



CONVERSATIONS
WITH MAJOR
DICK WINTERS

**LIFE LESSONS FROM THE COMMANDER OF
THE BAND OF BROTHERS**



COLONEL (RET.) COLE C. KINGSEED, USA
New York Times bestselling coauthor of *Beyond Band of Brothers*

Also by Cole C. Kingseed

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Life Lessons from the Commander of the Band of Brothers

Colonel Cole C. Kingseed



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To the memory of

Chief Commissaryman William B. Kingseed, Jr., U.S. Navy (Ret.) and Lieutenant General Hal Moore, U.S. Army (Ret.), the finest sailor and the best soldier I have ever known.

Now, as I look back, they loom larger than ever.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am generally skeptical of any author who puts within quotation marks conversations he never heard or who pretends to recollect with absolute fidelity conversations he heard many years ago. I, too, am guilty of some reconstruction, but the conversations with Major Dick Winters that appear in this book are as I best remember them. There are a few conversations in which I did not participate and others that I heard firsthand more than fifteen years ago. The former conversations are based on the memory of mutual friends who shared their recollections with me to provide the reader with a fuller understanding of Major Winters. In the latter conversations, the key phrases appear as I meticulously recorded them in my journal within days of my visits with the major. Additionally, the candid conversations outlined in the forthcoming pages follow a more thematic than chronological order; hence within each chapter the dialogue quoted often transpired over repeated sessions with Dick Winters and was not confined to a single visit. Consequently, I urge the reader to exercise some discretion in accepting with absolute certainty every word that is recorded and to take my recollections with the necessary grain of salt.

FOREWORD

Aside from an occasional short wrap-up on the national network news stations and an Associated Press release that appeared in the obituary section of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania's *Patriot-News* on January 10, 2011, I suspect few Americans noticed the passing of Major Dick Winters of Hershey, Pennsylvania. Winters was a most remarkable man whose story was chronicled by historian Stephen E. Ambrose in *Band of Brothers*. In the wake of the 2001 Emmy Award-winning HBO miniseries of the same title, Winters published his own memoirs in an effort to set the record straight and to record the accomplishments of an airborne company in combat during World War II. *Beyond Band of Brothers* rapidly climbed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nonfiction, peaking at number ten within two months of publication. As for Winters, one reviewer stated that he "was too humble for a genre that requires a little bit of conceit." The American public disagreed.

I suppose the obituary would have attracted greater attention had it read, "Died January 2, 2011, the commanding officer of the Band of Brothers," for it was by that title that Dick Winters was more widely known. I had every reason to know him, for not only had he asked me to coauthor his memoir in November 2003, but our personal and professional association also predated his death by well over a decade. In his declining years, when public access to this aging veteran was extremely limited, I was privileged to visit Winters on a monthly basis. At first, our discussions revolved around his role in the twentieth century's bloodiest conflict. Ironically, after I mailed the memoir manuscript to our publisher in April 2005, we never again addressed the war in detail. Winters had finally left it behind him. "It is finished," he stated emphatically when we submitted the manuscript. In his final years, we spoke only of more pleasant issues, nothing more than two old soldiers sharing memories of time long past. What struck me most was his undying loyalty to the soldiers whom he led in the most cataclysmic war in history. In the twilight of his own memory, his thoughts always returned to Easy Company, to happier times when a group of young men joined together to fight for freedom and to liberate a world from tyranny. Especially treasured were the memories of experiences he shared with family, friends, and the men of Easy Company. None was ever forgotten by the old soldier who resided in the white house along picturesque Elm Avenue in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

I first met Dick Winters on April 6, 1998, when he traveled to the U.S. Military Academy to address the Corps of Cadets on the topic of frontline leadership during World War II. As chief of military history in the Department of History at West Point, I routinely encouraged my officers to ask veterans to speak to their respective classes. Few members of the military faculty took me up on my suggestion, for no other reason than that ambitious young officers preferred to teach the cadets themselves and seemed reluctant to turn over control of their classes to outside teachers. On that particular afternoon, however, Major Matt Dawson entered my office to inform me that he had invited Major Dick Winters to address his class on the Battle of the Bulge.

"You know who Dick Winters is, don't you, sir?"

I had never heard of Winters, although I had read Ambrose's *Band of Brothers* six years earlier. His name simply did not register. Fortunately, I did not have to reveal my ignorance because Dawson added, "You know, the guy from *Band of Brothers*."

"Yes, Matt, Dick Winters from *Band of Brothers*."

"Would you like to join us for dinner tonight?"

Seldom did I "pull rank" on one of my subordinates, but on this occasion I made an exception to my long-standing policy. As with most of the leaders who spoke at West Point on the subject of leadership in combat, I wanted the opportunity to explore how leadership among the ground troops is essentially different from any other situation—even air forces and navies, where the violence is indirect and depersonalized. This reflects the fact that armies are *sui generis*: Their primary function involves the direct employment and the direct experience of human-generated violence. Consequently, I graciously thanked Major Dawson for the invitation, but added that I preferred to host Winters alone for a quiet dinner at the Hotel Thayer on the grounds of West Point. It was one of the best decisions that I ever made as an army officer. And so it began.

I remember him as if it were yesterday. The old soldier emerged from the elevator in the hotel lobby at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, dapperly attired in a dark blazer with the crest of the 101st Airborne Division on his pocket. His neatly cropped gray hair reflected a military man far younger than his current seventy-nine-plus years. I am not sure what I had expected to see. At the time of our initial encounter, most veterans of World War II were in their late seventies or early eighties. Most veterans who visited West Point to share their reminiscences with the cadets walked with the aid of canes or walkers. In Winters's case, there was a noticeable spring in his step that belied his age.

