Chapter 14

The Domain of the Erl King

The 90th Division took several deep breaths and licked its wounds. We were still in the front lines, but it was unlikely that the Germans would cross the frigid river to attack us, so there was time to rotate some of the combat-battered troops back to a rest camp in the rear for R & R [rest and recuperation]. There they got to take a hot shower, change into clean clothes, watch a couple of movies, and write some letters home before their three days were up and they returned to duty. This mini-vacation reduced the number of combat fatigue cases substantially.

Meanwhile the rest of us received and trained, or at least oriented, replacements for men lost as casualties or otherwise. We cleaned the worst of the mud off trucks and howitzers and caught up on other maintenance jobs.

Our liaison and forward observer personnel returned to us, full of frustration ranging from rage to numb despair over the problems they had faced: the infantry stalemated in the Siegfried Line, the unaccustomed artillery battalion they couldn't work smoothly with.

I mentioned Bill Beck's grief at the loss of Col Pond; fortunately, however, Beck was a resilient man who physically enjoyed combat, so he was recovering rapidly.

Capt Richter, LnO 3, was a different problem. Never the ebullient soldier, he considered war inglorious and inconvenient, a nuisance to be gotten over with as soon as possible and endured in the mean time. But he **had** endured it, by his complete contempt for danger. He was the one who never took cover during enemy artillery fire ("incoming mail"), who walked upright when machine gun bullets cut up the trees around him. He refused to give war the satisfaction of making him afraid.

Now, however, he began to show symptoms, if not of fear, at least of apprehension. He was subdued, quiet. He huddled by the stove in the CP and wrote long letters to his wife. Back during the Moselle crossing he and "Foxhole" Smith had a narrow escape from death, and since then he had lost a number of friends in the infantry. I think it had finally begun to seep through his thick German-Texan skull that people - including himself - were not invulnerable. And it may have been physical, too. He was older than most of us, about thirty-five, and he had taken a lot of punishment.

During this time Bob Hughes started negotiations to get Richter transferred to an Ordnance unit. [Ordnance was the branch of the service that issued and repaired weapons and vehicles.] Rick was a mechanical near-genius, so he was well qualified for the work. I expect he would have enjoyed it more, and I'm positive that it was safer.

Hughes was a sensitive man; I wouldn't have recognized the problem or thought of the answer. And he didn't broadcast his efforts, probably waiting until he could announce it as a *fait accompli*.

Upstarts

January 5, 1945, was a gloomy winter day. About mid-afternoon we got a telephone message from Div Arty. It was in code, an unusual precaution. We habitually encoded messages sent by radio, because they were broadcast for anyone to hear, but telephone was usually assumed to be secure from eavesdropping, even though it was possible to tap in on a line (Bug it, in the language of espionage stories). We decoded the message, which directed our battalion reconnaissance party to meet the new Div Arty S-3, Major Salisbury, at 0600 (six a.m.) the following morning.

So far, so good. But then came the kicker. The place we were to meet him, when we finally found it on a map which included the entire First and Third Army zones, turned out to be away to hell-and-gone north of us. Something in the neighborhood of 75 miles. Why, it wasn't even in France or Germany, but in the tiny Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

There must have been a mistake in the encoding. I got on the phone to Universe 3 and asked for Major Salisbury. Instead I got Col Sutton, the new exec officer. "The Fox isn't here. What did you want?" [Major Salisbury once got lost on desert maneuvers, and won the nickname "The Desert Fox." Sutton never let him forget it.]

"Oh. Hi colonel, I wonder if you could check that message you just sent us? I think -"

"That message is correct," he snapped, "and you'd better be getting ready to comply!" I suspected from his tone that we were not the first to question it.

Now it finally dawned on me. We were going to the Bulge, the Forest of the Ardennes, where Field Marshal Von Rundstedt's massive winter counter-offensive had broken through and was threatening the whole Allied line.

So I told Col Hughes and alerted the appropriate members of the recon party.

Then somebody asked, "What about maps?"

What about them indeed! We would need maps, large-scale detailed maps of the new area, and all we had was the small-scale general map on which we had found the location. I felt as if I had been kicked in the belly when I remembered that we had once owned all those maps we needed - and that they were all buried in the woods near Gravelotte.

Well, it was too late to retrieve them now. Arlo Knowles, our new S-2, went to the Div Arty CP to see if he could get more. As he had not been around when I got rid of them, he could at least plead ignorance if they asked why we couldn't use what we had.

It was bitterly cold outside, and we all bundled up as warmly as we could in preparation for the trip. The light was already waning: we would be traveling at night probably all night.

Capt Knowles came back with no maps, but with the information that they would be issued at the rendezvous point, and no one had mentioned that we should already have them. He added that the Div Arty CP was in a turmoil getting ready for the move: Gen Bixby and Maj Salisbury had left some time before.

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And yes, there was no mistake about the location.

We ate a hot supper-at least as hot as a supper can be when served outdoors in zero weather. Then we mounted our nine vehicles [see Chapt 4, Hill 122] and took off, allowing nearly twelve hours for the trip. And a good thing we did, for as soon as we started west, toward the rear, where we could pick up the highway going north, we found the roads jammed with traffic moving east, toward the front. All kinds and sizes of military vehicles. It was another Division, coming to relieve the 90th, so we could go north.

My first thought was Why? Why not do it the simple way, and have these newcomers go to the Ardennes Forest instead of us, saving a lot of time and gasoline? And then I realized why. This division looked, even in the dark, like a division was supposed to look, not like a gypsy caravan. Their men were neatly dressed in GI overcoats or wrapped in OD issue blankets for warmth, not in a hodge-podge of stolen featherbeds and sheepskin coats. Their equipment was all issue stuff, properly stowed. They carried no smuggled civilian stoves with coal for fuel. In brief, they were a green outfit. They were probably good, if inexperienced, troops. However, what General Patton wanted to counter-attack the German breakthrough in the Ardennes Forest were good **experienced** troops. Including us.

I have spent some time trying to think of a word to describe that night's trip. **Enchanted** came to mind, but enchanted suggests a pleasant, benign experience, not a cold, miserable, apprehensive one. **Spectral** is a little closer, but not quite right. **Haunted** doesn't quite get it either, for I didn't actually feel a presence, although I was reminded of the **Erl King,** the malevolent spirit in the Schubert song who freezes to death the child whose father is trying to carry him through a blizzard to safety.

We weren't in a blizzard, but snow started falling before we got into the Forest of the Ardennes, and fell, not fast but continuously, the rest of the way. During much of the way we were behind the "Light Line," the boundary between the combat zone and the rear echelon, so that we could use headlights, but all they illuminated was an hypnotic swirl of snowflakes ahead. Even more unnerving was the vision of the limbs of trees alongside the road. They were pine trees, and the snow-laden branches curved down, the tips almost touching the command car. But the trunks were invisible, lost in the dark between the snowflakes. Maybe they weren't there at all, and the branches floated without support.

Eerie. That's the word, although it isn't strong enough to give the total effect. And the total effect, I am sure, was augmented by drowsiness. I drifted between trancelike sleep and trance-like consciousness. My feet also went from painfully cold to numb and back again.

I'm not sure whether we were told to cover the bumper markings on our vehicles before we left or after we got to the rendezvous, but somewhere or other we did. [These bumper markings indicated what unit the vehicle belonged to, right down to company or

battery size, and they were big enough to read as they passed. They were a handy device for someone trying to find his way around; however any knowledgeable enemy agent could get a lot of information from noting them.] We also put black electrician's tape over the 90th Division insignia painted on our helmets. Our arrival was intended to be a surprise party. [We did succeed in surprising the enemy. Documents from German higher headquarters that were captured later stated that their intelligence had lost track of the 90th Division, and that it was vital that they be informed instantly if anyone from any of our units were identified, dead or alive.]

