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IN THE FORESTS OF THE NIGHT

My recent epistolary exchange with Cincinnati luminary and literary legend Harriet Beecher Stowe sent shivers down the manly spines of some. Tonight we lay down the pen and return to the more comfortable instrument of this testosterone blessed assemblage, the sword.

My subject will be two military actions, both taking place in the dark forests of Europe, one involving an ancient tribal chieftain, the other a young first lieutenant in the U.S. Army, soon to receive a field promotion to Captain, my own not long deceased father. For those who may have followed my papers closely, the form will shift somewhat, as I am concerned in this endeavor not so much with the events themselves and why I put two such disparate events together in my mind as what I see that portends for the future.

1. Teutoburg Wald, 9 C.E.

Just giving the title of this section will alert those of you who are classically trained that I am going to speak of the German Chieftain, Arminius, and his annihilation of three Roman Legions, numbers XVII, XVIII and XIX, and their general Varus on three dark days and dark nights in the autumn of the year 9 C.E. Some of you will have already read Fred McGavran's entertaining and artful novel, The Arminius Codex which deals with Arminius, and, as Fred is wont to do, ranges from there far afield. My scope is far narrower.

Some years ago on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, at the same now defunct Borders Bookstore where I first read Xenophon, sparking an earlier paper of mine, I came across a copy of Rome's Greatest Defeat, Adrian Murdoch's story of the Teutoburg Forest disaster. It was a vivid account, and it left me amazed.

This encounter at Borders must have occurred when I was in my 60s. I had studied Latin for 6 years in my teens and thought that I had a decent handle on Roman history, having read, wading through blood, sweat and tears, Caesar, Cicero, Vergil, Horace, Ovid, Catullus and others whose names and memories have now escaped me. Nevertheless, reading of the massacre in the Teutoburger Wald at Borders I had no knowledge must less memory of it. Aside from the ultimately avenged defeats of the Romans by the Carthaginians, I visualized the progress of the Romans as one endless parade of victories and conquest until they weakened themselves with debauchery, drinking and eating from leaden vessels and finally drowned in the Asiatic tide of the Goths and Visigoths.

Of course, there had been a rebirth of interest in the Teutoburg disaster after the work of Tony Clunn, a British army officer and amateur archeologist stationed in Germany, who singlehandedly found the actual site of the battle, near the village of Kalkriese, during his amateur archeological explorations in the late 1980s.

I will get back to how I came to understand the Teutoburg disaster later. Now we turn to the battle itself. In the early days of the current or Christian era Rome was in an expansive phase. Gaul having been subjugated in the prior century, the Emperor Augustus was sending armies into Germany to subdue the tribes, make them tributary entities, and with the inevitable levies, enrich the coffers of the realm. Roman hegemony extended to the Rhine. The plan was to push on from there to the Elbe, at least. In the year 6 C.E., Augustus dispatched a trusted general from prior postings in the Near East to lead the forces of subjugation in Germany. This was his colleague and relative, Varus. After a relatively quiet summer in 9 C.E., except for events described below, Varus was leading his Army, composed of 14,000 – 20,000 regular soldiers and a perhaps equal number of camp followers of the 17th, 18th and 19th legions into winter quarters.

One of the leaders of Varus's ancillary native forces was Arminius, a Cheruscan Chieftain. Arminius had been raised and trained by the Romans, having been consigned to them as a hostage by his father. While Arminius learned Roman military procedures quite well, rose high in the Roman equestrian ranks and served as a trusted advisor to Varus, events starkly demonstrate that he was not fully assimilated into Roman ways and customs. Varus was totally unaware that his trusted lieutenant had begun a guerilla war of attrition that summer against the Roman forces with whom he was serving. Roman patrols went out. They never came back. Cheruscan warriors and the warriors of other tribes in league with the Cherusicans set upon them and killed them to a man. Of course the Romans were surprised. Until it was too late, they thought of the Germans as friends, not foes.

But this war of attrition was not all that Arminius had in store for the unwary Varus. As the army marched toward winter quarters at Xanten, east of the Rhine, Arminius brought news to Varus of a tribal uprising in the opposite direction – across the Teutoburg forest and to the northeast. The uprising would have to be put down, even if it meant taking the legions through the woods of the Teutoburg.