This shy, quiet gentleman who introduced himself simply as "Dick Winters" immediately made an indelible impression on me. From the beginning, I was "Cole," he was "Dick." Never once for the next thirteen years did we ever address each other by rank or surname. Over dinner Dick and I discussed a myriad of topics, all associated with his wartime experience and his thoughts on leadership in war. Why were some commanders more effective than others in inspiring their men? How did you identify the best soldiers in your company? Had he relieved any commander in combat? To what did he attribute his success in Easy Company? Were his leadership principles applicable to the civilian and the corporate worlds? Minutes evolved into hours as we discussed leadership under a number of circumstances. Before we finished dinner, I had already decided that I would include Dick Winters in the book I was writing about combat leadership during World War II. To my great satisfaction, he invited me to spend a few days on his farm outside Fredericksburg, Pennsylvania. By the time that the evening was over, I had received the best primer on leadership than I had obtained in twenty-five years of commissioned service.

No man, with the exception of my own father, exerted a greater influence on my life. For the next decade, Dick's and my lives were mutually intertwined. I am honored that he considered me his friend. For some inexplicable reason, he chose to share his memories with me. He seemed comfortable communicating with me in a way he never could or would with popular historian Ambrose. Little could I have realized that henceforth my professional life would revolve around the heart of the company town founded by Dick's boyhood hero, Milton S. Hershey. In the decade of our association, I remained a frequent guest, never missing an opportunity to visit the man who not only captured the imagination of veterans of the Greatest Generation, but had also bequeathed a legacy of selfless service to a younger generation in search of heroes and heroines. Now that he is gone, it seems appropriate to share the story of our friendship, how it began and how it matured over time. And if the readers will be patient, surely they will understand the manner by which this citizen-soldier touched

thousands of lives with his favorite aphorism, "Hang Tough!"

PART ONE

* * *

Spring

CHAPTER I

Incidents at War

We have shared the incommunicable experience of war. We have felt, we still feel, the passion of life to its top. . . .
In our youths, our hearts were touched by fire.

—OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

It was nearly two years from our initial meeting and less than six months from my visit to the farm outside Fredericksburg, Pennsylvania, before Dick extended an invitation to join him in Hershey to answer any “questions that you have.” We had corresponded regularly during that interval, but a number of things had precluded a visit. First, on Easter Sunday in 1998, Dick had experienced a bad fall that resulted in him landing on the back of his neck and suffering a mild concussion. “In the past he wrote, “following a fall or injury, all I needed was a good night’s sleep and I would wake up feeling good as new. Not this time. I am feeling much better, but progress is slow. It’s like taking two steps forward, then going back one step.” I later learned that the concussion was severe enough that Dick cancelled all his speaking engagements for the remainder of the summer.

Then in mid-September, I received another letter from Dick in which he begged off once again and asked my understanding of his position. What generated this second postponement was a letter from actor Tom Hanks. What Dick related in his missive was that Hanks had called to inform him that Steven Spielberg had purchased the rights of Stephen Ambrose’s *Band of Brothers* and he intended to produce a miniseries about combat in western Europe during World War II as a sequel to *Saving Private Ryan*. As Dick wrote, “You can, I am sure, read between the lines what they would like me to contribute. Let me get back to you after the dust settles on this latest development.” Dick signed his letter with his signature closing, “Hang Tough!”

Now, driving past the beautiful rolling hills where Dick Winters made his home near Hershey, I was struck by the fact that everyone remembers one’s own past in color, but all too often we make the mistake today of seeing the historical past in black-and-white. Just as anyone alive today remembers childhood, youth, events from when he or she was twenty-five years old, all in color and fresh, so too did those now long gone, those of the Greatest Generation who fought in World War II, or those who saw battle in the Civil War, the Revolution, any era—this is how they remembered their lives and experiences. Seeing the stunning green hills of Dick Winters’s life, it was hard to imagine them as he remembered them from years past, but the reality is that to him they were just as green and just as beautiful then as they were to me that day. This is the challenge of remembering the past—it is not black-and-white, dull and faded, but rather vibrant and rich, in vivid color regardless of the era.

An hour later, I pulled up to a white house on spacious Elm Avenue in Hershey. Dick greeted me

at the door and immediately escorted me to his upstairs office. “Cole, this is my den where I retreat to share my memories. Here, my maps, my decorations, and my memorabilia surround me. This is my personal refuge.” On the walls were maps, photographs, the Easy Company guidon or pennant, and the escape map that he carried when he jumped into Normandy on D-Day. Next to his chair were his spit-shined Corcoran jump boots that he wore on that historic day of days. Even in today’s U.S. Army, Corcoran jump boots and bloused trousers are the mark of distinction of the airborne soldiers and distinguish paratroopers from the “straight-legged” infantry. Dick called those boots his “good luck charm.” The bullet hole in one of the boots dated from Carentan in mid-June 1944. When he returned to England that July, he put new soles on the boots, and he kept them every step of the way through the remainder of the war.

