

Covered by the Cloud

Spencer January

It was a morning in early March 1945, a clear and sunny day. I was 24 years old and a member of the U.S. Army's 35th Infantry Division, 137th Infantry, Company I. Along with several other companies of American troops, we were making our way through dense woods in the German Rhineland. Our objective was to reach and take the town of Ossenburg, where a factory was producing products that were being used in the war.

For hours we had pressed through an unrelenting thicket. Shortly after midday word was passed that there was a clearing ahead. At last, we thought, the going would be easier. But then we approached a large stone house, behind which huddled a handful of wounded, bleeding soldiers – who had tried to cross the clearing and failed.

Before us stretched at least 200 yards of open ground – bordered on the far side by more thick woods. As the first of us appeared on the edge of the clearing there was an angry rat-tat-tat, and a ferocious volley of bullets sent soil spinning as far as we could see. Three nests of German machine guns, spaced 50 yards apart and protected by the crest of a small hill to the left, were firing at the field. As we got our bearings it was determined the machine guns were so well placed that our weapons couldn't reach them.

To cross that field meant suicide. Yet we had no choice. The Germans had blockaded every other route into the town. In order to move on and secure a victory, we had to move forward.

I slumped against a tree, appalled at the grim situation. I thought of home, of my wife, and my five-month-old son. I had kissed him good-bye just after he was born. I thought I might never see my family again, and the possibility was overwhelming.

I dropped to my knees. "God," I pleaded desperately, "You've got to do something. . . . Please do something."

Moments later the order was given to advance. Grasping my M-1 rifle, I got to my feet and started forward. After reaching the edge of the clearing I took a deep breath. But just before I stepped out from the cover, I glanced to the left.

I stopped and stared in amazement. A white cloud – a long fluffy white cloud – had appeared out of nowhere. It dropped from over the trees and covered the area. The German's line of fire was obscured by the thick foggy mist.



All of us bolted into the clearing and raced for our lives. The only sounds were of combat boots thudding against the soft earth as men dashed into the clearing, scrambling to reach the safety of the other side before the mist lifted. With each step the woods opposite came closer and closer. I was almost across! My pulse pounding in my ears, I lunged into the thicket and threw myself behind a tree.

I turned and watched as other soldiers following me dove frantically into the woods, some carrying and dragging the wounded. This has got to be God's doing, I thought. I'm going to see what happens now.

The instant the last man reached safety, the cloud vanished! The day was again clear and bright. I can't believe this.

The enemy, apparently thinking we were still pinned down behind the stone house on the other side, must have radioed their artillery. Minutes later the building was blown to bits. But our company was safe and we quickly moved on.

We reached Ossenburg and went on to secure more areas for the Allies. But the image of that cloud was never far from my mind. I had seen the sort of smoke screens that were sometimes set off to obscure troop activity in such a situation. That cloud had been different. It had appeared out of nowhere and saved our lives.

Two weeks later, as we bivouacked (in temporary camp without cover) in eastern Germany, a letter arrived from my mother back in Dallas. I tore open the envelope eagerly. The letter contained words that sent a shiver down my spine. "You remember Mrs. Tankersly from our church?" my mother wrote.

Who could forget her? I smiled. Everybody called Mrs. Tankersly the prayer warrior. Frankly, I sometimes thought she carried it a bit too far.

"Well," continued my mother, "Mrs. Tankersly telephoned me one morning from the defense plant where she works. She said the Lord had awakened her the night before at one o'clock and told her, 'Spencer January is in serious trouble. Get up now and pray for him!'"

My mother went on to explain that Mrs. Tankersly had interceded for me in prayer until six o'clock the next morning, when she had to go to her job. "She told me the last thing she prayed before getting off her knees was this . . ." – here I paused to catch my breath – "Lord, whatever danger Spencer is in, just cover him with a cloud!"

I sat there for a long time holding the letter in my trembling hands. My mind raced, quickly calculating. Yes, the hours Mrs. Tankersly was praying would have indeed corresponded to the time we were approaching the clearing. And 6:00 A.M.? With a seven-hour time difference, her prayer for a cloud would have been uttered at one o'clock – just the time Company I was getting ready to make its daring dash.

From that moment on, I intensified my prayer life. For the past 52 years I have gotten up early every morning to pray for others. I am convinced there is no substitute for the power of prayer and its ability to comfort and sustain others, even those facing the valley of the shadow of death.

Psalm 23:4