As the troops entered the forest, the legionaries, who ordinarily marched several abreast, had to break formation. The entire train of men, baggage, pack animals, and camp followers stretched out over 8-10 kilometers or more. After the battle began, taking advantage of the situation, the Germans secreted in the forest would be able to pick off men and animals as they made their way in unaccustomed straggling clumps along the dark and wet path. Rain storms over the fatal days made matters even more miserable.

The Romans were able to make camp after their first day on the improvised march across the unplanned for forest. Sometime along here, Arminius and his cavalry said farewell to Varus, ostensibly to check out and clear the path across the forest toward the rumored and mythical

uprising. Of course what they actually did was circle around and join with the secreted forces of the affiliated tribes to take part in the massacre on the second day. The Romans built their usual camp the first night. Heavily fortified with walls and ditches, the camp would have been impregnable to the more lightly armed Germans. Arminius and his forces patiently waited for the Romans to break camp on the 2nd morning and then attacked the strung out train of legionnaires, animals, wagons, carts and camp followers. As the rain continued and the Romans struggled along the narrow path in disarray the Germans would suddenly attack outnumbered segments of the straggling army and kill or wound the soldiers and their animals before retreating quickly back into the forests. This was a brutal, agonizing battle, to which the orderly, efficient Romans were woefully unsuited.

Somehow, the Romans were able to make camp that night. Assessing the situation, Varus ordered the abandonment and burning of the luggage train. Matters were serious, but all was not lost. The Romans would be able to fight their way through.

But the third day was worse than the first and second. At some point the Roman cavalry left the train and made a run for it. Arminius intercepted and annihilated them. During the third day Varus took stock of the situation with his officers. Now recognizing that the situation was hopeless, Varus and the senior officers fell on their swords. They preferred an honorable death rather than defeat and the awful fate that would await them at the hands of the barbarous Germans.

Only two Centurions survived to lead what was left of the Roman forces after the mass suicide of the general and his staff. They determined to push on through the forest, little knowing that Arminius had lured them into a death trap. The primitive path went through steep hills on the left and a marsh on the right, squeezing the formation even further. Not satisfied with that, Arminius's engineers had constructed a camouflaged earthen wall at the base of the

hills. Behind this rampart the shielded German warriors could throw spears and other projectiles at the Romans. From it they could sally forth, cut down the defenseless and surprised Romans and retreat back to safety.

The defeat was total. The carnage was intense. The talismanic eagles of all three legions were lost. When the Roman general Germanicus came through the area the following year, he and his men found a field littered with the bones of men and animals, not to mention the heads of soldiers nailed to trees and bodies swinging from improvised gibbets. Captured junior officers had been sacrificed to the German gods at altars constructed for the purpose. Appalled, Germanicus ordered a halt and his forces did what they could over the course of a day to collect remains and bury the dead.

The year before, within a month or so of the battle, word of the disaster reached Rome, and Augustus and the rest of the Romans were in a state of shock. While the three lost eagles were eventually recovered, the Romans permanently retired the numerals XVII, XVIII, and XIX from use with its legions again. Of much greater import, the Roman advance stopped at the Rhine. The Romans made no further attempt to assimilate the peoples of the region between the Rhine and the Elbe and of course, beyond.

Victorious Arminius, destined to become a Teutonic icon in the burst of German nationalism of the late 19th Century and, perforce, later, soon receded into the shades of history. He was assassinated by his own people, who feared his burgeoning power, only 12 years or so after his famous victory.

We will return to Arminius and the Teutoburg Forest shortly. For now let's take a little jump in time.

2. The Ardennes Forest, December 1944.

I was born in July, 1944, only a few weeks after my father, a 1st Lieutenant in a tank destroyer battalion in the field artillery landed on the Normandy beaches some days after D-Day. Dad had been drafted before Pearl Harbor and reported for induction in January 1942 over the strenuous objections of his mother, who did not relish the thought of losing her favorite child of five. Dad graduated from Officers Candidate School at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma and trained in Texas, the Southwest and England for the European invasion, in which he played his individual part.

