

THE ATTACK ON PRETOT

This story is about an attack. To begin with, there is something about attacks that I find interesting and surprising. I, of course, am only stating my opinion, but all the G.I.s I have spoken with agree with me: A soldier feels better in the attack than he does in any other phase of battle, where you are under fire.

I have heard there is a small organism in your body that releases liquid into your system that reacts as a stimulant when you are excited. I am not surprised at all as I remember before an attack thinking how tired and worn out I was. Yet, when the attack got under way I did not feel tired. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

But back to this tale I was going to tell. It is a story about an attack our battalion made in Normandy, France, on a little village named Pretot.

The reason I remember this attack better than any other is that it went exactly as planned. Second, it was vigorously carried along, and third, the battalion was in such good, or should I say, "high" spirits. I don't believe any combat soldier ever feels good while on the line. He has too much to worry about. This is why I remember and write of this particular attack.

Pretot is a small village of approximately 1,000 or 1,500. During the two days we were in that section I never did see French civilians in Pretot. They left their towns and villages as war advanced. They took off seeking escape like scared rabbits in front of a forest fire. Some stayed, but the majority took a very hasty departure.

Pretot is a picturesque village surrounded by low rolling hills. The town itself is situated in the center of a little valley; very pretty. As it was June, everything had the look of spring and a fresh green color. It was ideal weather for anything but war.

Our battalion was about a mile away when we were ordered to go into the attack. It was early morning; not yet daylight. We were to move up under cover of darkness, deploy around the west side of town and attack at the first crack of dawn. There was to be ten minutes of artillery before our jump-off. We checked our crew served weapons, drew hand grenades, the necessary ammunition and rations. All NCOs were called in by platoon leaders for briefing; the NCOs had just returned from a briefing by the company commanding officer who had just been briefed by the battalion commander.

I was told to orient my squad and make last minute checks on things like water, ammo, etc. Everything was now ready. Everyone was keyed-up and having that last smoke before the jump-off, under cover of course. We were making feeble attempts at stale jokes to show everyone we weren't scared — actually, we were scared to death. The fear of death is a fear I don't believe anyone ever masters. Our battalion commander

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used to say: “It takes a brave man to be scared — and admit it.” By his ruler I can say I was feeling extremely brave that morning.

Cigarettes were put out, a last warning for silence was given, squads were lined up and we moved out.

We arrived at our destination (the jump-off point) in less than an hour. We moved into position and prepared to wait for our artillery barrage. When it lifted, that was our signal to attack. Here is the big picture: We were deployed companies abreast, squads in line, one battalion strong. Roughly speaking, we were 600 yards from Pretot on the forward slope of a hill to the west side of town. We were attacking from the west to the east. The first platoon of G Company was to swing through the southern edge of Pretot and set up machine guns on the road leading out of town, catching the krauts as they started to pull back.

We waited about ten minutes before our artillery went out and I believe it was one of the longest ten minutes I ever spent in my life. Finally, after what seemed a lifetime of waiting, I heard a dull boom far to our rear. Then the funny whirring sound a shell makes tracking across the sky. They usually fire one lone shell in to see if the range is correct—then lay it on. Such was true in this case, for seconds after the first shell hit—just long enough for the observer to radio back to the guns to “fire for effect” — the air was filled with whirring sounds, like angry bees. I could hear the dull boom of the 105s firing far to the rear. Then the ground would shake with the impact and everyone would hit the dirt praying there wouldn’t be any short rounds. Ten minutes of that and the countryside was as quiet as before, except now we could hear the soldiers in town cussing and running to their stations.

Up the line I heard some Joe yell, “Let’s go get the bastards!” And with that every man seemed to move out as one man. The gentle slopes leading into town were alive with charging paratroopers yelling like drunken Indians. The air was full of snarling lead looking for a body to stop in. The attack on Pretot was in full motion.

Before we had run the first half of the 600 yards separating us from town, I could hear the slugs ripping through the foliage as gunners fought to get our range. It seemed so thick that I thought it impossible to advance through it and not get hit.

The gerry guns were reaping their toll but we were too near; nothing could stop these hell-for-leather troopers now. They were never taught how to attack and retreat at the same time.