We arrived at the designated spot just as it started to get light. Not that daylight made the ambience any more ordinary. There was a pearly, opalescent fog in the air, thick enough that for several days I tried to adjust to the sight of telegraph wires starting out bravely from a pole in the foreground and appearing to be cut off abruptly in the mist before they could make it to the next pole.

We did get maps - too many to sort out with fingers numb from cold - and were told where to go. It turned out we were relieving portions of another division - I think it was the 26th "Yankee" Division - in place. Our party of zombies pulled up at the CP of the battalion whose position we were to take, and I got a briefing from the S-3 while Jake negotiated with their communications officer for him to leave his wire that was already laid, so we could use it. In return, Jake was to give him a like amount of new wire, still on reels.

The S-3 explained to me that there was no way to observe any targets, since the fog had been in place for several days, so they had tried to figure where the enemy would probably be, and fire there. In other words, they were firing the same kind of H & I (harassing and interdiction) missions that we did at night, only they did it around the clock. He emphasized the importance of our continuing to fire the same pattern, so the enemy would not realize there had been a change. Then he gave me a complete schedule of what they had been shooting, and ended up by putting his finger on the map and saying, "And we fire at least one round every twenty minutes at this big intersection where five roads come together." I looked closely, and sure enough, there was a junction of five roads. I was to become more familiar with them later.

A quick bit of mental arithmetic showed me that he was expending some 72 rounds per day on that particular target, and that altogether they were shooting probably 500 rounds per day. Quite a lot to fire with no specific targets, but his point about keeping it up so the enemy wouldn't notice any changes had merit, and I resolved to start out that way and taper it off gradually until the situation changed.

The rest of the 915th arrived late in the day, emitting clouds of visible breath, stamping and slapping hands to regain circulation. Everyone, including me, was exhausted and snappish. Nonetheless, we got organized and ready to go, and I was about to start sending a 24-hour schedule of fires to the batteries, when Gen Bixby arrived, an anxious Bob Hughes close behind him.

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"Look," said Bixby, "these idiots we're relieving have been shooting up the whole forest! I've got nothing against these trees. So let's let the woods alone and save our ammunition for the krauts. "

I got in the last word. "Yes, sir." Then I added, "But shouldn't we fire some of what they've been doing, so Jerry won't know he's up against another outfit?"

The general made an uncouth sound with lips and tongue and departed.

I cut my schedule of fires to a normal night's H & I fire and hoped for the best. Anyhow, the cannoneers got a little more needed sleep this way. And I did remember to fire occasionally at the five-way intersection. If the Germans noticed the difference, they didn't tell us. They must have needed sleep too.

Two more days passed, days of the same unearthly fog giving an air of unreality to the whole landscape. Where the ground was open, the snowy slope curved upward until it merged imperceptibly into the overcast sky without a suggestion of horizon. I began to wonder if Luxembourg was a part of the earth as I knew it. Might we have wandered off into a new and different dimension, one of those parallel universes from science fiction?

But then on January 9th, I was brought back to reality, or at least to work. The 90th Division went into action, attacking between the 35th and 26th Divisions and making modest gains over open ground and forest land, both covered by snow boot-top high. The 359th Infantry objective was that same five-point road intersection we had been firing at for three days, and they got about half-way there on that first day.

Naturally they needed artillery fire, and we gave it to them throughout the day. We were glad to be back in support of our partner regiment, and after their experience at the Saar, I know that they were glad to have us.

Late in the afternoon I was talking on the telephone to Capt Richter, who was at the CP of the 3rd Battalion (Unique Blue). He wanted me to plan some defensive fires along their front lines in case they were attacked during the night and needed them. He sounded tired and preoccupied, as could have been expected. But suddenly he said something totally unexpected: "Excuse me, Bob, I've got to duck. Here come some of them damn nebelwerfers."

When I recovered from the shock of hearing Rick,' of all people, talk about ducking, I decided that even he knew better than to stand up to anything as notoriously inaccurate and unpredictable as the German rocket launchers they called nebelwerfers and we called "screaming meemies."

After a decent interval to allow for ducking, I rang him back, but got no answer. The Upstart operator said the line rang "open," that is, cut or broken. Probably by the nebelwerfer fire.

I tried again, later, but too late. I never spoke to him again, and he never got to be an Ordnance officer. He was dead.

Upstarts

[Note: In about 1990, Don Richter's older sister Anita put a request in the newsletter of the Ninetieth Division Association for anyone who knew anything about the death of her brother to write and give her what details they had. I intended to send her a letter, but I procrastinated, knowing that it would have to be a long one to do the subject any kind of justice. Anyhow, I hate writing letters, and I was busy on another project at the time. Finally I realized that I owed it to him if not her to tell her what I knew, so I compromised and called her on the phone almost a year after the initial request. She said that she had been overwhelmed by the volume of response she had received, especially from enlisted men, both infantry and artillery, to whom he had been a real hero.

I told her essentially what is in this chapter, and when I got to the "Excuse me, Bob, I've got to duck," she interrupted.

"But everyone said that was one thing he never did - duck!"

I assured her that was the reason the exact words had stuck with me - because they were so completely out of character. And I ended by saying, "I think perhaps he was the bravest man I ever knew. "

And as I reflect on it, I still think so.]

For some reason I have never understood, the battalion survey officer was listed as Assistant S-2, which I suppose meant that the S-2 was to supervise his activities. In practice, at least in the 915th, the survey officer ran an autonomous operation and was directly responsible to the battalion commander. This was a good thing, for at the time I was first assigned to be S-2, I didn't know anything useful about artillery survey.

When I took ROTC in college, they taught plane-table surveying, a primitive variety whose only good point was that the equipment used was cheap. But I didn't even learn that, for the captain in charge felt that extra equitation (horseback riding) would be more useful to me in battle. He was wrong. From the time I joined the 90th Infantry Division, I never saw a horse.

On the first Saturday afternoon after the 915th started basic training, I was directed to layout a volleyball court for the recruits to use for fun and games. Seeing an excuse to practice with the battery surveying equipment, I went to the supply room and took out an aiming circle, a hundred-foot tape, and a set of taping pins. These pins were about ten inches long, with a loop at one end to pass the tape through and a sharp point at the other end to stick into the ground. With the help of a couple of bored recruits, I laid out the most precisely measured, square cornered, volleyball court in Camp Barkeley. Of course, by the time we were through, it was getting too dark to play anyhow.

Then I collected up the equipment to turn in. I carefully retracted the telescoping legs of the aiming circle, loosened the ball and socket joint that held the head in place, and eased it into the case, turning the head until it fit precisely into the pads inside the case and its lid. Meanwhile my two assistants reeled up the tape and collected the pins. I counted the pins. There were eleven.

"Look around," I told my little crew. "We seem to be short one pin."

"No, sir. I've kept track, and that's all we had."

"Use your head," I told them. "**Nothing** comes in sets of eleven. Either there are supposed to be a dozen, and we're short one, or there are ten and we have one too many. Keep looking."

And we did, until I saw S/Sgt Reynolds, the Chief of Detail, and asked whether there were ten or twelve taping pins in a set.

"Eleven, sir. You see, that's so you'll know when you've taped a thousand feet, or ten tapes. There's a pin at the beginning of each hundred feet-that's ten-and an eleventh one at the end of the last hundred. "

So ended my first lesson in surveying.

There are several reasons for field artillery survey, but the most important is to locate the firing batteries in relationship to each other, so that when you have established the distance and direction of a particular target from one battery, either by firing at it or finding it on a map, you can quickly measure the same information for the other batteries, and so be able to fire them all at the same target.