From ages 4-6 I knew that Dad had been a soldier, but I knew little about it and understood less. Like many of his fellows, Dad who passed away at the age of 92 some 6 years ago, had little to say about his time in the military. It was only gradually, as his life entered its final phase that he shared some of his recollections with me and I came to understand what his experiences in the war meant to him – and perhaps more centrally to this paper what they had meant to me.

While my recollections cover Dad's whole time in combat in Europe, they focus tonight on his part in one momentous event, the Battle of the Bulge. This battle took place December 16, 1944 – January 25, 1945. It was a major German offensive, their last offensive of the war in the West. The Bulge was the bloodiest battle in American casualties of the European invasion. After landing in Normandy on June 6, 1944, the Allied forces swept surprisingly quickly through France and toward Germany. By the late fall, they were in Belgium and the Netherlands, had even a toe hold in Germany at Aachen and were inevitably approaching the extended border of home land Germany itself. Now progress slowed. Supply lines were stretched. The only deep water port in operation that had fallen early into Allied hands was at Cherbourg. The more useful port at Antwerp had just become available.

Hitler, always wiser, he thought, than his highly trained, experienced and battle hardened generals of the German General staff devised a plan to push through the British and American

forces, overrun them and force Britain and the U.S. to settle for peace. Recalling forces from the Eastern front and committing reserves to the surprise counter attack, the Germans launched a counteroffensive on December 16, 1944. The Allied forces were stretched thin over a large area of terrain. With almost complete surprise and forces initially superior in number the Germans were quickly able to establish a significant Bulge in the Allied line, whence comes the name of the Battle. Conditions were made worse for both sides by brutally cold winter weather with plenty of snow. The overcast skies kept Allied air forces on the ground, making it easier for the Germans to advance with impunity.

Communications were not at their best, and actions to hold the line often needed to be improvised. According to my father, one night his artillery company, part of a Tank Destroyer battalion was bivouacked on a farm on the outskirts of Sadzot, a Belgium village, supposedly with infantry in front of them. There was no infantry, however and late that night, the Germans attacked. It was to be their last offensive act in this part of the Bulge. Here is what happened according to the contemporaneous records of the 75th Infantry Division:

“Along the northern side of the Bulge, other German divisions continued to attack furiously. Everyone, including headquarters personnel, took part in stopping them. In the wee hours of 28 December, for example, off duty men in the 629th Tank Destroyer Battalion’s A Company Command Post at Sadzot were awakened by the crump of mortar, and the increasingly louder sound of small arms fire drawing closer. Capt. Charles Grimshaw and 1st Lt. Anthony Covatta quickly established a perimeter defense around the Command Post with cooks, supply clerks and mechanics and even the company T-2 armored recovery vehicle. Three M10s which had just returned for a “rest” were also pressed into service. Between 400 and 500 grenadiers of the 25th and 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiments assaulted Sadzot. The 629th reported:

For over two hours, the tiny village of Sadzot sounded like a basic training machine gun range, but the out-numbered headquarters platoon wouldn't admit the Germans were getting the upper hand. T5 Barney Young, of Lancaster, Ohio and Cpl. Bill Blue, of Greenfield, Indiana, threw the knockout punches in the form of three-inch shells. Fired point-blank at a range of 300 yards, the HE was hitting directly in front of the area. Evidently the Huns hadn't anticipated anything as potent as that back in a Command Post area. Their screams of pain and confusion were audible over the din of battle. From that point on, there was no doubt as to the outcome. Welcomed assistance in the form of two companies of paratroopers from the 509th Paratrooper Battalion arrived between 0430 and 0500.

At 0900 the firing was still sporadic, but it was possible to venture out to see the results of the nocturnal adventure. The final count was 187 dead Jerries. Add to this the 60 prisoners sent to the PW cage, and the fact that not one of our men received a scratch – yes, it would be called a successful evening.”

