

## **Words Better Left Unspoken** **By Ronald E. Coe, MD**

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On the evening of January 15, 1945, we were moving upon the Autobahn heading toward the Roer River. During a short rest the soldier in front of me slammed a mortar case filled with shells onto the cement highway. I was not concerned over the ammunition, but rather the noise. This fellow coincidentally had the same name as the self-winding watch I had received from my wife earlier that day. I told him that if he did it again, the Germans would not have to kill him, because one of us would.

Late that night, we finally moved into a house on the Roer River opposite Duren. This house was quiet and built like a fortress. The basement was similar to a pillbox with heavy cement overhead. The sentries were posted and we settled down for the night. Suddenly, the silence was broke by the sound of rifle fire followed by the cry "medic". At the top of the stairs I found our mortar shell carrier lying on the floor. In the darkness I started to examine him. I soon realized that my fingers were inside his skull and covered with his blood and brain tissue. As I turned at the top of the stairs I noticed a full-length mirror leaning against the wall. Our mortar shell carrier had been standing in front of it and, in the moonlight, would probably have looked like at least two people. At the foot of the stairs, I found our sergeant who had fired the fatal shot when there was no response to his requests for the password. I did my best to console this brave and outstanding non-com.

The following night, this same sergeant was returning to our side of the river, leading his squad that was being chased by the Germans. He correctly called the protective artillery fire. The shells fell short and killed him just as he was entering our backyard. That same day he had been promoted to staff sergeant.

During the overseas trip with the 104<sup>th</sup> Division veterans in May of 1999, I located the Sergeant's grave and quietly reflected, mourned and praised this find soldier. Regretfully, I could not locate the mortar shell carrier's grave.

That watch was always a reminder, but it too, is long gone. I often remember those two brave soldiers who were victims of double friendly fire. I recall the words I said that night on the Autobahn. Words, which would have been better left unspoken.

Many war experiences fade or vanish with the passing of time, but this one remains as clear today, as if it were yesterday.