Survey also enables the batteries all to fire in the same direction, by laying out a **base line** common to all batteries, so that each battery can point its howitzers at the same angle to the base line. [Another method is to **lay** (point) the battery by compass, at a given angle from north, but compasses are often erratic.] The survey section made a base line visible by driving stakes decorated with toilet paper precisely along it. Occasionally a battery executive would make the unfortunate error of sighting on a roll of toilet paper at the battery latrine instead of a base line stake, but that was usually caught in time. Or a truck might run over a stake and knock it down, but drivers soon learned to be careful.

2nd Lt Don Thomson was the survey officer, and one day he invited me to come and watch while he and his crew ran a practice survey. I went along, hoping to learn something. And I did. I learned about "breaking" tape on sloping ground, about taping a distance twice and taking an average - unless, of course, there was a gross difference, say one inch in a city block, in which case you did it a third time. I also learned how to calculate distances by triangulation: If you have gotten the length of a line or **base** by taping it, you can read the angles from each end of the line to another point and calculate the distance to it by trigonometry. Then you can use this new distance as a base for calculating another distance, and so *ad infinitum.* Lt Thomson had laid out a wonderfully intricate survey, but by the time the crew finished and did the calculating, the day was over and the results would have been too late to be very useful. Fortunately, this was a training exercise, and no one was waiting impatiently for it.

One of the reasons it took so long was that they had two different instruments for measuring the angles at the ends of a base. One was the aiming circle, like the one I had used to layout my volleyball court. It was comparatively simple to operate, and all artillery officers learned how. Unfortunately, it was only accurate to the nearest mil, a small angle that is 1/6400 of a circle. [The mil is a very convenient measurement for artillery purposes because if you measure out one mil on something 1,000 yards away, it will mark out one yard of width. Or at 1,000 inches it will be one inch in width. Or at 1,000 miles, the width will be one mile.]

The other instrument was a **transit,** which measured angles in degrees, minutes, and seconds. It was accurate to the nearest 20 seconds, in the order of magnitude of a tenth of a mil. However, it was a delicate, sensitive instrument and required time, skill, patience, and sharp eyesight to be fully useful. Some experts said that by the time you got through converting degrees into mils, you lost all the advantage of the transit's accuracy anyhow.

That question was never resolved by the 915th survey team, however, because a couple of months after I watched their exercise, Don Thomson tripped over one leg of the transit tripod and the whole instrument crashed to the ground, bending a vital brass plate so that it was inoperable. The transit had to be sent in for repair, and by the end of the war, three years later, we were still awaiting its return.

Ray Wright and the Survey Section

So when we got a new survey officer, he had to start out with nothing but two aiming circles incapable of measuring angles of less than a mil. The new survey officer, 2nd Lt Raymond J. Wright, was a "ninety-day wonder," freshly graduated from Officer Candidate School. He was about twenty-five, tall, very slightly round-shouldered, and quiet - even diffident. When he reported for duty, he was just in time to go out on a battalion field exercise, and he got the job of survey officer because Don Thomson (Now 1st Lt Thomson) had just departed for a three-month course at Fort Sill.

Wright and I both went on reconnaissance, and when we got to the future battalion position, I stood by and watched while Col Pierce explained to the hapless newcomer what he wanted in the way of a survey. My mouth dropped open as I listened, for it seemed to me like a very detailed and difficult job, over ground rough and cut by deep gullies, a nightmare for taping distances. Lt Wright listened with a frozen face, which might have indicated shock and terror, but when Col Pierce finished and asked if there were any questions, all he said was, "No, sir."

And, to my astonishment, by the time the firing batteries were in position, the survey was completed and had checked out by closing the traverse with an error of less than a foot.

From then on, the 915th stopped worrying about surveying. Lt Wright had been a Survey Sergeant as an enlisted man, and he knew exactly what he was doing. Even better, he had the instant respect and loyalty of his crew.

When Don Thomson returned from Ft Sill, it did not occur to anyone to make him survey officer again: we **had** a survey officer. So Don, who was an overall brilliant officer, went on to command Battery A for a while, was promoted to captain, then became Assistant S-3 and the brains of the fire direction center.

Ray Wright, on the other hand, was too efficient for his own good. No one wanted to move him from a vital job he could do better than anyone else, but the position of survey officer called for a lieutenant, so he ended the war as a first lieutenant, while less outstanding officers got promoted to captain. [However, he also ended up alive and healthy, as he might not if he had been made a liaison officer and promoted.]

On desert maneuvers, he convinced even our new commander, Major Costain, a talented skeptic about the abilities of his subordinates. On one maneuver near Salome, Arizona, we were part of the **Red** Force, which meant that we were scheduled to do a lot of retreating and would eventually lose. There were no maps of the area that could be of any use for artillery fire, only a few **bench marks** established when the original U.S. land survey had been made some time after the Mexican War.

Ray Wright located one of these and used it as a basis for a continuous survey, which located each battery position as we leapfrogged backwards for about five days. As the maneuver ended, he closed the whole system by tying it into another bench mark some twenty miles from the first one, and it checked to the nearest five yards, or fifteen feet. Far closer than any rough artillery survey could be expected to be.

Upstarts

As I believe I mentioned somewhere before, Lt Wright was one of only three officers in the battalion who never came in for a tongue-lashing from Costain.

We learned to take him for granted. When a survey came in, it never occurred to anyone that it might be flawed. Not until January 1945.

When we made our mid-winter move up to the Bulge and got maps of Luxembourg and Belgium to replace the ones I had buried, we found them far less reliable than the ones of France and even of Germany. We were in mountainous country, with many steep slopes, and the biggest problem was with the contour lines. A contour line is a line on a map, every point of which is the same elevation above sea level. If one took a butcher knife and sliced a hill into horizontal slices, it would be cutting along contour lines. These contour lines are important because you have to know the difference in altitude between the gun and the target as well as the horizontal distance to know how to set the elevation angle of the cannon. The contour lines on our maps tended to be vague and discontinuous, so that it was hard to see which ones connected to each other. Fortunately, certain key points on the terrain, like road intersections and mountain tops, were marked with numbers to indicate their elevations.

We made a move, and I had a registration fired, for the purpose of determining what minor corrections had to be made in firing from the new position for mysterious reasons. As the observer sent back orders to adjust the fire, I became more and more incredulous. This was not going to be a minor correction; it was grossly out of whack! I got in touch with the observer and made caustic suggestions about his eyesight. He offered to let me come up and see if I could do any better. "The battery must be screwing up," he suggested.

I called the battery executive at the firing battery and demanded that he check the elevation of the gun firing. He could find nothing wrong. I checked everyone in the FDC, the HCO, the VCO, and the battery computor, and everything seemed OK. But the results of the registration were outlandish.

Finally, as a last effort, I called for Lt Wright. "Ray, I have never had to say this before, and believe me, I never expect to say it again. But there is something wrong with your survey!"

He looked stricken, licked his lips as I explained why I thought so, and hastened away to gather up his crew. An hour later, he came in with a new survey. Everything was exactly like the first one, except for one thing. He had started originally from a road junction with a spot elevation marked on the map as 225 meters. This second time he started from a bench mark, and it turned out that the road junction was actually 325 meters above sea level. The batteries were 100 meters higher than we had thought about the height of a 25 story building. No wonder our results hadn't fit!

After that life with the Survey Section went on as usual: new problems with each survey, all solved with deceptive ease. We again assumed that every survey would be quick and perfect. And 1st Lieutenant Wright, arguably our most efficient officer, was stuck in a job with no promotion in sight.

Ray Wright and the Survey Section

In mid-April, in the waning weeks of the war in Europe, Capt Bill Beck, then commanding A Battery, was one of a very small quota of distinguished combat veterans to be rotated back to the United States. Our battalion commander, Bob T. Hughes, saw a chance to give Ray Wright what he had so long deserved a captain's job and an opportunity for promotion.

Of course it turned out to be too late: the war was over before he was eligible, and after that everything was chaos. But even before that time, Hughes had occasion to wonder if he had made a wise decision.