Significantly, it is a measure of the man that Dad was that I never heard anything from him about German casualties in the battle. His only references to the battle tended to be self-deprecating. When I was a very young boy, he related firing his officer's service revolver out a farm house window in Sadzot at the approaching Panzers, just like, he said, in a Western movie. At one point Capt. Grimshaw looked over and said “I thought you were dead.” Apparently a German bullet had shattered a window pane just above Dad's head, but in the heat of the moment, Dad did not even notice.

In later years he recalled attempting to run from one farm building to another, to get an angle on the enemy, firing a machine gun as he went, like Audie Murphy. To his surprise the kick on the machine gun was so strong that he could not hold it horizontal. He almost

shot himself in the foot, but avoided that humiliation. Nevertheless, he was decorated for his performance that night and soon promoted to Captain.

Dad's recollections of the war tended to be both self-deprecating and homespun. Quite early on I heard about his single handed capture of a German POW. As he was driving through the forest in his Jeep with his improvised bucket seat, liberated from a German Mercedes, he came across a German soldier standing beside the road. It was a young boy, in his early teens. No gun, but plenty of fear and no stomach for the war. Dad apparently had no difficulty in getting the boy soldier to sit on the hood of the Jeep and took him back to the American camp.

At another point Dad recounted a tale of his efforts at reconnaissance. He was lying on a rocky outcrop on top of a ridge at the edge of the forest, looking across a valley at German activity some distance away. Apparently the Germans noticed light reflecting off his field glasses and started firing at him. Fortunately he caught on and withdrew before the German sharpshooters found the range.

Another time he told us about a meal break in rain so intense that he never had to refill his coffee cup. The rain kept refilling it for him.

He never discussed killing anyone although he must have. His job was as a Tank Destroyer and it's hard to take out a tank without hurting anyone. As the years went by, even these homely stories dropped from Dad's repertoire. His distaste for George Patton, whom he considered an arrogant, profane bully probably remained, but he stopped talking about it. Dad himself said that he never used profanity in front of his men. There was plenty of it emanating from other sources. And at some point I no longer heard him referring to the "Krauts" or the "Jerries," but only the Germans.

Thus I was surprised during the last few years of Dad's life that he began to reminisce about the war again. He talked about the fear the troops felt after first landing in Normandy and their reluctance to fire the first time they encountered a German tank. Most poignantly out of nowhere, one day, he told us about his experience with two other German POWs. Once he and another officer were called back to headquarters. When they returned to their Company, the one German POW the Company had held was no longer there. The troops had killed him. Apparently, the officers took no action against their men, but when next they had to leave their men alone with a POW, Dad carefully ordered that the prisoner had better be alive when he got back. Dad grew emotional in recounting his regret over the death of the first POW and the waste of the life the young fellow never got to live. By then an old man, Dad had fellow feeling for his enemy who did not have the same chance to live that he had.

3. Today, Cincinnati, Ohio.

So what in the world am I doing writing in the same paper about a 2,000 year dead treacherous German warrior and a mild mannered citizen soldier who began and ended his working career as a small time restaurateur and manager of a college food service?

Frankly, as I began to write this section of my paper I wasn't even sure. While I could easily see the superficial resemblances, two brutal battles with significant consequences for at least one of the sides, each taking place in a forest in Europe, it was difficult to see resemblances or correspondences between the two major actors to this writer's mind, the German Arminius and my father, then 1st Lt. Anthony Gallo Covatta.

Paradoxically there is a similarity in what we do not know in the unknowing. In actuality there is very little that we do know about Arminius. He falls into the Rumsfeldian category of unknown unknowns. None of the accounts of the battle are drawn, so far as we know from contemporary records. Tacitus was the earliest and most reputable writer on the

Tuetoburger Wald disaster, and he flourished in the late 1st century of the current era. He had access to official records of the Roman state, and so would have a better grasp than later writers on the historical facts of Arminius and his triumph, but he was still writing about a century after the original battle. Interestingly, Tacitus's *Annals*, which recount our battle, were lost for hundreds of years and it was only in the 15th century that a single copy of a portion of the work was found at a German abbey; later a single copy of another part was unearthed at Monte Cassino. It is remarkable that his work survived at all. Others wrote of the battle, including Cassius Dio, who penned his 80 volume history of Rome in the 3^d century of the current era.

