

Christmas in Surbourg, France, 1944 Part 2

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Hans Schnockenberg was disabled in some way--a severe limp, or shattered hip perhaps. He had to be, considering he was one of only a few males remaining in French (but German speaking) Surbourg by the German border.

It was the marble plaque mounted on the side of an unremarkable building that galled him. He could tolerate it no more. What he did in Surbourg that late December day in 1944 must be remembered yet today in the village.

After their occupation in 1940, the Germans had mounted a fine marble testimonial to a local boy who in their mind made good--in other words a turncoat who went over to the Nazi's and achieved some prominence. Townspeople could hardly mention his name, except in contempt.

Yet there was the marble plaque, mocking them, and Hans (not his real name) had taken particular offense. Hans had also taken action, and the morning after Christmas found him, hammer and chisel in hand, on a precarious ladder.

He was chipping away the dishonor to the village. Supporters and curious G.I.'s gathered to watch, but by late morning most had wandered over to the mess tent for lunch--"no K Rations today, real powdered food" was the rumor.

The bomb came at noon without warning, other than the ominous high-pitched accelerating swish of a rapidly falling object. The impact and explosion paralyzed all for a moment, everyone that is except blonde nurse June Stoops, who rushed to the scene, only 250 feet from the hospital (June later got a Silver Star).

The little town hall was gone, neighboring shacks were shattered, and three Frenchmen lay bleeding, one to die before he could be brought to the hospital, not damaged but in chaos anyway. There was debris everywhere. Soldiers cots were covered with fine glass splinters.

Some claimed to have seen two planes in a dog fight over the village, but planes in the air, American planes, were a common and unremarkable sight. But a German plane? Dropping a bomb on meaningless Surbourg? Or, was it an errant American bomb? Some said that later a plane crashed nearby, but no one knew if it was Allied or German.

The war was returning to Surbourg, and the townspeople were afraid. At first it was whispered, and then spoken out loud. The vaunted American troops had been just to the North, at the German border, for 15 days, with no evident progress!

Even the Americans in the hospital appeared to have no clue, other than that their radios reported a fierce battle to the northwest, possibly in the Ardennes. German radio boasted of great successes, but they always did, so you couldn't tell by them what was really happening. There did seem to be fewer French flags hanging from the windows.



After the Bomb. Two Frenchmen were killed.

The flags disappeared quickly the next day. Sort of like Paul Revere in a different way, a jeep had rushed in from the border on January 2, a thin and very nervous Infantry Lieutenant in effect crying "Evacuate, evacuate, you have three hours." It was a tactical retreat!

Three hours to move a hospital full of patients! The nurses were unceremoniously trucked out first for safety. Trained to move quickly, the field hospital borrowed trucks from resting divisions to the South and West, and by mid-afternoon the Americans were gone. Surbourg shuddered.

It is said that in the trucks on the road South to Hagenau, some said they saw him--a man walking South against a bitter wind, poorly dressed for the winter cold, and hurrying despite his limp and the evident pain. Hans Schnockenberk knew what his fate would be when the Germans returned to Surbourg. Hans was now a homeless refugee.

Surburg's momentous Christmastime, 1944 was over. Heil Hitler replaced stille nacht as the words of the season. Fear triumphed over Hope.

