

Letter from Guyowen H. Howard, 317th/B, to his wife

June 1945

I will tell you about the Battle of Velemont [Valmont].

It really was not a battle, it was an attack. I said in my last letter I was proud of the job. In one sense I was, although there were certain things I had just as soon forget.

We came through the woods which the first and third platoon had cleared. They had so much hard luck that we could use a reserve platoon so we all line up together to make the attack. At the very edge of the woods was a ditch, each squad leader lined his squad up on line with the other. There was 69 men in the Co not counting the weapons platoon, of course they are always in the rear. In front of us was an open field and across it, about 500 yards, was the town of Velemont [Valmont]. The town sat in a sort of hollow just below the slope of a small hill.

The order was to charge out of the woods and move fast, keeping well apart, and as soon as we drew fire to open up. Shoot everything in front of us. If mortar and artillery came to move right on through it with out slowing down. We got ready and finely the time came. We rushed out of the woods and across the field. We had moved forward but about a hundred yards when a machine gun cut loose and we opened fire on bushes along the edge of town, rises in the ground or mounds of dirt, windows, church steeples, everything a man could possibly get behind or in. One mortar came our way but we keep going, running and a shooting, hollering like cowboys of the wild west.

I see two Germans run across an open gate. I fired at them as they dashed by another opening but missed. Once I looked around and see that the others were about 50 yards behind me. I dare not stop as some unseen Jerry might pull a bead on me so kept moving. Hitting the edge of town I stopped against a high stone wall, pulled the pin on a hand grenade and tossed it over the wall in case some Jerrys were on the other side thinking about doing the same thing. It didn't come back so I guess the coast was clear.

About that time the Captain came up to me. The rest of the boys were also coming up on line. He said, "Howard, a squad leader usually stays in the center of his squad and not in front of the whole Co." Well, I had it on him too. I told him a company commander usually stayed in the rear of the Co. He said, "I guess we are a couple of suckers, what do we do next."

Two boys came up from my squad and then went through the gate. We covered them then we moved through and they covered us. The rest of the company was doing likewise in other places. We came into a big courtyard. On our right was a big stone barn, on our left was a stable and wagon shed. All thick-built stone buildings. Directly in front was a stone building about the size of Scotia High School.

The wall on all these buildings were about 30" thick. Every house in this country is a small fort and the cellars are built with walls and ceilings about three to four feet in thickness. I moved past the barn, ducking as I went by windows and moved up to the large stone building. The Captain followed. We went through all the rooms.

Some doors were locked but we rifled the locks. We didn't find a thing in them. Coming out I noticed long slits in the openings to the cellar. They were I would say three foot long and six inches wide and each was covered with a slab of wood. You couldn't push them in, they had to be pried out. I opened one and called in but no answer. I was tempted to toss in a pineapple but something kept me from doing so. One of the boys moved up and asked if he could. I said, "better not." Finally I found an outside entrance and called down. A voice said back, "don't shoot, me Pollock." He opened the door, I leveled my gun on him and told him to come out. I never see a man so afraid in all my life. Just as he started to come out the Germans started to shell the town from the East. He closed the door in my face. I told the Captain I was going in. He kept me covered and I went down and made the Pollock open up. I told him I was American and before I knew it, he grabbed me and kissed me on the cheek.

I asked if any Bosch. He shook his head and showed me in. The next few minutes I will never forget. There were about 500 people in that cellar. Young, old, living, dying and dead, also wounded. Some spoke English. They said Thank God you have come. It was so crowded I don't think my feet touched the floor once while going through. Some shook my hand, others kissed me on the cheeks. Little children with blood still running from their wounds tried to get up to me. One girl about 25 years of age lay on a cot dying. As I came near her she put out her hand and said in good English, "Thank God you have come. I go in peace now."

I turned away, the sweat running off me like water. I wanted to get outside before I passed out. Coming to the back end I opened a door. The exit was plugged with concrete and steel from shell fire. I thought, have I got to go all the way back through. No, I couldn't. I pushed up through a small opening and out to the open air once again. A couple of boys stayed with the CO and I with the rest walked around the left flank of town. The Jerries had had enough. They started to come out of the building with their hands up. We got 63 prisoners and 18 lay on the ground. No more trouble from them. Many of the prisoners were wounded. Some from their own artillery, but most from rifle fire. Leading out of town to the East were big trees. Each tree was notched and ready to be blown down making a road block. I would say there were a 100 of them. As a German tried to get up to where he could set off the charges which were wound around each tree and wired up to one main point, my B. A. R. man cut loose on him. He didn't get his work done.

We search out all the houses. As we were going down one street, a woman called out, "Yanks, come here I have a prisoner for you. She had lived in Philadelphia. The prisoner even though a German soldier, I think was a brother of hers. They looked much alike. No doubt it was a wise move on someone's part. Anyway we took him. They give us French coffee, milk and bread. We found out from this woman that we were out

numbered five to one. Most of them got away, but we did a good job. We took all their equipment, wagon loads of blankets, amo, three artillery pieces, a dozen or more machine guns. The job was done. We had to move east of town and dig in while the rear move into town and sleep in good warm places we had taken. It's always that way. The riflemen and machine gun get the dirty end of everything. I went on patrol that night to boot. The Germans threw artillery until 2 A.M. but it wasn't effective. At six A.M. we moved East again.

I will save that until another time. My writing isn't so good today. I get butterflies in my stomach when I go over this stuff.