Looking at all the memorabilia, I could not help but ask what he considered his most prized possession. I was surprised by his response. Every military officer who commands a company in combat treasures the company flag—we call it a guidon in the military—that bears the designation of the unit and crossed rifles if you are an infantry commander. Different branches of the service have various insignia, and their guidons bear different colors. Infantry guidons are always blue. As a fellow infantry officer, I naturally assumed Easy Company’s guidon would occupy the highest place in Dick’s affection. “I know you think it is the guidon,” he said, “but you’re wrong.” Pointing to a flower mounted under a glass frame, Dick replied, “As I look at these mementos from the war, what I treasure most is this edelweiss. After the loss of so many soldiers and after witnessing untold suffering during the war, the edelweiss symbolizes freedom to me. It represents renewed life and hope for a better world. Edelweiss is one of the few flowers that grow in the snow, above the tree line, in the Alps. I personally climbed a mountain in the Austrian Alps to pick this edelweiss, and I have cherished it ever since.”

We spoke for the better part of an hour, and then Dick suggested we get down to business. “I know you have lots of questions. Last year when I spoke to the cadets at West Point, I noticed you took pages of notes. That impressed me. As I recall, we were discussing D-Day and the fighting outside Brecourt Manor. Why don’t we start there?”

A word of explanation—Brecourt is a small farm outside of Ste. Marie-du-Mont, just two miles inland from Utah Beach. On June 6, 1944, the mission of the 101st Airborne Division, to which then Lieutenant Dick Winters was assigned as a member of Easy Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, was to secure four causeways behind the beach to facilitate movement of the amphibious forces into the interior of the countryside. The causeways were actually elevated roadways over which wheeled traffic could pass since Field Marshal Erwin Rommel had flooded the surrounding countryside to preclude amphibious and airborne forces from landing behind the beaches of Normandy. Easy Company operated as part of 2nd Battalion whose specific mission was to seize causeway number two, leading directly from Utah Beach to Ste. Marie-du-Mont.

And perhaps here is the place to remind readers that an infantry squad in World War II consisted of twelve soldiers armed with rifles and led by a sergeant. Three squads formed a platoon led by a lieutenant, and a company consisted of four platoons, one of which was a heavy weapons platoon with machine guns and mortars for indirect fire. A captain usually commanded a company, although the British units were commanded by the next higher grade of major. When Ambrose wrote *Band of Brothers*, he was describing one such company, Easy Company, an airborne company that jumped into Normandy on D-Day and fought throughout the campaign to liberate Europe. Three companies then formed a numbered battalion and three such battalions formed a regiment, such as the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. In today’s U.S. Army, most infantry battalions are affiliated with a numbered

brigade, but air or ground cavalry units still maintain their regimental designation.

Going back to D-Day, senior Allied planners had decided that the paratroop drop would be conducted at night in order to achieve an element of surprise preceding the amphibious landings scheduled shortly after dawn. A night drop is the most dangerous of all airborne operations, and as a result, the paratroopers were scattered across the Norman countryside. Unbeknownst to Lieutenant Winters at the time, Easy Company's commanding officer, First Lieutenant Thomas Meehan, had perished when his plane was struck by anti-aircraft fire.

"Tell me about D-Day, Dick."

"It was a special day for every soldier who participated in what General Eisenhower called 'the great crusade.' In one of his first books on D-Day, Stephen Ambrose said, 'Sometimes a single day's combat reveals more about the character of a nation than a generation of peace.' That's how I feel about June 6, 1944."

"What was it like that night as you prepared for your first combat jump? I know that you lost your weapon and most of the gear when you jumped into Normandy shortly after midnight."

"Our division was experimenting with what we called leg-bags, cloth bags strapped to your leg. The bags contained our weapons, extra ammunition, and other equipment. Why we decided to use these bags when we had never used them before was beyond me. When you jump from an airplane that is traveling at excessive speed, the propeller blast literally tears away everything not securely tied down. So I jumped around one o'clock in the morning and landed in a field outside Ste. Mère-Eglise, the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. When I landed, the only weapon I had in my possession was a trench knife that I had placed in my boot. I stuck the knife in the ground before I went to work cutting the risers from my chute. Here I was in the middle of enemy country, alone, no weapon, and not exactly aware of where I was. This was a hell of a way to begin a war."

"What happened next?"

"Fortunately, I encountered a few men from Easy Company and we were able to identify our exact location. As the ranking officer, I took charge and began the slow trek toward our battalion objective that I reasoned was approximately seven kilometers away. We later ran into more paratroopers, and around dawn we reached our battalion command post outside a small village named Le Grand Chemin. When I say village, I am being generous. Le Grand Chemin was a collection of houses and that was about all. By this time the amphibious forces were already landing at Utah Beach. H-Hour at Utah Beach was 0630 hours."

As dawn broke on D-Day, only ten soldiers from Easy Company were in the vicinity when Winters received orders to destroy four German 105mm guns firing on Utah Beach. The Germans had placed a battery of self-propelled guns in the area in February 1944. Around April, they had taken the motorized battery and moved it toward Cherbourg at the tip of the Cotentin Peninsula. They then replaced the self-propelled guns with a battery of horse-drawn artillery guns, but Allied aerial photography failed to detect the concealed gun position. The artillery pieces were located along a shallow ditch in a pasture outside a fourteenth-century manor house called Brecourt. A former French colonel named Michel de Vallavieille, who lived in the manor house with his wife and two children, owned the farm. Colonel de Vallavieille was a decorated veteran who had served his country gallantly during the Great War of 1914–1918. During the subsequent battle, Lieutenant Winters inflicted fifty casualties and destroyed three of the enemy cannons. Lieutenant Ronald Speirs from Dog Company destroyed the final gun. Regrettably, Winters lost two soldiers killed in action and several wounded. Considering that the Americans were heavily outnumbered and outgunned, Easy Company's battle serves as a classic case of fire and maneuver.

