carried and began firing into the group. He continued raking back and forth until all the POW were dead. The guard was not hit and of course was stunned. Sparky then turned and walked away without comment.

That is the story as I heard it. Whether it is true or not I cannot testify to. I do know that no charges were ever brought against him and to my knowledge there was no investigation of the incident.

Every combat soldier knows that you can build a case for "atrocities" in war. I saw them in WW II myself. Later I left the Army and enlisted in the Marine Corps and fought in four campaigns, including the Chosin Reservoir, in Korea in 1950-1951, again as a company grade officer. Twelve years after that I served on a joint Navy staff in Vietnam as a senior Major before that became a "war". As a three war veteran I know these things do happen and I knew that long before the Calley incident.

I firmly believe that only a combat soldier has the right to judge another combat soldier. Only a rifle company combat soldier knows how hard it is to retain his sanity, to do his duty and to survive with some semblance of honor. You have to learn to forgive others, and yourself, for some of the things that are done. I never have condoned murder and I do not now. If Sparky was a murderer, and the evidence may be strong against him, I do not set myself up as his judge.

This is not an easy letter to write and I am ambivalent about it. Please try to place the events, if they are true, in the context of the time, place, and intense emotional demands. When every moment may be your last and many of your prayers are simply that you will do your duty, and that you may live to see the sun rise one more time, things look very different.

I have told the story a number of times over the years without naming names. Perhaps for that reason I may seem quite positive about the minute details. As we all know, war stories seem to have a life of their own. They have a way of growing; of being embellished consciously or unconsciously. Whether the details are precise or not there must be a kernel of truth for such a story to ever have been told the first time.

There you are, editorial comments and all. Maybe this will help me purge myself of this once and for all.

I will look forward to your book about Jack Foley's "Easy" Company and the men who served there. Good luck. If I may be of any further assistance please let me know.

Sincerely yours,


Tom L. Gibson

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Dear Doctor Ambrose,

Thank you for your prompt response to my letter concerning "Sparky" Speirs of the WW II 101st Airborne Division. Having said what I did I will leave the matter there.

Since you are researching the wartime "Easy", 506th, I am sure you would be interested in scanning a copy of the regt scrapbook. Did Jack Foley mention its existence? Among other things it contains a great picture of Sparky standing bare-headed in the snow during the Bulge. I know Jack has a copy as do I. Unfortunately my copy is in storage. My wife and I recently moved to central Oregon after many years in southern California. We are living in a cramped rental unit while our new home is being built. Almost all my books, including the scrapbook, will be in storage until we occupy our home about the first of November.

You asked about my impressions of Dick Winters and others who served in "Easy". You know from your own experience that a rifle platoon leader serving in one company in a bn has trouble enough keeping up with the officers who pass through his own company. His impressions and recollections of those in other companies may therefore not be very fair or accurate. However, I served, and survived in that 2nd Bn for a long time so I definitely do have impressions.

The "Easy" company people, beside Sparky, that I remember best are Lts. Harry "Limey" Welsh, Jack Foley, and by reputation Lt. "Buck" Compton and Platoon Sgt Bill Guarneri. I do not remember 1st Sgt Lipton somehow and I only knew Dick Winters from a distance. I do not know how many impressions you wish to wade through so I think for now I will restrict myself to a few rather general ones.

*Bastogne
Compton*

Dick Winters served with distinction as "Easy" Co. CO in Normandy. He won the DSC there and later became Bn Exec. and was promoted to Major. Since I was not in Normandy I do not know who he replaced. As Bn Exec. Dick worked for the Bn CO Lt. Col. Bob "feed 'em beans and mark 'em duty" Strayer. In my opinion, Strayer was not a great fearless leader but he was smart enough to surround himself with able staff officers and then let them do their work without interference. One of Strayer's least admirable qualities was that he played favorites. Certainly his staff could do no wrong and Dick Winters was his fairhaired boy. "Limey" Welsh by contrast was not.

Harry Welsh was one of the real oldtimers in the 2nd Bn. He was a rock and commanded "Easy" Co. off and on in all four campaigns. "Limey" jumped in Normandy as a 1st Lt and despite doing an excellent job over and over as CO he finished the war as a 1stLt. Many of us who had been around for a longtime were disgusted and did not know who to blame.

As an example of Strayer's petty politics, in Holland "Limey" was acting CO. Some 1stLt was CO of the 101st Airborne Div Parachute Maintenance Company miles in the rear and thus had a hard time getting promoted. This guy was sent up, bumped Limey, took over "Easy" for exactly seven calendar days, was promptly promoted to Captain, and promptly was transferred back to his Maintenance Co. Maybe the guy was forced on Strayer by Div., maybe not. The fact is that the guy got a quick promotion from Strayer but Limey never got one at all. My pique with Strayer may be incidental but I could not make my point about how Limey got shafted without mentioning the way things were. I always wondered too why Dick Winters did not go to bat for "Limey" since they had served together. Maybe Winters knew something I did not know.

I hope you are going to feature Lt. "Buck" Compton and his Platoon Sgt. Bill Guarnere. Those two deserve at least a chapter. Buck was another Normandy DSC winner who was also WIA there. He again was a tiger in Holland until he was WIA again. As I recall, each time he went down Bill Guarnere took over their platoon. In the Bulge Bill Guarnere had a leg blown off one night by Kraut incoming artillery. Buck was right there, lost his platoon Sgt., and his composure. He cracked up, was evacuated, returned a few days later, cracked up again and that was the end of his war. Buck later became a very successful Asst.DA in Los Angeles but for years the poor guy felt ashamed of how it ended for him. No one else agreed with him on that. We all knew we were one firefight, one patrol, one tree burst, one 88mm from the same end. I thought Bill had died that night; many years later I found out he had not. How's that for not knowing what is going on in the next company?

Have you run across the name Jack Maclean? Jack was the longtime Platoon Sgt of the bazooka platoon in HqCo, 2ndBn., 506th. As such he was attached to all the companies in the bn and was, and is, particularly close to "Easy". Jack is intelligent, articulate, polished, an accomplished raconteur and an old friend. It will be well worth your time to contact him. He can fill you in on the battalion and its characters from the earliest days. Contact:

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I swore I was not going to say this but I cannot resist one more Strayer tale. When I joined the Bn I heard that Strayer had two pet hates. First, the little issue wool knit cap. Second for an officer to arm himself with anything but his T/E weapon which was the M1A1 carbine for rifle company officers. Being new and green I took his pet hates to heart. When I mentioned this to the returning Normandy vets they just laughed. They said the carbine was a lousy weapon, not rugged enough, not powerful enough and too undependable to risk your life on. They also told me that Strayer never came forward of his CP in combat so wear and carry what you like. They were right. In Holland I threw away the carbine and loaded up with an M1 and bayonet, an enlisted cartridge belt, two bandoliers of M1 ammo, two grenades and a .45 cal pistol. For the rest of WW II that was the way I went to war. I never saw Strayer, Dick Winters or any of his staff except in garrison. Oh hell, I have gotten charitable in my old age. Maybe I just missed them.

After you have had a chance to digest this, and if you want more, I am at your service.

Semper Fidelis,


Tom L. Gibson