

he had attacked across the Belgian and Luxembourg borders, and slashed into the Ardennes Forest. The Germans had made a good headway those first few days, had made a deep bulge in the American defense lines. "The Battle of the Bulge," newspapers had begun to call the fight in the Ardennes. The 101st and 82nd Airborne divisions had been rushed in to reinforce the battered, retreating American troops. Now the 17th was ready to go.

Spence boarded a C-47 Transport airplane headed for the Continent. The ride was bumpy, and some of the men got sick, but the flight ended with a landing at a field near Reims, in France—away from the action—and not with a parachute drop. After a couple of nights at a camp at Mourmelon, the troops were trucked to a site on the Meuse River, not far from Verdun, where some of the great battles of World War I had been fought. This was only a defensive position—in case the Bulge broke and the Germans drove south into France—and the men of the 17th were disappointed. They wanted to get to the front. They believed in themselves, were hardened and trained; now they wanted to show what they could do. Or at least that's what everyone

CHAPTER 8

On December 19, Spence got the word that his division was heading into battle. For several months he had been living at a camp on the Salisbury Plain, west of London. After being pushed through his basic training so fast, he had expected to head straight to the war, but his battalion had been shifted from camp to camp in the United States, and then shipped to England. All through the summer and fall he had continued to train—and all the drills were getting tiresome. The men in his unit wanted to get to the Continent, get in on the action before the war was over. They had missed D-Day, and now they were afraid they would miss the rest.

Spence was part of the recently created 17th Airborne Infantry Division. Rumors had gone around for a long time that the division would be dropped into Germany, behind enemy lines, as the final push to end the war began. But now Hitler had surprised everyone. On the sixteenth

said. Spence never heard any of the soldiers say much about being afraid, and no one had ever admitted that he hoped the division might sit out the war in England.

What Spence didn't like was sleeping in a foxhole, out in the cold. The men had dug in in pairs, and Ted Draney and Spence had worked hard on a hole together, getting it deep and roomy. Then they had covered it over with some fir limbs and a couple of shelter halves—the two sides of a pup tent. They hadn't really suffered from the cold those first nights, and Spence had slept fairly well, but he longed for a bed, or at least a cot. There was something not only uncomfortable but a little scary about sleeping in a hole in the ground. He would awaken in the night, unclear for a moment where he was, with the smell of wet earth around him, the damp air touching his face like a cold hand.

On the twenty-fourth of December, snow fell all day, and then, as evening came on, the sky cleared and the temperature dropped like a rock. It was going to be a bitter night. All day, no one had mentioned that it was Christmas Eve—as though the men saw some weakness in bringing up the subject. But as they settled into

their foxholes, early, to protect themselves from the cold, someone began to sing "Silent Night." The notes were not really pure, the voice a little too raspy, but the music got into Spence. He had been fighting his feelings all day, trying not to think of home, but the song brought back a whole set of memories: the family get-togethers on Christmas Eve; Dad reading the Christmas story from the Bible; the good food; the excitement about the Christmas morning to follow. Spence never thought of Christmas without remembering the year he had gotten his first bicycle. It had been back in the middle of the Great Depression, and his family had been getting by any way it could. Spence had admitted he wanted a bike, but he hadn't dared to ask for it. Still, on Christmas morning, there it had been, standing up by the Christmas tree, bright red. Spence had seen immediately that the bike was used, that his dad had fixed it up and painted it with a brush, but it hadn't mattered. It had chrome fenders, polished bright, and new tires. Spence was seven at the time, but he had sensed, even then, that he would never in his life be any happier than he was right then.

And he had been right. Spence did remember

some other nice times—like the first time LuAnn had agreed to go out with him—but that one morning, on Christmas, when he had gotten his wish, that was as good as anything he had experienced. And his dad had managed it for him; Spence had always understood that. Later, he and his dad hadn't gotten along so well, and Christmas could bring back those memories, too, but that's not what came to him now. He pictured the big table with his relatives from town all sitting around it—uncles and aunts and cousins—and all the food, all the laughing and talking.