“Brecourt holds a special place in your heart, doesn’t it, Dick?”

“It does indeed. I have returned many times to pay my respects to the family who still farms the land. D-Day was my first time in combat. I was mentally prepared and felt that I had done everything necessary to prepare myself for this precise moment. And yet you never know if you will measure up as a leader until the minute arrives when you face the enemy for the first time. Baptism by fire is a soldier’s sacrament. There is always doubt. Hopefully, in combat, you perform as you train.” Having taken out a piece of loose-leaf paper, Dick then sketched the position of the four artillery guns that had been firing on Utah Beach that morning. “My mission was to silence the guns. I only had two officers, including myself, and eleven men for the job. I viewed it as a ‘high-risk opportunity.’ When confronted with unexpected and ambiguous circumstances, you can either see opportunity or obstacles. I believe that opportunity is present even in chaotic situations. Brecourt was such an opportunity. In retrospect, D-Day served as one of the defining moments in my life as well as one of the defining moments in my development as a leader.”

Such moments often occur but once in a leader’s life. History is replete with such examples: Washington risking the fate of the Continental Army by crossing the Delaware to attack the Hessians at Trenton, Colonel William Barrett Travis accepting only “Victory or Death” for the besieged defenders of the Alamo, General Dwight D. Eisenhower selecting June 6, 1944, as D-Day. In describing Robert E. Lee’s decision to resign his commission as an officer in the U.S. Army at the outset of the Civil War, historian Douglas S. Freeman entitles the chapter “The Answer He Was Born to Make.” I place Dick’s decision in how to employ his force at Brecourt in the same category.

I continued, “Last year, you mentioned how you divided your soldiers in two teams and how you laid a base of fire to cover your team as you made the assault on the first gun. Tell me again how you selected which men for each team.”

“If you recall at West Point, I mentioned my ‘killers.’ On D-Day I had to work with the team that had since most of the company was so widely dispersed after the night jump. Fortunately, several of my noncommissioned officers and key leaders were present. All I had to do was put them into a position where I could use them most effectively. I hate to use the term ‘killers’ because I don’t want to give the wrong impression. Soldiers are trained to fight. As a leader, you obtain a sense of the best soldiers during training. They have a quiet confidence about them and a swagger that sets them apart. They are people who want to win in combat, just as those who desire to win in sports competition. With soldiers, a leader develops a sense about which soldiers you can trust. You look for the soldiers who perform consistently. That is generally no more than fifteen percent of an organization. Solid leadership and association with your top performers can influence another seventy percent of your unit. The final fifteen percent will never perform up to standard. Concentrate on the seventy percent and you can’t help but be successful. That’s what I did on D-Day. One of war’s tragedies is that the best men are lost early. You can replace the men easier than you can replace their spiritual worth. The problem is that your killers sustain the highest rate of casualties since they are always in the action. By the time we reached Bastogne, most of the ‘killers’ were gone.”

“As I remember, in addition to destroying the artillery battery, you also discovered a critical map that saved countless American lives.”

Dick responded, “At the third gun, I found several maps, very important. I’m looking at these maps and realize that they contain the entire defense of Utah Beach, machine guns, minefields, and concertina wire. Only later did I come to understand what I had done, but at the time, it was another job. It was just another job that had to be done.”

Because I was familiar with Dick’s fight on D-Day, I saw little need to get into the details of how

he destroyed each gun in rapid succession. I was far more interested in the leadership that he had exhibited. So I asked, “This was also the first time you fired your weapon in combat. How did that affect you?”

“Last year a young cadet asked if killing made me happy. No, it did not. It was not so much a feeling of happiness as it was satisfaction, satisfaction that I got the job done and that I had proved myself to my men. Satisfaction led to self-confidence that I hoped would be felt by others. Once you perform once, twice, or even three times, soldiers develop confidence in your leadership. You can only hope that this confidence will be passed to other leaders within the company. Brecourt gave me confidence in my ability to lead. That’s why it remains so special to me.”

“I remember that Eisenhower’s historian S. L. A. Marshall once claimed that to destroy the enemy battery, you hiked to Utah Beach, borrowed four Sherman tanks from the 4th Infantry Division, and sicced them on the enemy guns.”

“I don’t know what war Marshall was describing. If I had that many men, I could have taken Berlin,” Dick replied.

Of the battles in which Dick fought in World War II, Brecourt remained preeminent in his mind. Perhaps because it was his initial combat, but I suspect more because the fighting there reinforced his conviction that he had “measured up” to his own standard of what was expected of an officer. Dick returned to Europe only once more after our initial meeting at West Point in 1998. The occasion was the world premiere of *Band of Brothers*. Before consenting to participate in the festivities, Dick informed executive producers Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks that he would forgo the activities scheduled for Paris. In lieu of those events, Dick preferred to visit friends in Normandy, but he promised to be present for the actual premiere ceremonies at Utah Beach. While other veterans wine and dined in the City of Light, Dick and his wife Ethel returned to Brecourt Manor outside Ste. Marie-du-Mont. Charles de Vallavieille, the grandson of the farmer who owned Brecourt on D-Day, hosted Mr. and Mrs. Winters. Charles’s father, Michel de Vallavieille, had been a twenty-three-year-old man in 1944 when Dick destroyed the German battery. Michel had been seriously wounded on D-Day and was evacuated to England. After convalescence there, Michel returned to his home, and he was elected mayor of Ste. Marie-du-Mont in 1949. He served honorably as mayor until 1991. During his tenure and against tremendous opposition from the local citizens who preferred to put memories of the war aside, Michel established the Utah Beach Museum as “a living expression of the town’s appreciation and gratitude toward the Allies and their sacrifices.” Michel’s son Charles currently serves as city councilman and deputy mayor of the village and has carried on the work that his father had so nobly initiated. Having received Dick on a number of his visits to Normandy, Charles was delighted to once again host him and Ethel on what he assumed would be their final visit to Brecourt.