Let me explain.

Military maps are marked off in a **grid** with squares of a uniform size, and locations on the map are described by **coordinates,** sets of numbers which indicate which square it is in and how far from the lower left corner of that square. On the best of the European maps we used, the squares were the equivalent of 1,000 meters (one kilometer, or roughly 0.6 mile) on the ground.

When Ray Wright was kicked upstairs, he was replaced by Lt Leonard Wagner from C Battery. Early in Wagner's career, we made one move for which I somehow missed going on the reconnaissance, so I arrived at the new CP without knowing much of anything about the ground. Wagner brought in the survey information, and I had it plotted on the HCO chart, a blank grid sheet with squares the equivalent of those on the map, and the VCO chart, which was the map itself.

About that time, B Battery checked in, saying they were in position ready to fire. Since we always fired a registration as soon as possible after a move, I alerted the observer in the airplane to get ready to observe it, and we got the data ready to send to the battery.

Just then Capt Arlo Knowles, the S-2, who had been on the reconnaissance, strolled into the FDC and glanced at the VCO chart. "Hey, that's not right! The batteries aren't on the other side of that little lake; they're on this side. "

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Look, I've got 'em plotted on the situation map." "Cease firing," I said. "Somebody go find Lt Wagner."

When Wagner arrived, he took a look at the chart and went into shock. When he recovered, he was able to explain without making a new survey. He had just misread the coordinates of the starting point by one digit - the first digit, the one, which indicated what 1,000 meter square it was in. Everything was plotted exactly one kilometer (6/10 of a mile) too far north.

A simple mistake, but it served to emphasize how much we had always depended on Ray Wright.

All honor to Lt Col Hughes, who resisted the temptation to recall Wright to his old job. And to Wagner, who never made the same mistake again. And particular honor to the Survey Section, which never **let** him do so. After all, they had been well trained by Ray Wright.

Chapter 15

Battle Casualty

During the summer campaigns there were all sorts of reports and rumors, some based on fact, of dirty tricks played by the German forces. For example, in Normandy about the time of the breakthrough, I saw abandoned bundles of mildly pornographic booklets obviously intended for distribution to British troops. They were in comic book format portraying with heavy-handed "humor" the light-hearted if fictitious rape of an English woman by an American soldier. The scurrilous booklet bore the advertising imprint of a bar in New Jersey, also fictitious, I am sure.

And then there was the use of land mines and booby traps, more directly lethal, and used by both sides. Of course they were more useful to retreating forces than advancing ones, so the fact that the Germans used them more than we did does not indicate any moral superiority on our part.

Another terrifying report was that retreating Germans would stretch piano wire across roads throat high to the driver of a jeep or a 3/4 ton truck. A piano wire is too thin to see from a vehicle traveling at road speeds, but strong enough to sever a neck which meets it at 25 miles per hour. At least so the rumors said. And since in the summer we traveled with tops and windshields folded down, there was nothing between driver or passenger and a possible wire.

The solution was variously called a wire catcher or an anti-decapitator. It was a vertical length of heavy angle iron welded to the front bumper of each light vehicle, extending upward to about the height of the vehicle's top if it had been in place. The topmost several inches bent forward to prevent a wire from sliding up over it and back down. The very top end was pointed.

I never heard of one of these catching a wire, but I never heard of anyone who had one being decapitated either, and they made us feel more secure.

First Lieutenant Vincent Mendicino [a fraternity brother of T/4 Harris in the FDC] replaced Richter as LnO with the 3rd Battalion. Vince had been the B Battery executive, responsible for the firing and maintenance of the howitzers, and as such had little experience with the infantry, but he was a senior lieutenant. And he was idiot enough to want the job, which meant a captaincy if he survived.

His first day was a long, rough one. The infantry made a little progress through the snow, but they were still a good mile from their objective, the five-point road junction, at dark. They expected at this point to button up for the night, but then came the surprise. They were to make a night attack with orders to reach the objective by six in the morning.

A night attack meant that we had to be ready to fire for them at any time during the night. Obviously we couldn't get by with our usual practice of going to bed and leaving one officer and one enlisted man awake in the FDC. I was trying to figure out what was the minimum staffing we could get by with, when I got help with my decision.

General Bixby arrived, wearing a grave frown. Placing his face so close to mine that I could smell the anti-freeze on his breath, he said, "Moore, I want you to know that this little two-bit, two-battalion attack tonight represents the major effort of the entire US Third Army." He paused a moment to let this astounding news soak in, and went on, "If it falls short, God forbid, a lot of heads are going to roll, and I want to make it clear that it better not be for lack of artillery support! Now you know what needs to be done to see that those people get what they need, and you'll by God do it, or I'll know the reason why! Any questions?"

"No, sir," I said. "You've made everything quite clear."

So at 2300 (eleven p.m.), when the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 359th Infantry were to jump off, our entire fire direction center, including both me and Capt Thomson, were wide awake, with a stock-pot of coffee keeping warm on the heating stove of the house we occupied. Outside the night was dark black, with neither moon nor stars showing through the cloud cover. I hoped our infantry could see what they were doing. On the other hand, I hoped the enemy infantry couldn't.

The plan of attack was unorthodox, to say the least. Modern infantry habitually attacks on a wide front called a skirmish line, with several yards of distance between the skirmishers. [You may have seen pictures of attacks in the Napoleonic Wars or even the Civil War with a long line of men moving forward shoulder to shoulder, but that was before the development of the modern machine gun, which would mow down tightly packed men like a combination reaper.] The looser formation now in use works better, but it is harder for commanders to keep control of their men. Especially in the dark.

Some time later I heard a story, possibly true, about how the plan for this attack was worked out. According to it, the two battalion commanders, Booth of the 2nd Bn and Smith of the 3rd, got the order with no details, only an objective, and were told to operate together. They called on their S-3s [an infantry S-3 is the officer who works out tactical plans] and told them to figure out a coordinated plan. I don't remember the names of these S-3's, so will call them Captain White* and Captain Blue* in the following reconstructed dialogue:

White: Well, I guess the road will have to be the boundary between battalions.

Blue: Right. It's the only line we can see on the ground, what with the snow and all. And it goes where we're going.

White: The problem is going to be control, out there in the dark.

Blue: Yeah. I think I'll recommend a narrow front, one company wide, with the other two companies in column behind them.

White: Sounds good to me. Even so, it'll be slow going, wading through all that goddam snow.

Blue: Sure will. The only solid footing in the area is the road itself. [pause] Say, if you don't mind our crowding the boundary a little, I'm tempted to narrow down the front to one man wide. Just send 'em in single file down our shoulder of the road. Of course we can deploy into a line when we hit resistance."

White: Jesus Christ! Why didn't I think of that first? Here the 2nd Battalion will be plowing through snow up to their ass, while the 3rd is strolling along on a blacktop road! **Blue:** Not necessarily. The road has two shoulders.

White: Right again! Route column, right down the road. It just might work, but you don't suppose my Old Man and your Old Man will both buy it, do you?

Blue: I don't know. But if they don't, let 'em come up with something better.

And now we come back to our vigil in the 915th FDC. The primary reason for a night attack is to surprise the enemy, and since artillery fire tends to wake people up and make them alert, you generally don't fire until after the enemy infantry is already awake and starting to resist. So we did not fire a preparation that night, but waited to hear from our observers. The atmosphere was tense.

At midnight we had heard nothing. We began to yawn. I refilled my canteen cup from the stock-pot of coffee. A couple of the computors started playing tic-tac-toe, passing a clip-board back and forth.

Don Thomson said, "I wonder why we don't hear anything." "They're keeping radio silence until they make contact," I said. "I'd still like to know."