The singer, whoever he was, ended his first carol and began "O Come All Ye Faithful." All this time, Spence and Ted hadn't said a word. They were lying next to each other, both in sleeping bags. Almost everything was black around them except for a little opening at one corner in their cover. Through that, Spence could see a thick little patch of stars, and he kept thinking of the nativity scene his mom would put out at Christmastime: the stable and the star overhead.

When Spence had finished his basic training, he had expected to take a trip home. All during

those hard times in Georgia he had dreamed of that. He had thought of walking into Dale's, downtown, with his uniform on, and letting the high school kids look at him. He wanted LuAnn to see the man he had become. And he wanted his dad to take him aside and tell him how proud he was that Spence hadn't quit, no matter how hard the training had been.

But all that had never happened. Spence had gotten a seven-day leave, and he had expected to grab the first train out of town, headed west. He knew he had to allow two days each way, but that would still give him three days at home. The only trouble was, the trains were moving troops, and most of them were full. He couldn't get on one. Then, when he tried to buy a bus ticket, he found that he couldn't get anything for a couple of days, and that wouldn't leave him enough time to do any more than arrive, turn around, and head back. So he had been stuck at Fort Benning with nothing to do but think about home. What he knew now was that the next time he saw Brigham City would probably be at the end of the war—and who knew how long that might be?

Ted finally asked, "Are you awake?"

"Sure."

"Are you homesick?"

"A little, maybe."

"Yeah. Me too. Everyone is, I'd guess."

"Sure."

"I sort of wish we'd move up tomorrow and get into this thing," Ted said. "I don't like all this sitting around and waiting."

"I know."

They listened again, until the song ended, and then came the next one: "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear."

At home, the Sunday school had always put on a Christmas pageant. When Spence was a kid, he would play a shepherd. He would pose near the manger in his bath-robe, with a dishcloth wrapped around his head and draped down his back. He had hated the whole business as he had gotten to be ten or eleven and was still too short ever to be chosen to play Joseph, but when he was finally old enough to sit in the congregation, he had been able to laugh at his little brother, dressed in the same funny getup and sneaking little waves to his family. Spence wondered how much Lloyd had changed in the last year, wished that he could see him for a few minutes. Lloyd

was thirteen now, nearing fourteen, and Mom had written that he had grown half a foot since Spence had left. He was already five seven, an inch taller than Spence, and he seemed to be a better ballplayer. Spence wished he could get back home for a furlough or something, just once to see Lloyd and Evelyn and Betty before they had grown up too much. Louise was going with a boy named Sterling Carter, from up in Honeyville. He was home from the war with a bad knee, shot up in a battle on the little island of Biak, in the Pacific. Mom said she thought he and Louise were getting pretty serious. Spence figured they would probably be married before he saw Louise again.

Since the end of basic training, Spence had been through some lonely months. He had never really become much a part of his company. Most of the men were older and used to different ways. Spence had stuck to his promise not to drink or smoke, but that had cut him off from almost everyone. He had learned not to accept invitations when the guys in his squad headed into town. It was not just that they got drunk and got into fights; they also headed straight to any whorehouse they could find. No one else seemed

to believe that God was watching, knew what a person did; but for Spence, that idea was basic to the way he looked at life. Going to a prostitute was worse than almost anything, and he knew he could never go home and marry a nice girl, not if he had done that.

At least Ted wasn't so different. Ted had chewed tobacco some, before joining up, and he had taken up smoking the way most of the boys had. But he didn't drink much at all, and he always bragged that he was never going to "pay for it," when the men asked him to go along to the brothels. But that was just Ted's way of sounding tough. Spence knew that his Baptist upbringing was part of what kept him out of those places.

The only trouble was, Spence and Ted took some hard ribbing from the other men. They were two of the youngest, and that was bad enough, but some of the men never let up on them for being such "Sunday school" boys. Vic Barela had told them, "When the fighting starts, I hate to think what these two boys are going to do. Fill their pants, probably."

