

Richardson Tales

by Randy Richardson

2 BLACKS, WHITES AND COMMON SENSE

It was March of 1945 on the flat lands of Germany beyond the Rhine. While a welcome change from one of the worst winters Europe had experienced in decades, it was still cold without promise of spring. The mission of my unit, the Second Division from Texas, was to move across the flat farmland in a southwesterly direction to pacify the countryside and eventually capture Leipzig.

Some months earlier there was a long battle line across Italy with the Germans trying desperately to break through. At that time black Americans were segregated in separate units, often commanded by white officers and used in non-combat service. From the start of the war civil rights forces pounded on the politicians to integrate blacks in all commands. But the army bitterly opposed this. The only concession was to begin using blacks in battle situation, but still insisting on white officers. At least that's my understanding. The Germans set their best S.S. troops opposite the sole black division in the American line. The blacks dropped their rifles and fled. The casualties in the divisions on both sides were enormous. The army paper for the troops did not mention this and the folks at home never heard of it. But soldiers have a news system that doesn't depend on paper. We were unhappy, then terrified on learning that a 5th all black platoon with white officer would be added to our company. I thought that a mistake, but figured it wasn't clever to tell that to our CO, not tolerant of the opinions of teenagers without a high school diploma.

Next day on a cold, windy morning our company walked out of the small city we had occupied and moved along a dirt road running southwest. The German army was then so depleted that their only resistance consisted of 88 fire but there were fewer and fewer 88 attacks as we moved further SE. The 88 in that war were the best field gun in any army. The sounds of its shells in the air were pure terror and the damage wrought by its explosions unbelievable unless seen. Because of the scarcity of even 88 attacks we had become lax. Instead of spreading out in battle style we walked down the dirt road four abreast. Presently we came to a deep depression, a large bowl where soil or stone had been mined with a road down into it leading out on the further side. As soon as the leading men appeared coming out of this pit the 88's began firing and kept up for about 5 min. Due to a foot injury or divine intervention, I was riding in the captain's Jeep. One of the first shells landed near the Jeep, which was already on a steep decline with a deep drainage ditch to its left. Realizing instantly that Jeeps are not good places to be in such situations, the driver and I dove into the ditch. Just in time as the next shell blew the Jeep over our heads, but the ditch, narrow and deep, was a wonderful shelter for us. Then the screaming of the wounded began. But it soon appeared that the screams were coming nearer to us while nearly all of the shells were landing a good distance further into the pit. In a few seconds it was clear that the screams were mostly coming from blacks who'd thrown down their rifles and were running full tilt up the road where the Jeep had been and many with a few whites ran nearly all the way back to the town. At the end of the day another company in our division was brought in to disarm these deserters and place them under guard. All the unwounded and walking wounded, the driver and I walked back to the town.

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That night there was a revolution in race relations and I think all of it came from a few 2nd Division officers on the site, most of them not career soldiers the fifth platoon disappeared. All of its men were divided among the units in the four extant platoons, 1 or 2 to each of the four units in each platoon. We were a mixed lot: Mexican Americans, a very few Texans left after the French coast battle, many men from the South and a scattering from New England and the Mid West. All, including those from Southern states, had seen enough action to realize one had to trust and depend on comrades, that battle was no place for racial dislikes. Hence there were no problems integrating the blacks.

A couple of weeks later we reached the outskirts of Leipzig. It was black dark and cold. We were in a newly plowed field before a harrow had leveled the surface hence there were little hills and valleys in the ground. Bullets were being fired across the field only a couple of inches above the dirt. We knew this because some of the bullets were tracers. Hence all of us lay in the tiny valleys between the rows. Occasionally a bullet would nick someone, in my unit, the two black soldiers were nicked, but they never cried out lest the Germans learn of our presence. The medics crawled up to them and did what they could, but neither of them made a sound. The next morning were you to eavesdrop on us you would realize you were listening to a band of brothers.

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