"So would I," I told him. "But our observers probably had to break down their radios to carry them by hand. And even if the radios are operating, I don't feel like sending them a message. You know how loud the speaker is on a radio, especially at night, and they sure as hell don't want their position given away."

Thomson sighed. "Yeah, sure. But I still would like to know. The doughfoots just kind of disappeared into the night. And here we are."

I told him to phone the radio control set to see if any of the LnOs or FOs had checked in. They hadn't.

One of our forward observers, Lt Seymour Landay, was up there just behind the lead scouts of the 2nd Battalion. He would probably have gone in front of them had they allowed it.

Landay was rapidly becoming a legend. Nineteen years old, he had come to us some time before the Moselle crossing and seemed bent on winning the war singlehanded. Like Bill Beck, he thrived on danger. At one time he thought the infantry platoon leader he was with was too cautious in approaching a village to capture it, so he, Landay, called out "Follow me!" and led the platoon in a successful assault.

Surely Landay was now in a position to know and report if contact had been made with the enemy.

Unless, of course, he and his crew had been killed or captured before they could get the radio set up.

I opened the door a crack and strained my ears for the sound of distant gunfire, but all I could hear was the crackle of the fire in the stove and the sizzle of the Coleman lantern. The frigid blast of outside air made me close the door hastily, but the drop in room temperature helped keep us awake.

At 0200 (2:00 a.m.) we still had not heard anything. We were all still awake, kind of, but my bladder was protesting all that coffee I had drunk, so I opened the door again and stepped out into the courtyard of the farmhouse. I stood there, the cold hurting my chest when I breathed, trying to accustom my eyes to the velvety black of the night. I was tempted to go no farther, but to do my business right there on the ground and get back inside quickly. But that wouldn't have been sanitary. Or aesthetic. I knew where the latrine was, not forty steps away, and I prided myself on my ability to find my way in the dark. Already I could distinguish the darker blobs in the courtyard that I knew were vehicles. So I stepped out, slowly and cautiously, across the icy yard. I got to the latrine, accomplished my purpose, and started back, still moving deliberately.

Four steps short of the door to the house, I was stopped by an excruciating pain in my left eye, accompanied by a flash like a Roman candle. I had caught the pointed tip of an anti-decapitator in the center of my eyeball. Later I found that it was lucky I had been moving so slowly, for it might have pierced the cornea and blinded me permanently. However, I was in no mood to be grateful right then. Holding my hand over the injured eye, I managed to get back indoors, and even recovered enough to help with the firing at daybreak, when the enemy suddenly discovered our troops on the objective, and all hell broke loose.

We fired enough to make up for the night's waiting, helping to break up the enemy counterattacks, and our two infantry battalions were able to hold the position. The weird attack was a resounding success, and General Bixby did not have to justify any lack of artillery support.

However, I was not around to celebrate. I went on sick call after breakfast. Doc Davis looked at my eye, gave me hell for not waking him up when it happened, and put me in the ambulance.

I don't remember any of the details - I suspect he gave me something for the pain which knocked me out - but I have a vague impression of being at the Division clearing station, being put into another ambulance along with a lot of men suffering from trench foot or frostbite, and being unloaded at the field hospital.

I think I was there two days. The hospital was in tents, and the beds were canvas cots, so the place was neither warm nor very comfortable. Of course they were doing their best with what they had, and the place was jammed. They were trying to take care of a tremendous influx of battle casualties, sending the worst cases to some hospital farther in the rear with more adequate facilities and sending the milder ones back to duty as soon as they could, to make room for more.

Battle Casualty

Being one of the mild cases, I was sent back to duty with a heavy bandage over the damaged eye and strict orders to keep it warm and dry. They left me to figure out the minor details, like how this could be accomplished.

No one suggested giving me a Purple Heart, nor did it occur to me to ask. The Purple Heart is a decoration given for battle wounds or injuries sustained "as a result of enemy action." And when I thought it over later, had it not been for enemy action, the anti-decapitator would not have been there. And to take it a step farther, neither would I!

However, I still have my eyesight, and I suppose that's enough.

[Note: Years later, when stationed at Metz, I managed to drive up into Luxembourg and locate the big, important, five-point road intersection that we had concentrated on for so long.

What a come-down! Five insignificant narrow trails wandered in from the woods to meet at one spot. They looked like those described in Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken."

I think it was Col Sutton who commented, "These people have had two thousand years with nothing to do but build roads, and they have just wasted their time."]

Essay Ten

Friendly Fire

I never heard the expression "Friendly Fire" during WWII. Artillery fire was classified as outgoing mail or incoming mail, depending on which side fired it. However, on rare and unhappy occasions outgoing mail landed in. The possibility of its doing so was a constant source of concern, to the point of terror.

One of our observers overheard a conversation between two infantry privates during our final exercise on desert maneuvers, before we even knew where we would be going to fight. They were talking about, of all things, artillery battalions:

"I hear tell the 344th is a real good outfit. "

"Maybe so, but you can't beat the 915th. They ain't screwed up yet, but when they do, they'll probably kill the whole regiment. "

Not quite correct, on either point.

An article I once read in the *Field Artillery Journal* catalogued 3200 different possible, even common, human errors that could be made in any single fire mission. Granted that this number was based on permutations and combinations, it is still large enough to make you wonder that most fire missions do come out all right. I suppose the odds on being hit by friendly fire are in the same order of magnitude as being in an accident while driving on the freeways of Los Angeles.

My own first experience with the artillery laws of chance occurred during a Service Practice (firing live ammunition) near Brownwood, Texas. In Service Practice firing, the rounds had to land and burst somewhere. The government leased uninhabited land for this, and the part where it was OK for the shells to land and burst was called the impact area. An extra officer called a safety officer had to be with each battery (four howitzers) when it was firing. He had the heavy responsibility to make sure it did not fire in such a way that anything would land outside this impact area. He put up stakes in front of each howitzer showing the maximum amount it could traverse (turn) to the right or left and still stay within bounds. He also made a check of each howitzer to make sure the tube was not elevated too much or too little so that the rounds would land short of or beyond the impact area. He was authorized to take all the time necessary to make sure everything was safe before any howitzer was allowed to fire; however in practice he tried not to slow things down too much.

A 105 artillery round is composed of two sections: the projectile or shell, which goes out the tube, flies through the air to the target (hopefully), and bursts; and the removable cartridge case, a long brass cylinder that holds the powder which explodes and pushes out the shell, just as gasoline vapor in a car cylinder explodes and pushes the piston.

The powder comes in seven silk bags strung on a silk string. If the firing command calls for "Charge 7," the round is fired with all seven bags in the cartridge case. If it orders Charge 6, one of the cannoneers removes the top bag and holds it up for the safety officer to see. For Charge 5, two bags are removed, and so on. The higher the

charge, the faster and farther the shell goes. So there are two different ways to control the range (distance) the shell will travel: the angle of **elevation** of the howitzer tube, and the **charge** used.

After the round is fired, the cannoneer tosses any leftover bags onto a pile to be destroyed later by burning. The stuff is really quite safe to handle at normal temperatures. Even when ignited, it does not explode unless it is confined, but burns with an intense flame. It is often used to heat water for swabbing the inside of the tube of a howitzer at the end of a day's firing.

I was the commander of B Battery at the time of the Service Practice in question. I was also assigned as safety officer. A commanding officer is held responsible for everything his unit does, so I was doubly responsible. And I was doubly careful to check everything.

And since I was being extra careful, I was astounded to get a phone call saying an artillery round had exploded within fifty yards of a farmhouse nearly a mile beyond the far edge of the impact area, and that the farmer's wife had gathered up her family and taken to the tall timber.

"That's terrible," I said, "but it couldn't have been us. I've checked everything. Try somebody else. The 915th wasn't the only battalion firing on the range."

When an officer went out to investigate, he asked the farmer if any artillery had landed on his farm.