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Things were moving fast now; no time to think, just act automatically and move. The gerries were surprised and didn't have much chance to organize. As we approached the first street in town we came to I could hear the blam of hand grenades and the nasty whine of flying shrapnel above the sputter of tommy guns and the crack of rifle shots. I knew the main weight of the attack had started to fight through town and was systematically cleaning out house after house with hand grenades and bazookas.

Nothing too exciting happened to my squad going through town. That is, nothing that didn't happen to squads in combat every day. There was one squad ahead of mine and they caught most of the dirty work. They were on one side of the street and we were on the other, followed by the mortar squad. I could hear all hell busting loose further to my left; I knew the boys were having it hot.

As we neared the edge of town the first squad was held up by a machine gun in a front yard. The platoon leader sent a runner back to tell me to take my squad and swing around to the right and come in from the flank. I took seven men and myself and started swinging to the right down a little alley between the houses. I left my machine gun crew and assistant squad leader behind because it is hard to climb fences and move fast with a machine gun.

We started down behind the row of houses, climbing the fences and zig-zagging through the flower beds, keeping as close to the buildings as possible. As I stepped through the last hedge row before the corner house I nearly bumped into a kraut who was standing with his back to me, facing the street. I will never forget his look of surprise as he turned and saw me. I pressed the trigger on my tommy gun and he went down like an unseen hand had just smacked him with a sledge hammer. I had no sooner let up on the trigger when two more jumped to their feet and to run. They had been hiding in the hedge row. I had 25 slugs left in my clip so I just split it up between them. It always amazes me how much power there is in a bullet. If a man is hit solid it is like a house was dropped on him. Needless to say, these two were surely hit solid; they weren't over 15 yards away from me.

A scout and myself moved on around the house. The two of us crawled up towards the street to try and spot the machine gun that was holding our two squads up. We saw it. I sent the scout back for the man with the grenade launcher on his rifle and he proceeded to polish it off. It took two rounds.

We then moved on through the town with no more than the occasional sniping to hold us up. Arriving on the east of town we set up our two machine guns covering the road leading out of town. We put out local security and waited.

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All of this time I could hear the boys raising hell in the main section of town. Later I learned we had attacked so fast that two tanks were bottled up in town and they were rushing around like bulls in China shops; up one street, down another. Everywhere they went there were troopers laying it on. They finally knocked them out.

We hadn't done much more than set up when the krauts started pulling back down the road leading out of town. They were very disorganized and needless to say we had a field day. Dead and dying German soldiers were laying along that road for a quarter of a mile. Later we learned we had chalked up about 150 krauts.

While one of our machine guns' gunners was zeroing in I was standing behind him. As he fired I would slap him on the shoulder which meant he needed to raise his sights by two mils. I noticed there was no rifleman protecting the left flank of the gun. I turned sideways and yelled to one of the boys, "Hey Vanmeter, come here. We were standing behind a hedge row, out of sight, except for the hole in the hedge I had been looking through at the road to correct the firing of the gun. Vanmeter came over and yelled, "What do you want?" I turned sideways and reached back to pull him close so he could hear above the noise of the gun. I had just grabbed his arm when a sniper got in a lucky shot and plugged Vanmeter right through the chest—clean through. He fell at my feet and I drug him in close to the hedge row and yelled for the medic. I pause here a minute to explain exactly what happened. The sniper that shot Vanmeter was actually zeroed on me. I just happened to turn sideways leaving Vanmeter facing the hole in the hedge. I never had a closer miss. I felt the wind from that slug across the back of my hand. Vanmeter was hit bad and he knew it. He died later on. He told me to take his pistol, that he wouldn't be needing it. He refused to let the medic bandage up his wounds; he said it would be a waste of time. He was bleeding awfully bad and he had a feeling he was cashing in. Funny how a guy knows, for I believe they do in most cases.

We got our orders to move on. We were to set up and dig in on the high ground beyond the town. I went over to Vanmeter where I had dragged him. I couldn't think of any pretty speech so I just said, "Take it easy." He answered, "Yeah, yeah." As I left his face was gray as ashes and he was bleeding like a stuck pig. I knew he had had it. I learned later from the medic who stayed with him that he died in about 20 minutes. He was a nice guy; a good friend of mine.

Well, Pretot was ours. It had taken just a little more than two hours. It was one of the most organized attacks I ever took part in.

W.W. Farris
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