Anyone interested in the battle would like to know more about Arminius, including his real name. Arminius is a Latinized name, and he most certainly wasn't "Hermann" as he was rechristened by Martin Luther. We know very little about the man other than the battle itself. Obviously, he was a bold and decisive commander. He must have loathed and despised the Romans, among whom he had lived for many years, and who had educated and trained him, and trusted him with high rank and the command of significant forces. Indeed they trusted him enough to give him the opportunity to annihilate a significant portion of their armies in the field, and change the course of their colonization of Europe.

We can only guess that he must have been intelligent, cunning, foresighted, a good judge of others' character and with clear talents for deception and dissembling. Quite a combination. Authors such as Murdoch and Tony Clunn himself spin stories of the actions of Arminius out of whole cloth. We have only a few tantalizing facts about the personal life of this man. Interestingly we do know that his wife Thusnelda fell into the hands of the Romans while she was pregnant with Arminius's child Thumelicus. Tacitus states that he

had an interesting story to tell about Thusnelda and son, but he either never told it, or it is part of the large portions of Tacitus's work that do not survive.

If we don't know much about the inner Arminius, neither can I tell you very much about the inner workings of my father, who was a very quiet man who did not share much of his personal feelings, except on rare occasions. Thus here we are dealing with known unknowns, to use Secretary Rumsfeld's categories. We do know a lot more about Dad's life than we do about his fellow forest warrior, Arminius. Dad came home from the war in 1946 and was called back to active duty during Korea. He was in the restaurant industry his whole civilian career, retiring at age 65, in order to enter college, graduating with Honors and a B. A. at age 73, his lifelong dream. Dad was not a rash man, nor one who betrayed a strong taste for acts of bravery. He was cautious to a fault. His reluctance to take chances held him back in his business life. The actions thrust upon him at Sadzot were different from anything else that I know he ever encountered.

So the men talked of here are very different although their actions show some similarities. What interests me at the outset is why the two battles fascinated me and why they resonate in my mind together. At first glance, they attracted me for markedly different reasons. I was stunned viscerally to realize that the Romans could lose anything. Sure I had heard of Hannibal and the hapless, doomed Carthaginians, but what had been drilled into my consciousness was a reverence bordering on idolatry towards the Romans and the Roman state: The roads, the legal codes, the spread of civilization that lit up the world for some hundreds of years before the Asiatic hordes plunged Europe back into centuries of darkness. The Pax Romana that coincided quite mystically, some feel, with the birth of Christ. But dipping into books on Rome's greatest defeat got me thinking about all this in a new way. First, there was no Pax Romana. Only armed occupation and subjugation. The Romans were

colonialists of the worst sort. As Tacitus himself said, the Romans created a wilderness and called it peace. Arminius, whatever his non-Latinate name might be, was a Freedom Fighter, a man who had eaten the Romans' food, taken their shelter, absorbed their education—and as a result, of course, there might have been other motives -- wanted to kill as many of them as he could and keep them out of Germany.

I felt that I had been sold, or willingly absorbed a bill of goods. Old habits die hard however. This summer, partially at my insistence, my esteemed grandsons are going on the Walnut Hills H. S. trip to Rome, the reward for having suffered through four years of Latin. We reverence the Roman ways which have triumphed over 2800 years. We don't know much about the inner Arminius, but we know that wine is drunk on one side of the Rhine and beer on the other. Latinate languages prevail in southern Europe and Germanic tongues to the North. There is a clear difference in language, laws, folk ways the very *Zeitgeist* between lands South and West of the Rhine and more North and East.

Nevertheless I can blame no one but myself. I was and am a willing dupe of the Eurocentric intellectual tradition. At the same time the ripples of Arminius's triumph still spread out and reverberate across the Continent in the anti-colonial actions of many. Perhaps we have been seeing that in France and Germany, in Iraq, Syria, on the bloody shore of Libya in recent days. The man with the bloody knife looks across the Mediterranean and threatens the bogeyman of all he hates—Rome.

