

Ask Rufus: A Gift of Memories

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By Rufus Ward

On Friday I went out to Caledonia with Danny Coggins to take a gift from James Farmer to Bradford Freeman.

Farmer is a British actor who portrayed Freeman in four episodes of the hit mini-series "Band of Brothers." Farmer had sent Freeman his cast member jacket and several photos from the series' production.

Sitting on his front porch, with proper social distancing, we had a delightful and, as always, fascinating conversation with "Mr. B". A genial unassuming man, Freeman is not the picture of one who has had tea with Prince Charles, sat on a stage with President Trump and the President of France and whose wartime exploits became part of a best-selling book by Stephen Ambrose and an award winning television mini-series. In his 90s, he still enjoys working in his yard and had been doing so just before we arrived at his house on Friday. As he opened the package from England, the conversation drifted back 75 years.

Freeman is a living history book of the World War II European Theater during and after the Normandy assault. He recalls the addresses by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and by Gen. Dwight Eisenhower to the airborne soldiers on June 5, 1944, the day before the D-Day landing. And that's just the beginning of his experiences as a soldier in the famed Easy Company of A Band of Brothers.

The night before the D-Day Landing they parachuted behind enemy lines to knock out German artillery aimed at what would soon be the Utah Beach landing. In September 1944, Easy Company participated in a second combat jump during Operation Market Garden. That joint British, American and Allied operation was the subject of the book and the movie "A Bridge Too Far." In late December, they helped hold off the German attack at Bastogne in the Battle of the Bulge.

They saw firsthand German death camps and labor camps with their untold horror. Then as the war ended the company was the first Allied unit to enter Hitler's famed mountain retreat, the "Eagle's Nest."

Sitting on his front porch (which is called by his friends "the porch of wisdom") on a beautiful but hot afternoon, Freeman had an almost far off look in his eyes as he began telling in more detail than he previously done of one of the incidents which had occurred during the Battle of the Bulge. Easy Company was a good distance behind the lines of combat when in the darkness of Dec. 18, 1944, they were ordered to grab their weapons and get onto trucks. They were taken in open-top trucks in freezing weather without heavy winter coats to a front-line position near the town of Foy. Easy Company was placed in the defensive perimeter of Bastogne in a position that was about 100 yards from the German lines and had earlier been vacated by another American unit.

Upon the Germans discovering that the position was now held by "Eagle Heads" (the insignia of the 101st Airborne was an eagle's head) their previous rapid offensive actions slowed and they became very cautious.

At their position near Foy, Easy Company and the 101st Airborne held off the German attempts to break through American lines there and capture Bastogne. Freeman's mortar squad had taken a previously abandoned American foxhole and enlarged it into a larger foxhole for the mortar. His squad occupied its position for about a month without proper winter clothing, little food, with limited supplies and under constant German artillery fire during one of the worst blizzards imaginable.

A couple of years ago, Freeman told me how two American aircraft had mistaken Easy Company for Germans and by mistake began strafing their foxholes. Looking at a photo of James Farmer portraying him in "Band of Brothers," Mr. Freeman sat quietly for a moment and then began adding details to that account he had not previously mentioned to me.

Mr. Freeman thought it was about five days after they had taken up positions outside Foy that the strafing incident occurred. The Germans had captured Foy before the 101st had arrived, and two American aircraft thinking Germans had also taken Easy Company's positions began strafing them. One member of Easy Company had left the safety of his foxhole to go and relieve himself. That was when the planes began their strafing run.

Freeman said he did not know whether to duck down in his foxhole out of fear of the plane's shells ripping through the snow covered trees above him or peek over the side of the foxhole and watch the scene unfolding nearby.

The soldier who had gone to relieve himself was attempting to run back to the safety of his foxhole while trying to pull his pants up from around his ankles as the airplane's bullets were kicking up dirt behind him as he ran. Freeman said after the soldier made it safely back, what could have been a tragic mistake turned into a very funny sight and he could not help but laugh.

Easy Company, seeking help from the mistaken attack, was able to communicate with a "Red Tail pilot," a Tuskegee Airman. Without regard for his own safety the Red Tail pilot "came in low knocking the snow out of the trees tops over Easy Company and between the strafing American planes and Easy Company." That shielding of Easy Company let the attacking American planes know it was friends down there.

Before Danny and I left Mr. Freeman's front porch, a previous conversation came back up. Danny had once asked Freeman what had been the best meal he had eaten during the war. Without hesitating Freeman said, "split pea soup."

Apparently Easy Company had been at its position near Foy for about four days under blizzard conditions without a meal, much less a hot one, when they were notified there would be a hot meal brought up to them. It was split pea soup.

Because they were exposed to German fire the soldiers could go two at a time and fill containers with hot soup. Just after the last soldier got his soup, a grenade or shell hit the soup pot and blew it up. Mr. Freeman and others always wondered if some Germans had been able to sneak in, get some soup and then drop a grenade in the pot when they left.