While Ethel stayed in the manor house, Dick walked alone across the pasture where he had led a small band of intrepid warriors on “the Day of Days.” “I spent hours along that hedgerow where the cannons were placed, just thinking of Carwood Lipton, Bill Guarnere, Joe Toye, and the others,” he confided to me. “I couldn’t put them out of my mind. I knew I would never again walk this field.”

Charles, too, became emotional when I asked him about Dick’s last visit. Touching his heart with his fingertips, he said, “I consider Dick Winters a close member of my family. He has been an absolute gentleman. I have always admired and respected the manner in which Dick conducted himself.”

Charles spoke not of Dick Winters, the soldier, but rather of Dick Winters, the man. Said Charles “Dick’s remarkable attributes were his calmness, serenity, integrity, and his courage. I miss him greatly, but I will always remember the remarkable man he was. I have four children of my own: a

daughter who is a doctor, a son who is a teacher in an agricultural college, and two sons who work with me on the farm. I sincerely hope that the bonds that bound me to Dick Winters will not be broken and our children will continue the friendship that has transcended two continents.”

Today a monument commemorating Easy Company stands at the corner of the main road east of Le Grand Chemin and the dirt road that leads directly to Brecourt Manor. The monument lists the names of Easy Company’s fatalities on D-Day, including Lieutenant Meehan and his plane of paratroopers, who perished in one of the invasion’s first actions. There were no survivors. As the next ranking officer, Winters assumed temporary command of Easy Company on D-Day and was promoted shortly thereafter to acting command.

Not far from Brecourt Manor also stands a new statue symbolizing the fighting spirit of the junior leaders who spearheaded the invasion on D-Day. The placement of the statue attracted worldwide attention when it was announced in 2011 that a memorial was being placed near Utah Beach and would be dedicated the following year on the anniversary of D-Day. An eleven-year-old South Lebanon Elementary School student named Jordan Brown raised much of the money for the statue. When Brown first read a newspaper story about the effort to establish a monument near where Lieutenant Dick Winters parachuted into France, he decided that he would help raise money by selling olive-green bracelets embossed with the words “Hang Tough.” Documentary filmmaker Tim Gray oversaw the fund-raising effort to raise \$400,000 for the project and was present for the dedication on June 6, 2012. At his side was Jordan Brown. The monument stands on the three-mile-long thoroughfare—old causeway number two—between Ste. Marie-du-Mont and Utah Beach. Sculptor Stephen Spears selected Dick Winters as the epitome of the airborne leader and used Dick’s likeness to represent the American fighting man. Inscribed on the side of the statue is Dick’s personal message to future generations, “Wars do not make men great, but wars sometimes bring out the greatness in good men.” I wish my friend had been alive long enough to view the unveiling of the statue. I know he would have been very humbled, but also extremely proud.

As Dick and I continued our conversation, I asked how combat changed him and what differences he noticed in his men following D-Day.

Dick responded, “Now that they had experienced combat firsthand, I could sense a new jubilation that came over the troops. They exhibited a confidence that I had not witnessed before. We felt we were now combat veterans, although we realized the war would go on and on and that greater adversity lay ahead. Brecourt was merely the initial step in what proved a long road to victory.”

Before leaving Normandy, on June 12 Dick led Easy Company in the attack on Carentan, a town of four thousand inhabitants located at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. He later recalled that the German counterattack on Carentan the following day was the toughest fight of the war for the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR). That day the German attackers pushed back the 506th and nearly overran the American paratroopers. Describing the action in a letter written in June 1945, Dick wrote “So what happened in the biggest and toughest fight I was ever in? I am so pooped I can hardly walk after three nights and four days of no rest, and I am running through an actual hail of bullets, two or three times an hour, and I am not kidding, it was a hail. This one time I am halfway through and a machine gun opens up on me, down I go, and the enemy thinks he has me. I am playing dead, and what do I do? I get up and lead Easy Company to capture the intersection. Here I am today—a lucky fellow. For that day’s work and several others, they recommended me for the Medal of Honor. I received the Distinguished Service Cross [DSC] instead.” Pointing to his jump boots next to his desk, Dick added, “I received my Purple Heart at Carentan.”

Winters ignored his wound, writing weeks later to a friend in the States, “Is being wounded

supposed to be something interesting? Now, if I'd been killed or something, that would be something to write home about. But being 'pinked' in the leg is about as interesting as cutting yourself while shaving. The only difference is that you get a little purple heart."

Yet Lieutenant Winters had demonstrated unusual composure under fire during the enemy counterattack, and his men recognized that he was an exceptional officer. Years later one of his officers informed Dick, "God, I was glad to see you." Sergeant Floyd Talbert wrote years later as well saying, "I'll never forget seeing you in the middle of the road. You were my total inspiration. All my boys felt the same way." Dick, too, considered the fight around Carentan as critical in his evolution as a leader and was extremely pleased by Easy Company's performance. As to the adulation that he received from his men, Dick said, "I'm proud that my men feel that way."