Ted was the one more likely to say, "Don't worry. We'll hold our own. Just make sure you

do the same." And Ted had once even taken a guy on, fought him nose to nose, and come out about even with him. But Spence's reaction was to withdraw. At times he had the feeling that some of the men liked him, saw him as some sort of little brother, but that didn't mean they ever got off his back, and he was tired of it. He was tired of all the hard talking, too, the cursing and talking dirty. He'd heard all that before, and he tried not to worry about it, but some guys never knew when to quit.

Ted talked a little more than Spence did, and he was taller and bigger built, but just like Spence, he was from a little town and he had farmed all his life. He came from a big family, too—seven or eight kids. Spence could never keep track of all the names. But mostly Ted talked about his brother, just younger, the way Spence talked about Lloyd. This brother—his name was Kenny—wrote funny letters, telling all about high school and his little hometown, Idalia, Colorado, and what the people did there. Ted would read the letters out loud and he would laugh until he'd have to stop, and then he'd tell about all the people who lived in his town.

Spence also liked Sergeant Pappas, the little man who led the squad. He was a no-nonsense guy, who had fought with the 101st Airborne on D-Day, and then had gotten himself wounded in Holland. He thought a squad ought to be a unit, so he tried to stop the razzing when it got too strong.

"Do you wonder what it will be like when we get up to the front?" Ted asked.

Spence was taken a little by surprise. Sometimes he had wanted to bring the subject up, but it had always been Ted who had stayed away from it. "Yeah. Sure, I do." But then he added, "But we'll get through all right, I guess."

"Some of them guys, they make it sound like they're not scared of anything."

"That's just big talk. Everybody's at least a little scared now."

Another song had started: "O Little Town of Bethlehem." The guy singing was warming up, getting better all the time. His voice seemed the only thing out there in the air now, cleaner than before, and penetrating, as though it were coming right through the earth around them. "No ear may hear his coming; but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still, the dear Christ enters

in." Spence had never thought of the words much before, wasn't even sure he knew what they meant. But he longed for something: some comfort the language seemed to suggest, some feeling he remembered from home, at Christmas. He could feel his throat tighten, his chest beginning to quiver.

"We didn't even have to join when we did," Ted said. "We could have waited another year."

"We would have gone in, anyway. We've still got Japan to fight."

"I know. But sometimes I wish I had this last year back. There's all kinds of things I've never done yet."

"We'll be all right, Ted. We'll do all that stuff later on. It's not good to start thinking about things like that." But Spence *had* been thinking about it, and now he was holding his breath. He would feel like such a baby if he started to bawl.

"We've got to turn the Germans around," Ted said, "and then we have to get through that Siegfried Line and across the Rhine. It's going to be bad, Spence. Every bit of it's going to be really bad."

"I know." Spence took a good, deep breath, and then he said, "But we knew that coming in."

"No, we didn't. Not really. Not the way we know it now."

"We know more than we did."

Spence knew what Ted meant, of course: that the war was finally close enough to feel. But he still wondered what would happen inside him when he faced the fire.

"I wish that guy would shut up," Ted said. "He shouldn't be singing all them songs."

But Spence didn't feel that way. He wanted to hear the words one more time: "No ear may hear his coming." He liked the thought of that, liked to think that "the dear Christ" was with him now.

Christmas Day was not quite as bad as Spence expected. For one thing, the cooks were all set up with a good field kitchen, and though the Christmas dinner wasn't exactly like the one at home, it was pretty good. The men seemed to lay off a little that day too. Most of them were friendly—maybe thinking about Christmas, or maybe thinking about going into battle.

That afternoon, mail arrived—mail that was just catching up from England. That was a boost. Spence had three letters: two from his parents, and one from his sister Louise. He opened them in the order they had been posted, and he

enjoyed all the news: Christmas preparations, Lloyd playing basketball on the freshman team, and all the rest. But the second letter from his parents brought the news he had expected for a while: LuAnn had gotten engaged to Dennis Stevens.

Spence hadn't held out any hope of ever having her. It wasn't that. But it was one step closer to what he had dreaded for a long time. And it had come at a bad time.