"Yeah. One bullet." A pause, then, "We just moved in, and now my wife wants to move out again. "

He took the investigating officer to the crater the shell had made in the farmyard, and the officer found the nose cone of the projectile, which bore the lot number of the ammunition. My battery was the only one using ammunition from that lot. Furthermore, although (so far as I knew) we had not fired that **distance,** we had been firing in that **direction** at about the right time.

The evidence became more and more conclusive. We had been firing Charge 4 all day, but somehow one round had been fired with Charge 7.

But who fired it? The army likes to assign responsibility, and it should have been a simple matter to find out. But by the time I realized the problem and went to check the little piles of powder bags at each howitzer position to see who was short three bags, the fires were already burning merrily and the swabbing water was boiling.

A howitzer fired at a higher charge makes more noise and jumps farther when it recoils, so someone (me, for instance) should have noticed. However, as nearly as could be determined, it happened in a battery volley, when all four howitzers had fired at once, and in the general noise and confusion no one did notice - unless it was the gun crew, and they weren't talking.

We never found the culprit. In the absence of any individual to punish, the entire battery was restricted for two weeks, and the battery exec and I were fined $100 apiece and given an official written reprimand.

Friendly Fire

I'm sure the fines did not cover the amount the US government paid for the moving expenses of the farmer's family.

Months later, near the conclusion of our California desert maneuvers, we had a field exercise in which the infantry advanced, fighter-bombers strafed, and the artillery fired at an imaginary enemy close in front of our own troops. It was the most nearly realistic exercise we had prior to actual combat. And no friendly troops were hit, unless you count the time a steel link from a belt of machine gun ammunition was dropped by a strafing plane, right onto Major Hughes's helmet, with a resounding clang. I was standing beside him at the time, and we were both shaken.

Things could easily have been worse, and almost were.

An infantry division is entitled to three general officers: the division commander, the assistant division commander, and the Div Arty commander. The division and division artillery commanders were out together observing the live fire exercise, and they were standing about fifteen feet apart when a 155mm artillery shell plowed a neat groove in the sand between them, ricocheted, and landed beyond without exploding. A dud. Had it exploded, two-thirds of our generals would have been wiped out.

Lt Col Frank Norris, who commanded our 155 battalion, rushed back to his battery positions, located the battery at fault, and placed the battery commander, the battery executive, and himself all in arrest. When people came to investigate, they found these three officers pacing up and down inside three circles drawn in the sand.

I never heard the outcome, not even the cause of the near-disaster. I expect it was 100 mil error in elevation [100 mils is less than 6 degrees of angle, but it can make a good mile of difference in range]. None of the three officers arrested was courtmartialed, but I presume that they were fined. [Frank Norris kept his command all during the war, had a distinguished career afterward, and retired a major general.]

The first few weeks in combat, everyone was jumpy. The infantry was getting **incoming mail** for the first time, and having trouble getting used to it. Because there was quite a bit of heavy stuff - infantry mortar shells as well as artillery rounds - going by in both directions a lot of the time, it was sometimes hard to sort out incoming from outgoing mail. Consequently, when infantrymen came under fire while we were conducting a fire mission of our own - often one they had requested - they tended to suspect that fire they were getting from the enemy might be stray rounds of ours.

Obviously suspicions like that were unhealthy, even when we were sure they were untrue, because they resulted in loss of the mutual confidence that we needed to work as a team. If our infantry ever got to the point where they were afraid to let us fire for them, we would be of no use.

Upstarts

I was involved in an episode which made a bad situation worse. Each of the [human] computors in a fire direction center was equipped with a graphical firing table (GFT), which looked like an oversized slide rule. [Slide rules are now obsolete, I am told, but may still be found in museums.] GFTs were used to convert **range** (distance) on the ground to **elevation** (the amount of angle above the horizontal of the howitzer tube). Since range also varies with the **charge,** which I discussed earlier, there is a separate slide to insert into the GFT for each of the seven charges.

I was duty officer one night while we were still in the Normandy hedgerows, and just before daylight we got a call for fire. I sent for the FDC personnel, but saw no reason to wait for them to arrive before commencing to fire. T/4 Devlin, who was on duty with me, read the data from the firing chart, and I took over as computor for one of the batteries. I might be slower than a regular computor, but I surely understood the technique involved. I alerted the battery, computed the fire commands, read them to the battery exec, and waited for the "On the way." Devlin held the phone that connected us with the FO.

When "On the way" came, I repeated it to Devlin and he relayed it to the observer. A few seconds later, he turned pale. "My God, sir, it landed right on top of them!"

About that time the FDC arrived in force and pointed out to me that although I had called for Charge 4 in my commands to the battery, the Charge 5 slide had been in the GFT. Consequently, the elevation was too low and the rounds had landed short.

Clearly I was accident-prone with respect to Charges.

We called the observer and told him that the error had been corrected, and did he want to continue firing the mission?

"Hell, no!" was the shocked reply. "I just talked the company commander out of shooting me!"

Luckily no one was hurt, but the 359th Infantry was justifiably incensed. Col Bacon, their CO (commanding officer) mentioned it at a meeting called by the division commander. "I intend to court-martial the officer responsible for this!"

Brigadier General Devine, the Div Arty commander, bristled. "See here, Bacon, I can take care of disciplining my own people without any help from you! When things like this happen, I give the officer responsible a good stiff fine as a reminder not to do it again. If that doesn't teach him, I'll consider court martial or getting rid of him."

Col Bacon was mollified, especially after he was told who was guilty. He knew and liked me. The fine was $200 this time, and it was quite a while before I drew any money, because most of my pay was allocated to my wife to feed and lodge the family. I don't remember just how much I drew for myself, but it was no more than $100 a month, I am sure. Fortunately, there wasn't much to spend money on.

However, I was as popular with the infantry as a polecat at a picnic for some time. Not long after that episode, I was up at the front, talking to an infantry officer Major Bob Booth, then of the 1st Bn, I believe - when a situation came up which seemed to call for artillery fire quite close beyond the hedgerow that marked the front line.

Friendly Fire

Booth, a man who sometimes had a short fuse, swung on me and asked, "Do you suppose your outfit can fire without it landing on my men?"

"I'm positive!" And I added for emphasis, "If it lands short, you can shoot me." "OK," he said, "we'll give it a try."

While we waited for the initial rounds, I looked at the hedgerow our troops were crouched behind. There were several tall trees growing out of it.

And sure enough, when the first salvo came, a round caught in one of the trees, and burst right above the hedgerow. And-oh God-there was a call, "Aid man!"

I took my pistol out of its holster and handed it to Booth, grip foremost. "Go ahead and shoot me," I said.

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he actually laughed. "That wouldn't help much. Let's see if we can get the next bunch a little farther out."

A crisis came when a company of the 359th Infantry was under heavy attack in one of those little hedgerow-bounded fields. The FO with them called for artillery fire to silence some pesky machine guns, and just as we fired for effect, a whole cascade of fire came in on their field, so effectively that they pulled back to reorganize. The infantry battalion commander was livid with rage, and he made an official complaint.

Lt Col Costain felt sure that it was German fire, perhaps deliberately timed to coincide with ours. He ordered someone [I don't remember who, but think it was either Capt Richter, the liaison officer, or Lt Wright, the survey officer], to go into that field after dark and see if he could get a **back azimuth** (direction they came from) by examining the shell craters.

I don't think Costain realized at the time that our troops had withdrawn from the place, or he might have hesitated to give the order. However, the officer assigned the job went out and found (1) that the enemy had not occupied the field after our people pulled back, (2) that the craters were round, like the craters of an infantry mortar shell, not bat-shaped like that of an artillery shell, so that it was hard to tell what direction they came from, and that (3) a nose cone he dug up bore markings in German. The fire in question had come from German 120mm mortars, not from American 105mm howitzers.