No sooner had E Company returned to England than the Army Signal Corps took a "head and shoulders shot" of the recent recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross. "I was told not to smile," Dick recalled, "in order to project the proper warrior image." Reflecting on the photograph, he wrote a platonic friend, "Honestly I didn't know I looked that mean and tough. I am actually afraid to send the photo to my mother for I know she'll worry and wonder what this army's doing to her son. Her son, the boy who could never even get mad enough to raise his voice. However, I don't feel quite so hard inside as I did in Normandy, but I guess I still look the part."

Dick Winters commanded Easy Company for only three months following his promotion to the grade of captain in early July. The company remained in Normandy until mid-summer when they redeployed to England to prepare for the next airborne operation. Higher headquarters scrubbed several subsequent drops, but on September 17, 1944, Dick commanded the company in Operation Market Garden, the aerial invasion of Holland. At the time, Holland had been under Nazi occupation since May 1940. Easy Company's mission was to seize a bridge outside Zon, Holland, and to conduct additional operations as directed. Market Garden proved a colossal failure, but the 101st Airborne Division remained in the country until early November.

If Brecourt Manor marked Dick's baptism by fire as a company commander, Holland proved an even more severe challenge of his leadership abilities. In continuous combat for six weeks, Easy Company found itself on "the Island," a long, narrow corridor north of Nijmegen between the Lower Rhine and the Waal Rivers, on October 2, 1944. The ground between the dikes of the two rivers was flat farmland, dotted with small villages and towns. The dikes along the waterways were twenty feet high, and the fields were crisscrossed with drainage ditches that were covered with heavy vegetation. On top of the dikes were narrow roadways that ran through the adjoining fields. It was along one of these dikes that newly promoted Captain Winters faced his toughest challenge as a company commander.

Easy Company had been in position for only two days when one of its patrols encountered a small body of German soldiers occupying a listening post at a crossroads a mile and a half east of Winters' command post. Due to the gravity of the situation, Dick personally assembled a squad of soldiers and quickly eliminated the enemy threat by employing all the weapons at his disposal. By dawn of the following morning, October 5, he remained concerned that the enemy might conduct another attack and replace the observation post that he had destroyed the previous evening. Consequently, he ordered the remainder of his reserve platoon forward. His options were limited. He could stay where he was and attempt to withdraw under fire. Or he could attack. To surrender the initiative was indefensible, so Dick ordered his men to fix bayonets and charge the enemy.

Bayonet attacks against a numerically superior force bordered the fine line between sheer audacity and complete lunacy. Fortunately for Easy Company, Dick's unorthodox assault caught the enemy by

complete surprise. His attack carried him to the top of the dike, where he unexpectedly encountered an entire Waffen SS company, in excess of one hundred soldiers. As he and his men took the first company under fire, a second SS company appeared on the horizon. Without missing a beat, Dick called for reinforcements and peppered the enemy with artillery fire. By late morning October 5, Easy Company had inflicted well over one hundred casualties, before Dick was compelled to retreat under intense artillery fire from the far bank.

In an uncensored letter at the end of the war, Dick summarized this action as his greatest thrill of the entire war because he “had taken a squad [12 men] and beat the devil out of a machine-gun crew, then brought up two more squads [40 men in all], and attacked two companies of SS troops across 170 yards of open field and cut them all to pieces. During our assault, I was running faster than I had ever run in my life. Nor have I ever run that fast again. Everyone else was moving so slowly—my men, as well as the Germans. And I couldn’t understand it. I’m normal, but they aren’t.”

I asked him why that day was so significant.

“At the time our strength was low and our front wide. In my estimation, the actions by Easy Company on that memorable day constituted Easy Company’s crowning achievement of the war and my apogee as a company commander. The destruction of the German artillery battery at Brecourt Manor on D-Day was extremely important to the successful landing at Utah Beach, but this action demonstrated Easy Company’s overall superiority, of every soldier, of every phase of infantry tactics—patrol, defense, attack using a base of fire, withdrawal, and, above all, superior marksmanship with rifles, machine guns, and mortar fire. All this was accomplished against numerically superior forces that had an advantage of ten to one in manpower and excellent observation for artillery and mortar support. By late October 5, we had sustained twenty-two casualties of the forty or so soldiers engaged under my personal command. All but a few casualties resulted from artillery fire after we had destroyed the two SS companies. My friend Lieutenant Lewis Nixon and I estimated the enemy casualties as fifty killed, eleven captured, and countless wounded. Colonel Robert Sink, commanding officer of the 506th PIR, ordered me to prepare a written summary of the battle since no senior officer witnessed the engagement. I purposely avoided the use of the first personal pronoun ‘I’ because I wanted each soldier to receive credit for what he had done. Later Sink issued a citation to the 1st Platoon that shouldered the principal burden of the fight.”

“To what do you attribute your success?” I inquired.

“Not my success, Easy Company’s success. As a company, we had suffered multiple casualties in Normandy and during the fighting around Eindhoven a few weeks earlier, but the core of Easy Company remained intact throughout Holland. The paratroopers who had trained together at Camp Toombs outside Toccoa, Georgia, in 1942 constituted the heart and soul of E Company. They formed the company’s core. The loss of a single core soldier, however, dealt a crippling blow to the paratroopers who had worked together for two years. At the crossroads fight, Corporal William Dukeman was killed. ‘Duke’ was a Toccoa man who was beloved by everyone in the company. All of us deeply felt his loss.”

“I completely understand, but do you agree that the action on October 5 constituted your moment of truth as a battlefield commander?”