Coming down from these heights I admit, of course that my father's contribution to world history is minuscule, hardly measurable, although he was part of a very great battle in a momentous war. While it is possible to know something more about Dad than about Arminius, Dad's inner workings, his inner thought and emotional processes were things he very much kept to himself. Dad was conflicted about his military service. He always

thought that the Army was a very screwed up outfit. He had little respect if any for his fellow officers—and this from a guy who was a draftee, an OCS graduate with no more than a high school education at the time. West Pointers, other regular army soldiers, generals, none of them impressed him with their abilities. He couldn't wait to get out of the service both times he served.

Nevertheless, it was clear that he looked upon his personal service with some pride. During one heated argument, not the only one that we had during the height of the Vietnam war, he accused me of casting aspersions on his service record. I was shocked. That was always far, far from what I felt about Dad. Never having served myself, and viewing that over the years with increasing regret, although I am very relieved that I did not have to make what I would have considered moral choices over service in Vietnam—I would have gone and more than likely regretted it to this day—emotionally I viewed Dad's service as a surrogate for the regretted lack of my own, even though I did not understand this very well.

I cannot quantify what Dad's moment in the sun, in the dark of night meant to him and us, but I can get at it metaphorically. In a roundabout way, I believe that at the end I did discern just how deep Dad's military experience touched him. There is a very fine book on American writers of the mid to late 19th century, Emerson, Thoreau and others, which I read some years ago. It is Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*, which I highly recommend. Almost in an aside, Menand recounted some poignant events from the life of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., the long time Supreme Court justice who died in the 1930s after many years of service on the Supreme Court. As a very young man Holmes had been an officer in the 20th Massachusetts during the Civil War. He was wounded at Ball's Bluff, Chancellorsville, and Antietam. When he died some 70 years later, among his personal

effects, hanging in a closet at his house was his Civil War officer's uniform, still stained with his own blood.

Holmes died at 93, my father at 92. We moved Dad to Atlanta some months before his death, to be closer to my sister. After my brother and sister gathered what Dad would need at the nursing home and drove him down I-65 from Louisville to Atlanta, it fell to me to close up the house and dispose of his remaining personal effects. I sensed what I would find in a closet under the stairs in the basement. There, hanging in garment bags were two of his dress uniforms from the Second World War. I hadn't seen them in many years. The shoulder patch of the ferocious tiger with a German tank in his jaws still glowered at me, burning bright. Perhaps Dad was wearing one of these uniforms the night in 1946 when at the age of two I saw him marching with his troops down Broadway in Louisville, as they were mustered out.

Nothing had ever been said to me about the uniforms. I knew that Dad had kept them after the war and I had sensed that like the Honorable Justice Holmes', Dad's uniforms would still be there all those years later. I believe I know why they were. Today they hang in a closet in my house. I don't know what will happen to them when I die, but I do know that I will never be able to dispose of them myself.

Events reverberate. The circles from rocks thrown in the pond spread out and out in whispers to the edges of space and time. We see not only disparate folk ways and customs across Europe. We see that the vengeance that Arminius took on the grasping and militaristic Romans has echoed time after time in the crude vengeance that native people take because they feel they must on their oppressors. They continue to do so today. Who knows what the young Muslim feels as he visits the huge Arminius monument in the Teutoburg?

Turning the page, as we face acts of terror and vengeance for what others perceive as our own militarism and greed, I pray that our forces and government will be led by men like my own father: men who hate violence and killing; who do what they can to remain human in an inhuman environment; but who at the same time do what they must to defend themselves and what is good about all of us, when duty calls. Who view devotion to one's fellows and what is good about one's country as a sacred honor. I submit that some of that flows from a citizen army, composed of draftees, like my father and millions of others. Messers. Dehner and Bennett were correct. We need the draft, not mercenaries.

To conclude, Arminius and my father are exemplars of the struggle of our time: both underdogs, one fighting (we think wrong headedly) against perceived injustice, the other battling that.

Finally, I am hardly mystical, and am seldom a believer in coincidence but must share this final piece with you. The Battle of Sadzot took place on December 28, 1944. I received a flag and the thanks of the President for Dad's service from a lovely African American female officer at Dad's graveside on December 28, 1999, 55 years to the day later.

Events reverberate. The circles in the pond spread out and out in whispers to the edges of space and time.

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