

Gary Mills

from *At All Costs*

The Waltz

We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men, we are crude and sorrowful and superficial—I believe we are lost.

—*All Quiet on the Western Front*

Technician Fifth Grade Roy Mills could feel the waves of sound long before the formation's signature yawn sluggishly chased and ultimately caught the second P-47, making the visual correlation complete. Noises were muffled, delayed, and weak. Nature's Doppler effect had been tainted, degraded by the detonation of a Tiger tank's 88 mm shell near the painfully inadequate cover of his fox hole pried from the frozen Belgian soil just four months earlier. Roy's ears had stopped bleeding a few days after his capture just four miles from Bastogne on 21 December 1944, but since then inflexible scabs had formed over his senses. Although, this sound, actually more sensation, was intimately familiar. The four bladed prop, the dull echo off the trees, the air stream howl caused by the oversized cowling, and the soft whistle of air squeezed between the bombs and the wings' hard-points made the first attack on the prisoners. For some, the reflex to run for cover was boxed by impulses to urinate and vomit at the same spasm-clinched second. Guards ran for nearby ditches—their war tackle clanked and flapped. They looked like gray geese being chased by six hungry dogs: a scene worthy of a cartoon strip in *YANK* magazine. Unfortunately, the waddling geese soon turned their weapons on the remnant of the formation—attempting to squawk and screech over the din at the prisoners. The frantic commands came across as pleas, as if the prisoners could make the planes go away. The column's *Gruppenführer*, section leader, pointed his MP-38 submachine gun at the prisoners and shouted over his shoulder down the ditch with little effect. Two of the guards, mere boys, were wedged silently next to each other. Others disappeared completely. Now all that remained was the rapid, throaty melody of each plane's Browning machine guns, followed by the sudden ripple and eruption of the road. The belt-fed tune, conducted at 150 rounds per minute would soon signal the end of the prisoners' easterly waltz across Germany. The half-inch rounds would often turn bodies into a heavy mist, leaving the torn clothing as the sole evidence of the encounter. Commonly,

the rounds would ignore the flesh and impact the ground, spalling up jagged chunks of concrete, asphalt, and rock. The resulting missiles were equally fatal, and the dead were decorated with earthen ornaments. Roy and Acker shared a quick glance. Roy remembered the P-47s that bombed the rail yard near the first encampment—one of many Marlogs that would eat away at his strength and senses. The P-47s would attack; after the explosions subsided, the prisoners were sent to remove the dead bodies and clear the contorted tracks near the coveted roundhouse. The initial excitement of seeing one of *their own* carrying on the fight soon was overridden by the fact that they now posed as great a threat of death as their captors. At this point, the ending seemed almost appropriate—another in a long list of misfortunes, starting at the Hürtgen Forest.

Horizon

The assembly is sounded; form companies, and we are ready for a march, or a fight, or a detail, or anything. If we are marched a thousand miles or twenty yards, it is all the same. The private soldier is a machine that has no right to know anything. He is a machine that moves without any volition of his own.

—*Company Aytch*

October '43 winds raced across the deck of the *Crystal Ball* as the troop transport shouldered fifteen-foot waves. During a rare reprieve from the clutter, compression, and contagious seasickness under deck, Roy caught a premiere of the world beyond Cabarrus County, North Carolina. Prior to graduation from high school Roy made several quick runs to the coast. It was a sweet exodus...the sand and waves... and Anne. It was *Huck Finn* visits *Treasure Island*. Importantly, it was an escape for Roy and his friends—far from their Proverbs 31 mothers, “She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness,” and near-cripple fathers enslaved to cotton mills, ten-acre plots, and frail box board houses filled beyond capacity. Just three years before, the wave-washed horizon held energy and mystery...now, the storm-slashed distance held the apprehension of an older brother’s letters home, headlines of spring offensives, and concerns of what it would take to actually lay siege to a “Master Race.” Up to this point, the world was limited to the contents of blue cloth-covered world history readers issued at Winecoff School. Yellowed, pull-down maps cracked along the edges as they were pulled down to place the vast expanse into view. Boundaries, rivers, and mountains were in ordered quadrants on thick paper. But here, he watched

the Atlantic swell and distort, making the ship pitch and groan. For a second he thought about the Liberty Ships that had split and sunk just seven months prior to the 28th Division's deployment. Some ships were lost to submarines...a fairly common occurrence during the first years of the war, even off the Carolina coasts, prompting the formation of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP): a group of hastily "militarized" Piper Cub pilots watching for periscope wakes to scar the ocean's surface. The organization's young cadets would earnestly warn neighbors about black out provisions, straining to sound official as words washed with heavy accents cracked and sputtered. Roy remembered how excited his youngest brother Alex was to join the CAP. He was one of the few cadets with a real government-issue uniform. The field jacket was a treasured gift from their oldest brother William, "Bill," a newly commissioned officer, already stationed in England. He remembered how Alex treated the jacket like a mythic relic. However, he wore it with the snap of a musketeer or a Royal Dragoon, always donning the garment with precision, then facing the family as if to say "I'm ready...soon I'll be old enough." Roy was glad he was safe at home: glad mom, dad, his sisters...and Annie...were there, too. Nearby, another soldier from the 28th was puking over the rail. The sound of the retching soldier was lost in the clash between the hull and the sea. While lighting a cigarette, Roy remembered how the other Liberty Ships had sank. Reportedly, the centerline welds on the pre-fab vessels had failed, giving way to extreme cold and rough seas. The last word was that government contractors had fixed the problem by riveting fifty-foot strips of steel along both sides of the critical point. Roy peered over the rail, dropped his cigarette, and went back below.

Major Gary Mills, USAF, is currently serving as a senior analyst at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (NATO). He is author of *The Role of Rhetorical Theory in Military Intelligence Analysis* (Air University Press, 2003) and Design Director of *Andre Dubus: Tributes* (Xavier Review Press, 2001). "The Waltz" and "Horizon" are part of a larger project inspired by interviews with Roy Mills, a WWII veteran and POW.