“I guess so, but I really don’t think of it that way. I had commanded E Company for only four months. During that time, we had fought outside Brecourt Manor, Carentan, Eindhoven, and on the Island. I felt extraordinarily confident in my ability to manage a battlefield and to lead paratroopers. Call it a sixth sense if you will. On the dike, I was faced with a couple situations that required my immediate attention. I knew I was backed by a truly first-rate team of solid noncommissioned officers

and great paratroopers. I made my decisions on what I knew was best for Easy Company. Fortunately these decisions proved to be right.”

As I listened to Dick relate this story, I could picture Captain Winters, having made the decision to attack, leading the assault across that open field on October 5, 1944. Totally oblivious as to if his men were matching him stride for stride, his combat instincts kicking in, and his adrenaline pumping to a feverish pitch, he crosses the dike and before him stand a company of Waffen SS soldiers as surprised to see him as he is to encounter them. Winters is no longer a leader; for a second, he surveys the field and regresses to being a pure warrior, a modern Achilles who as in Homeric legend stands high over the battlefield, all grim with dust, all horrible in blood. An instant frozen in time. As Easy Company's paratroopers join their captain, the enemy puts up stubborn resistance before attempting to flee to the safety of the Lower Rhine, only to be pelted by murderous artillery fire. For the SS, there is no refuge within the walls of Ilium. They resign themselves to their fate, leaving scores of dead and wounded on that ghastly field.

Dick then added a footnote. “Interestingly, Cole, that was the last time I fired my weapon in combat.”

“You fought the rest of the war and you never fired your rifle again?”

“Never did. I saw no reason why I should. At battalion, I was no longer a troop commander and I couldn't afford to act like one. I had other responsibilities, not the least of which was providing support for the three rifle companies in the battalion.”

“You fought the Battle of the Bulge, the largest battle in the history of the U.S. Army, and you didn't fire a shot? I find that hard to believe.”

“You have to remember that at Bastogne, I served as acting battalion commander because Lieutenant Colonel Robert Strayer spent most of his time at regimental headquarters. At that level of command, my job was no longer to fight, but to direct others to fight. I almost crossed the line when my 2nd Battalion's attack on the village of Foy stalled because Easy Company's commander froze. Before I could act, Colonel Sink intervened and reminded me that I needed to command the battalion and not get bogged down in the weeds with Easy Company. He was correct of course, so I relieved the company commander and ordered Lieutenant Ronald Speirs to assume command of Easy.”

Following the session in which he reminisced about the fighting in Holland, I sensed that Dick needed a breather. He agreed. “Let's take a break,” he said. “We can talk about Bastogne later this afternoon.”

When we resumed our discussions, I could see that some memories still troubled Dick, so I turned my focus from battlefields and inquired about his relationship with Captain Lewis Nixon. “You seem to have been polar opposites. You didn't drink, nor did you swear. Nixon did both and in huge quantities. He would have been the last man whom I think you would have befriended. What was the foundation of your friendship with Nixon?”

Dick's eyes shone as he recalled his old friend. “It is hard to explain. I had first met Nix when we were at Fort Benning, Georgia, in officer candidate school. Later we served as platoon leaders under Sobel's command. A special bond always exists among the platoon commanders in any military company, particularly when they perceive their own commander as ‘the enemy.’ I stayed in Easy Company, but Nix was transferred to higher headquarters. He drank too much, but he was also very conscientious. He was conscientious in his own way, on a man-to-man basis, and he always looked at what would best benefit the battalion. His contribution cannot truly be measured. There is no question in my mind that Nixon was the best combat soldier in 2nd Battalion. By the time we jumped into Holland, I was so lonely that I needed someone in whom I could confide my inner thoughts. That

someone was Nix. Whenever the bullets began to fly, I could turn and there stood Nix. He always walked on my left side, one or two steps behind me. This was his token of respect for me as a commander.”

Dick continued, “I also had the opportunity to observe how he handled himself under fire. The best way to illustrate this was in Holland when we encountered a German roadblock. As the 2nd Battalion peeled off to the left, Easy Company was placed on the extreme left flank, crossing a flat field in broad daylight. About two hundred yards before we encountered the roadblock, we came under intense machine gun fire. The Germans stopped us dead in our tracks. Nixon and I hit the ground simultaneously. When he did, he took off his helmet and saw that a bullet had pierced it. Nixon had a smile on his face. Here’s a guy who came under enemy fire and laughed about it. Of course that night Nix got roaring drunk. In hindsight, Nix probably needed me as much as I needed him. He was undoubtedly the coolest man under fire whom I ever encountered in combat.”

“Any other leaders who struck you as unusually capable?”

“Ron Speirs, who took command of Easy Company during the Battle of the Bulge, was an incredibly capable commander. I respected him as a commander, but not as a man. He killed for the effect of killing. You probably know the stories about him in Normandy and what he did with some German prisoners. There was another whose company I enjoyed. I guess aside from Nixon, Harry Welsh was as close of a friend that I had during the war. He joined us shortly after Easy Company left Toccoa, but before we deployed overseas. Like Nixon, he was present on V-E Day. Easy Company also had very capable noncommissioned officers.”

Though it was late in the afternoon, I wanted to address Bastogne, but Dick suggested that we go to dinner. “Enough talk of war. We’ll reconvene tomorrow morning. Bastogne is a story in itself.”

CHAPTER II

More War Stories

The pageant has passed. The day is over. But we linger, loath to think we shall see them no more together—these men, these horses, these colors afield.