Presented with the evidence, the CO of the infantry battalion apologized, then turned his anger toward his own troops. They had been shown up by an artillery officer who had guts enough to go alone past the front lines, into a field his men had found too dangerous to hold. He ordered the company to get back up where they belonged, immediately if not yesterday.

Chapter 16

Deja Vu

Infantry-artillery relations got better after that. I hitched a ride back from the hospital with Col Bell, CO of the 359th Infantry.

I don't remember how I happened to run into him: maybe he had come there to visit the wounded. The back seat of his jeep was cramped, because it held bedrolls and other gear, and the top and side curtains were up. That gave some protection from the wind, but the air was cold, and my eye still hurt. However, it was good to be going back where I belonged.

It may have been Col Bell who told me that "Foxhole" Smith, CO of the 3rd Battalion, was a casualty: his jeep had run over a mine the morning after the night attack. Our new liaison officer, Vince Mendicino, hardly got acquainted with him before he was gone.

Their battalion exec, Major George Godding, replaced Smith. I remembered him as a captain when he first arrived as a replacement, and the then battalion commander called him "S-3" because he couldn't remember his name. Anyhow, Godding and Mendicino learned to know each other and to work together well.

Col Bell dropped me off at his own CP, where I phoned Upstart to send a jeep after me. A good thing, too, for they had moved, and I would have had trouble finding them, with my one good eye watering from the cold.

My memory is less sharp from here on to the end of the war. A number of scenes and episodes stand out in my mind, but I am shaky as to precisely when and where they happened. It may have been on the trip from the hospital or on another occasion when we rounded a curve in the road and I caught my breath at the sight of **The Castle,** an edifice right out of a book of fairy stories. It stood on a crag, and its outer wall, complete with battlements, seemed to rise as a direct continuation of the vertical cliffs of the crag. It must have been the model of which all lesser castles are an imperfect imitation. I have been told since that the castle is named *Esch sur Sarthe* [I hope that is how it's spelled], that it is one of Luxembourg's chief tourist attractions, and that its picture is on the Grand Duchy's currency. Although I only saw it momentarily, the memory still impresses me.

When I finally got back to our CP, another change had been made. Bob Hughes had been shaken when Richter was killed before he could be transferred to a safer job, and he began to worry about our other long-term liaison officers, Bill Beck and Don Wilbourn, both fugitives from the law of averages.

Now the A Battery commander, Capt John Klas, needed surgery. He had developed a pilonidal cyst on the southernmost tip of his spine (nicknamed "jeep ass"), and the pounding it took from riding in military vehicles had made it bigger and worse. So Beck was brought in from the cold as a liaison officer and put in command of A Battery so Klas could have his operation.

And a little while later, Capt Donald Thomson was hospitalized with flu. Wilbourn replaced him as Assistant S-3. Thomson was soon back with us, but Wilbourn stayed on, so there were now three officers in the FDC. I suppose that made one of us redundant, but I never thought that I was the superfluous one.

I don't remember much about the rest of that campaign, although the names of Niederwampach and Oberwampach stick in my mind, and I remember the Our River.

I also recall that we ran up against the Siegfried Line once more, and that our infantry was getting sick of having to do it all over again. But this time it was not so difficult. There were several reasons why it was easier: (1) after their losses from the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans did not have enough troops to man the pillboxes adequately, (2) our infantry had done it before, (3) the Our River was less of an obstacle than the Saar (smaller, and mostly frozen over). Also, I like to think (4) that the 359th Inf did better with the 915th FA Bn in direct support.

We found a good deal of equipment left behind by the 106th Infantry Division: helmets with the Golden Lion insignia, mess gear, clothing, even weapons and radios. The "Hungry and Sick" Division, as it was cruelly nicknamed, had a sad history. It had been a green outfit, put into a defensive position over a broad front in a quiet area, to get a little seasoning before being committed to heavy combat. Unfortunately, the area abruptly stopped being quiet, as a whole German Army surprised them, broke their thinly-held line, and stamped on them as it blitzed on through. Two of their three regimental combat teams were completely destroyed: killed, wounded, frozen, or captured. The division was never refilled with replacements; it had lost too much of its framework. It continued to fight, but was always mentioned in orders as the "106th Infantry Division (-)." The minus sign meant minus two-thirds of its combat strength.

A battle-hardened outfit might have done better, but not much. No single division holding a wide front could have stopped that heavy onslaught. They were in the wrong place at the key time.

One of the items they left behind was a 2 1/2 ton GMC truck, the same kind that we used to pull our howitzers. It looked to be in good condition, but it was hard to know for sure, because it was located right between our front line and the Germans'.

Word of this prize got back to Lt Gerald Greak, our battalion motor officer. He came forward for a look, and what he saw made him drool. So after dark that night, he brought up the battalion wrecker (a tow truck with a hoist) and its crew, and they drove out into No-Man's Land, hooked onto the derelict, and hauled it back to the rear, where it could be put back into driving condition.

Luckily for Greak and his men, the truck was not booby-trapped. However a lot of other things were, some by our side before they withdrew, and some by the Germans before they did. None of our people were injured, so far as I heard, but Capt Jacobs insisted on moving the CP out of one area that was full of them, before we even finished setting up.

Déjà vu

And mines buried in the ground had been covered by snowfall. Often the triggering mechanism froze so the mine would not explode - until it thawed. The engineers were kept busy sweeping the roads and fields for mines.

There were major command changes, too. General Van Fleet, like McLain before him, left us to assume command of a Corp. Replacing him was a Major General Rooks, and we also got a new assistant division commander, Brigadier General Earnest.

Of perhaps even more importance, our infantry finally got issued snowpacs, a type of watertight boot with heavy felt inner soles, designed for wear in snow. They were to replace both the combat boots that had caused so much trench foot and frostbite and the heavy cumbersome rubber overshoes worn over them. [Most infantrymen didn't wear the overshoes anyhow, because when they had picked up a normal load of mud, they weighed about ten pounds apiece.] But shortly after the snowpacs came in, the weather turned warmer and the snow melted. They had no arch supports, and when used on hard roads they caused many a fallen arch. And since they were waterproof, when feet began to sweat in the relatively warmer weather, there was an epidemic of athlete's foot.

This sounds like criminally lousy planning on the part of the supply people. However, when you consider that things like footgear have to be ordered far enough in advance to be manufactured, and that the factories have to find scarce materials like leather and rubber after they get the order, and then the finished product must be shipped across a submarine-infested ocean, it is miraculous that we got them at all. Particularly since in the preceding summer, when the order needed to be placed, it looked as though we could win the war before winter.

As I mentioned earlier, the roads in that part of the world were rudimentary; heavy military traffic nearly destroyed them. And now the ground off the roads turned into a muddy morass. I recall riding on one road that was the de-tracked roadbed of a railroad. It was narrow, and there was only one-way traffic. Some engineer had put up a series of signs, Burma-Shave style:

Stay in the middle
Do not pass
Off this road
Mud's up to your A.

* * * * *

By and large, my memories of the campaign from the Our River to the Moselle are pretty much of a blur. I don't even remember what we were doing on March 2, my thirty- first birthday.

But on March 14, we had arrived at the Moselle, a good seventy miles north, or downstream, from where we had crossed in the Metz campaign. At this point, there was a sense of deja vu: not only had we struggled with the pillboxes of the Siegfried Line twice, but now we had to cross the Moselle for the second time.

Upstarts

As I remember it, the river here ran through a narrow canyon between steep hills, but I never really saw it by daylight, so I might be wrong.

A river crossing is never really easy, but this one was a lot easier than the first, because there weren't enough Germans and German equipment to put up a truly effective resistance. Their unsuccessful winter offensive had left them short.

In any event, I believe it was by the following night that the bridge was in and the bridgehead was deep enough for the artillery to follow.

