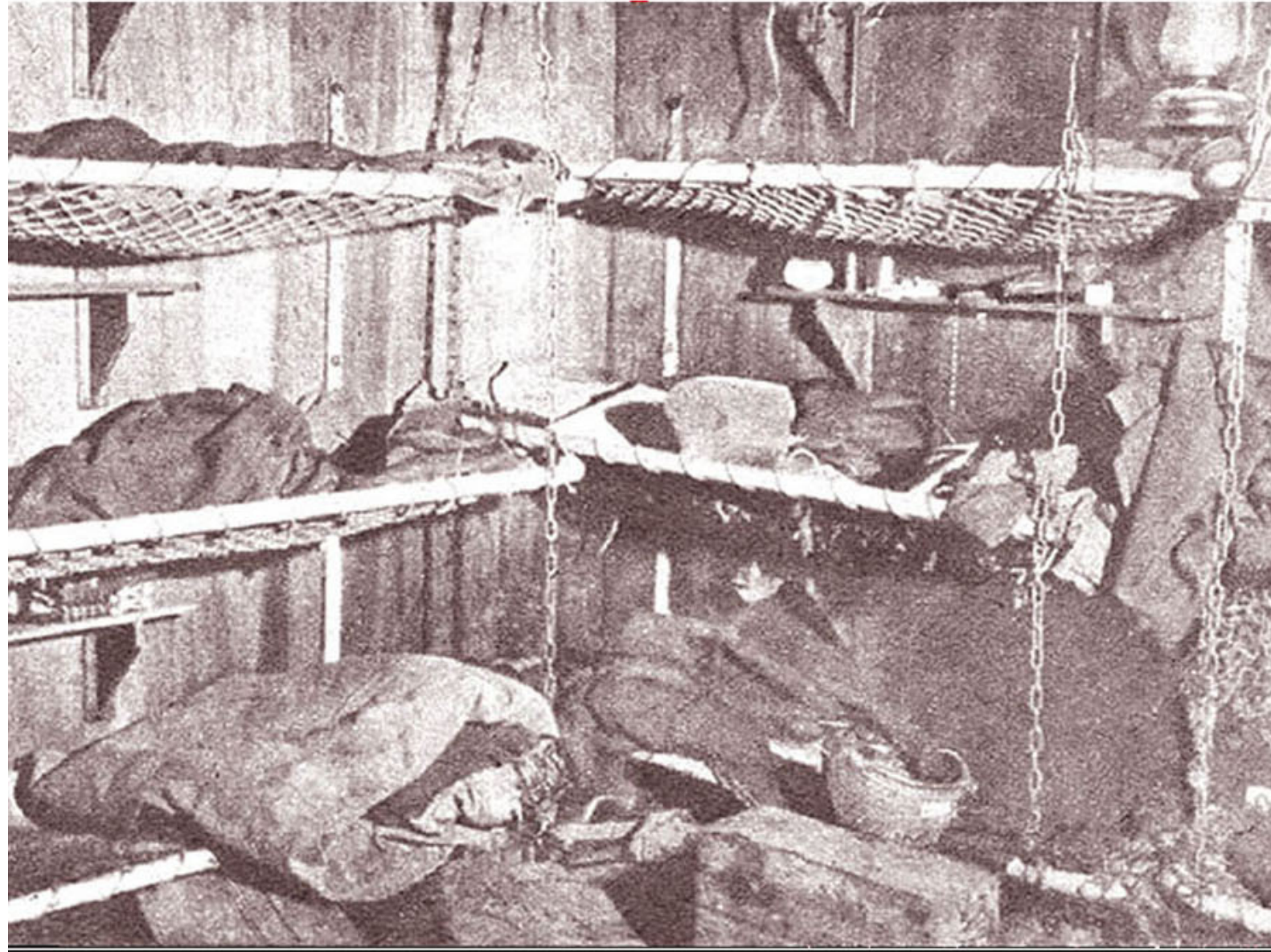


THE PILLBOX

It became the symbol of a peaceful world...



GI'S SLEEP FOR AWHILE, SAFE FROM MUD AND RAIN AND FIRE, IN THIS PILLBOX SHELTER.

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SOMEWHERE IN GERMANY—You can sense it, almost reach out and touch it, for it is like a heavy, suffocating, opaque cloak, pressing down around you—this ominous, foreboding atmosphere of immobility and inactivity which makes its mystic appearance whenever the frenzy of battle gives way to a static condition, when the dynamic world of men and machines, guns and supplies bog down in the sucking mud, and the mysterious things of battle seem to confine themselves to your slit trench.

It is another one of those cold, rainy days with the dark, shifting clouds, seemingly burdened with their own weight, hanging low over the rain-drenched shell-pocked landscape. A raw, biting wind moves noisily through the drooping pines and races up the low valley, driving the rain and mist before it.

You're lying in your slit trench—wet, muddy, damp—your mind working, laboring, struggling like a truck stuck axle-deep in the mire, motor racing, wheels spinning, but unable to move forward. Your buddy shudders violently from the dampness and mutters bitterly through chattering teeth: "Doesn't it do anything in this damn country but rain?" You're too cramped, too cold to answer; instead, you draw the wet, mud-stained blankets tighter around you and move closer to your partner in a vain attempt to absorb a little heat from his body.

Your hole's a mess, a sticky, gooey mess of mud and water. A puddle has collected at the foot of the trench. A feeling of discouragement seizes you as you think back how your buddy and you painfully dug a trench out of rock and hard soil, how you stole silently into the neighboring field at night and came back with wheat shocks, how you filled the bottom of the trench with straw, how you constructed a roof from broken branches, wheat shocks, and shelter half, and how the trench was very cosy until the rains came.