—JOSHUA LAWRENCE CHAMBERLAIN

The following day we began our discussion of Bastogne. The scope of what became known as the Battle of the Bulge was incomprehensible, even by the scale of most battles that the Western Allies fought in World War II. In January 1945, the U.S. Army suffered more battle casualties—more than thirty-nine thousand—than in any other month of the campaign in northwest Europe. The final reckoning of casualties totaled more than eighty thousand American soldiers killed, wounded, or missing. One-third of the American casualties resulted from trench foot and frostbite. Winters's 2nd Battalion was in the thick of the action. The battle began in the foggy early morning of December 16, 1944, when two massive German armies struck a thinly held portion of the American line in the Ardennes. It was Hitler's last desperate gamble to reverse the tide of the war in western Europe. Operating in radio silence and inclement weather that denied the Allies aerial observation, the Germans achieved total surprise. By the end of the first day, German forces had quickly penetrated the American defenses. After the initial shock that the enemy was still capable of assembling such a powerful force, General Dwight D. Eisenhower moved to contain the "bulge" that now existed in the Allied line. He directed General George S. Patton with his Third U.S. Army to strike the southern shoulder of the bulge as soon as possible. In the interim, Ike committed the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force's strategic reserve, consisting of the 82nd Airborne and the 101st Airborne Divisions, to the vicinity of Bastogne to hold the line. Bastogne was a crossroads town in Belgium where a series of transportation networks came together. If the Germans captured Bastogne, they would be able to cross the Meuse River and perhaps reach the Belgium port of Antwerp. As the American reinforcements boarded hundreds of trucks, headquarters directed the 82nd Airborne to St. Vith on the northern shoulder of the bulge. The 101st trucked to Bastogne, right in the center of the German penetration.

Easy Company and 2nd Battalion marched through Bastogne the evening of December 19 and established positions along the Bastogne-Foy-Noville Road that ran northeast from Bastogne's city center. There they remained for the next thirty days, attacking, defending, and then attacking again. By the time that 2nd Battalion was pulled from the line on January 17, Easy Company was virtually unrecognizable. Most of the Toccoa corps had become casualties, and Winters had relieved Easy Company's commander. Even more so than D-Day, Bastogne formed the crucible that transformed

Easy Company into a “band of brothers.” As war correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote, “The common bond of death draws soldiers together over the artificial vestiges of rank.” I could not imagine a more difficult leadership challenge, and I was anxious to ask Dick about it.

“Okay, let’s talk about Bastogne. You were now serving as acting battalion commander, and Easy Company and its sister companies endured a month of excruciating combat in one of the most frigid winters in recent history.”

Dick paused before responding, “Bastogne was the toughest campaign in which I ever participated. At night I still think about Bastogne. I’ve seen death. I’ve seen my friends, my men, getting killed. It doesn’t take many days like this and you change dramatically. Some died and others lived and nobody knows why it is so. As casualties mounted in both Easy Company and the battalion, the rest of us had to go on. At the same time, I was supremely confident that we could endure against anything the Germans threw at us.”

Brigadier General Jim Gavin, commander of Dick’s sister airborne division, the 82nd, noted his own confidence following his initial combat in Sicily: “I want to come back from this one, much more than I have ever wanted to come back before. I am not as uneasy about going in as I have been before. Although it is certain to be a hell of a fight, those of us who have been there before are all a bit more certain of ourselves, and our ability to handle anything that develops. There are not as many unknowns this time. It is the unknowns that bother the new soldier.” Gavin’s assessment on the eve of D-Day matched Dick’s own confidence in his ability to orchestrate the upcoming battles.

I asked Dick’s reaction when his battalion reached Bastogne and witnessed American soldiers in full retreat.

“We had never seen this before, and would never see it again for the remainder of the war. Their faces told us this was ‘panic,’ pure and simple. We moved directly to the front lines. The first night was very confused as to just exactly what was our sector, what was going on in general, what was our responsibility. Fortunately, Captain Nixon made a special trip back to find regimental headquarters to ensure we had our orders correct. Nix made many of those trips back to regimental headquarters over the next few weeks to keep us informed and to make sure we had the exact and correct orders. That system worked. He kept the 2nd Battalion out of trouble. Nixon did a great job keeping me informed.

I interrupted Dick and asked him to comment more on that first evening in Bastogne. “Moving into a position at night, under fire, must have been confusing.”

“You bet it was. Let me relate an incident that occurred during one of those first days that demonstrates the amount of confusion that existed. A heavy fog from the preceding night hung over the woods and fields at dawn on the second day that we were at Bastogne. I was standing in the edge of the woods, next to a field to the rear of our battalion command post. All was quiet and peaceful. Suddenly, to my left, out of the woods walked a German soldier in his long winter overcoat. He had no rifle, no pack, and he continued to walk slowly towards the middle of the field. A couple of men instinctively brought their rifles to their shoulders, but by a hand signal, I told them to hold their fire. We watched as the German soldier stopped, took off his overcoat, pulled down his pants, and relieved himself. After he was finished, I hollered to him in my best German, ‘*Kommen sie hier!*’ He then looked up, came towards me, and surrendered. All the poor fellow had in his pockets were a few pictures, trinkets, and the butt end of a loaf of black bread, which was very hard. Think of this. Here is a German soldier, in the light of early dawn, who went to take a crap, got turned around in the woods, walked through our front lines, past the company command post, and ended up behind my battalion command post. That sure was some line of defense we had that first night!”

“I can’t imagine what those first few days must have been like,” I added.

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