Rain and mud! Mud—it's everywhere; it clings to your pants and your jacket in wet masses; it sucks noisily at your shoes when you walk, gets in your hair, in your ears, in your teeth, covers your face and your hands, your rifle and pack. Mud! It's like a spreading disease.

Someone throws back the flap, and sticks in his head. "OK, which one of you fellows is going into the pillbox?" It's your turn, so you grunt a reply and struggle to get out of the blankets, gouging and elbowing your partner. Just as you're about to climb out of the hole a Jerry cuts loose over the next hill with a 20mm. machinegun. Instinctively you duck and drop although you know damn well Jerry isn't even shooting in your direction. You curse your jumpiness; you move out of your hole and, crouching low, run the short distance to the pillbox, slip around the corner, and skid down into the depression. You straighten up and head for the entrance, passing a group of dogfaces in muddy raincoats huddled around a small GI gas stove heating coffee. They look anything but what you see in photographs or on posters. These men were bedecked with a week's beard, they're mud-caked, wet and tired.

You open the heavy steel door, step into an L-shaped corridor and open another steel door. A gust of warm air smelling of leather and webbed equipment strikes your face and you pause a moment on the threshold.

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This dimly-lit, cluttered, crammed concrete chamber has become the nerve center of all activity, the source of news both official and unofficial, the sole link with the outside world. The Germans apparently designed these fortifications with some degree of comfort for their occupants, for one side of the wall is lined with bunks, similar to those found on troop-ships, one on top of the other—enough bunks to house sixteen men. The remaining space is taken up by a small table cluttered with everything imaginable, including a kerosene lamp which throws its feeble rays but a few feet. Hanging from ceiling and wall fixtures, scattered on the floor and in corners are all kinds of gear, equipment, and nondescript articles ranging from helmets, packs, rifles, ration boxes, water cans, and radio sets.

But amid all this haphazardly arranged paraphernalia there is an overwhelming sense of motion, a din of overlapping, interlacing voices. Behind the desk, is the company commander bent over a sheaf of papers, busily making notations; one of the communications men is talking loudly over the phone, while the radio operator is calling battalion CP in a persistent, repetitious monotone.

You stand there a moment accustoming your eyes to the dimness. The CO looks up from his papers and smiles a welcome from behind a healthy growth of whiskers.

"Did you have anything hot to drink yet?" he asks and turns to someone. "Where's that stove? Oh, there it is. OK." Turning back to you he continues, "Better get yourself some water and heat yourself a cup of coffee. Hang your jacket up to dry."

You smile back, a little feebly perhaps, but thankful for his consideration. It feels funny to smile; your face is stiff, unaccustomed to sudden change of facial expression. You take off your jacket; it's heavy and wet as you hang it up on the wall. Someone gives you the stove and you take out a K-ration unit and tear off the top with numb, dirty fingers.

Extracting a packet of coffee you set to work brewing some hot water. A few minutes later you're squatted in the corner, out of the lane of traffic, sipping a steaming cup of coffee. God, it tastes good. A warm feeling spreads through your veins bringing back a little life to your muscles. You finally climb into one of the empty bunks and pull a dry blanket over you. A blissful sense of relaxation seizes you and you feel comfortably drowsy.

Suddenly a sharp, tearing scream cuts into your brain like a hot knife and you feel, rather than hear, the earth-shaking explosion outside. Incoming mail! Jerry's finally getting around to the business of tossing over his daily dozen. Then comes another and another. These are even closer. You feel that throat-drying tenseness which comes over you when an 88 whines overhead on its deadly flight. The room is strangely silent, everyone thinking his own thoughts, everyone sweating out the next shell.

You suddenly think of your buddy in the slit trench outside, lying there all by himself while 88s are plowing up the field. You're glad that you're inside the pillbox with the heavily reinforced concrete ceiling over your head, and you forget the panicking fear brought on by the paralyzing sound of incoming 88s.

SUDDENLY, you like this pillbox with its heavy walls and thick ceiling, the safety and security it affords against screaming steel, the sense of protection that comes from being inside—the same pillbox you hated and feared just a short time ago when it sat on the hillside in enemy hands, challenging, deadly, when it cost men's lives to blast the Jerries out of it. Now, despite its design and purpose, the pillbox has become symbolic of a peaceful world—a room with four intact walls, bunks, a table, warmth, safety.

Now, the Germans are getting in a few licks with their mortars. You hope to hell none of those shells hit any slit trenches. And then, as though infuriated by Jerry's insolence, the artillery in the rear takes up the challenge and the air is split and ripped by the crashing, rolling thunder of guns and the whining, screaming noise of shells passing overhead. The duel is on, but the 88s refuse to respond. An eerie, sinister stillness settles over the area again. You're wide awake, tense, a little uneasy. It'll take some time before sleep will come, so you just lie on the bunk staring absently at the smoky ceiling.

You feel someone shaking you and you wake up with a start. "Yeah, what is it?" you blurt.

But the voice is calm, reassuring. The figure

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before you, his back to the light, tells you that you've slept three hours and now it's Mike's turn to come inside. You mumble an acknowledgment as you start looking for your gear. The vacation is over. It's back to the slit-trench, to the mire and dampness, wet blankets and confinement of your hole. Strangely, there's no feeling of despondency or irritation, rather just an empty sense of endlessness. Buttoning up your half-dried jacket and slinging your rifle over your shoulder you step out into the silent blackness of a foggy, damp night, closing the door on the warmth and security behind you. You wonder how long it'll be before you can spend another half-day in the pillbox.

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