Crossing a floating bridge is always an adventure, and although I have ridden over many a river on them, starting with the Sabine River between Louisiana and Texas, I have never gotten used to the sensation. The ones we used were called ponton (not pontoon) bridges, and were made up of a line of open boats called pontons lashed side to side, with two steel treadways laid across the top for the right and left wheels of vehicles. The treadways were wide enough to accommodate anything from a jeep to a tank, but I always wondered what would happen if my driver was unable to keep going straight and we jumped the track. In addition, the bridge undulated as the weight of each vehicle pressed down the ponton it was crossing. Anyhow, I was always glad when we reached the other side.

As somehow we always did.

Once across, we went in low gear up a steep winding road that ascended the wall of the canyon and through a darkened town at the top.

[Note: a year or so later, when I was visiting my father in Santa Fe, I told him about our crossing the Moselle twice. He was interested. At the end of WWI, as a new second lieutenant, he had been stationed at a place he called "Kokum-on-the-Mosel," and he wanted to know if I had seen it.

Sorry, I said, I never heard of it.

We continued the conversation, and he asked about where we had crossed the second time. I tried to describe the area, and he said, "That shouldn't be very far from Kokum. Sure you didn't at least see it on the map?"

"I sure don't remember it." I paused. "How do you spell it?"

"C-o-c-h-e-m. "

"Good Lord! Yes, that's the place I drove through when we crossed."

But since all I had seen passing through was a lot of darkness, I couldn't answer any of his questions, nor tell him whether and how much the place had changed.

However, I have often wondered about the spelling: it is a German town, but in German, I would expect it to start with a K. And if it were in French, I would expect the **ch** to be pronounced sh. Can anyone help me?]

[Note 2: My son Bill suggests that it might be a Gallic name, dating before the French spoke a Romance language.]

On beyond Cochem, we came to our destination and set up our CP in a German farmhouse which showed signs of the family's hasty evacuation when they had been told that we needed their home for a few hours.

Déjà vu

By dawn everything was ready to go. Battery A was within hailing distance, about a hundred yards away down a country lane. B and C were not far away, but out of sight of the CP.

A call from Div Arty told us to be ready to move on short notice, so we unpacked as little as possible and hurried through breakfast. Then we sat down and waited.

And we waited. The infantry had lost contact with the enemy; apparently the Germans had withdrawn to regroup and prepare to defend somewhere further on.

And we waited. The morning wore on, with no news, no requests for fire, no nothing. I wondered if the war had been called off and no one had gotten around to letting us know.

And we waited. I had gotten almost no sleep last night, and none the night before, when I had been duty officer. My eye, now almost well, felt tired and had a distressing tendency let its lids close. Finally, about ten o'clock, I decided that as the third-ranking officer in the battalion, I should take care of myself so as to be ready for action when the need appeared.

So I told Capt Thomson, "Don, I'm going upstairs and get some sleep. Be sure to wake me if anything - anything at all- comes in."

"Sure thing," he said.

Just to make sure, I repeated my plan to Capt Wilbourn, my other Assistant S-3.

There was a bed upstairs, or rather two single beds with a common side rail in the middle, the same dimensions as what we now call a king-size bed. It had mattresses and featherbed covers, so I didn't need my sleeping bag. I lay down, pulled a featherbed up around my ears, and passed out. It was the most comfortable I had been since I left home, and I slept soundly.

I awoke some hours later and lay there listening to the murmur of voices from the room below me. Then I suddenly sat up. They were women's and children's voices, **and they were not speaking English.**

The German family was moving back in!

I leaped up and ran in my sock feet to the window. The field where A Battery had been was empty: only the ruts in the soft ground showed where they had been. The barnyard below my window was vacant of soldiers and vehicles. The only sign of our occupancy was a short length of telephone wire dangling from the window below me, where the FDC had been.

I had been left behind! I**,** the third ranking officer in the battalion, abandoned! Was I indeed superfluous?

When I first met Lt Oscar Drake, I was mildly surprised at his having such an English-sounding name when he looked like an Italian. Then he spoke, and I was astounded: his German accent was thicker than Henry Kissinger's. I later learned that he was a German Jew, anxious to help overthrow the Nazis who had driven him from his native land. And that he was to become a Legend.

Drake was the S-2 of the 3rd Battalion, 359th Infantry Regiment (3d Bn, 359th Inf). His primary job was to find out as much as he could about the enemy situation in his battalion's immediate front. His fluency in German, which surely must have been better than his English, helped him a lot, as I'll explain later.

The occasion of our meeting was when I arrived to act as liaison officer between my own outfit, the 915th Field Artillery Battalion (915th FA Bn) and the 3d of the 359th. It was not my regular job, but the real liaison officer had been wounded, and I was a stop-gap until he could be adequately replaced.

Things were pretty confused at the 3rd Battalion when I got there. They had only been in the shooting war for a few days, but the battalion commander had been wounded at the same time as our liaison officer. His replacement was an unprepossessing little Lt Col who seemed to me far too old for the job (he must have been fifty). He had so recently come to the battalion that he didn't even know the names of his staff officers, one of whom, the S-3, was as new to the job as he.

Lt Drake took me under his wing, and the following morning I went with him to what they called the battalion observation post (OP), which was a funny term, because you couldn't observe much of anything from there. Or from anywhere else, for that matter. We were still in Normandy hedgerow country, and the entire landscape was divided into irregular fields of a half-acre or so fenced off with hedgerows - earthen embankments with trees and brambles growing on their tops, so that one could rarely see beyond the next field.

Actually this OP was a forward command post, from which the battalion commander was supposed to direct the battle, with some help from his S-3. In fact, neither of those two was there, and Lt Drake commanded the battalion the first day, sending orders by radio and runner to the company commanders, all of whom outranked him. But nobody complained.

Sometime that night they got another new battalion commander, a competent young major, and next day he took over, leaving Drake the opportunity to do his own work.

And that included saving a life.

Here's how it happened. Late in the afternoon of the second day, our leading company got pinned down by enemy machine gun fire as they tried to cross a road. The battalion commander brought all his "OP" group (including Lt Drake and me) up to the road to see what was going on. About the time we arrived, there was a commotion to the right front, beyond the road, and a young lieutenant platoon leader ran back across the road hustling a terrified German soldier in front of him. The lieutenant held a pistol in his left hand because he had a clean bullet hole through his right wrist. The German's left arm was limp and his elbow dripped blood.

Several soldiers, members of the lieutenant's platoon, offered freely and profanely to stick a bayonet through the prisoner (“Let me have the son of a bitch! He wounded the lieutenant!") This platoon leader was clearly popular with his men, and I am convinced that the prisoner might well have been killed in retribution.

But Lt Drake stopped them. "Chust a minute! I vant to esk him some qvestions first."

An aid man came to give medical attention, first to the lieutenant, then to the prisoner. While he was being bandaged and prepared for evacuation, the lieutenant gave instructions to his platoon sergeant for things he wanted done in the platoon and commending certain of his men. He was a good officer, and I could see why his men liked him.

I looked curiously at the prisoner, the first live German soldier I had seen. He was pathetically young, with adolescent down on his smudged face and long, straight blond hair falling over his eyes. He was hurt, and frightened sick. I don't know how much of the conversation about bayonets he understood, but he was eager to tell Drake anything he wanted to know.

The boy was a Czech, he said, not a German; he had been forced into the army. He was seventeen years old, and one of a crew of three on a machine gun. There were some five or six machine guns in the vicinity, but he did not know exactly where the others were. He was not German, and the Germans did not trust him or tell him anything. Yes, it was his machine gun, which had wounded the lieutenant, but he had not fired it himself. He had come in to surrender when the lieutenant called to them, and had been wounded by one of his own comrades for trying to surrender. He was sobbing by the time he was through, and they gave him a shot of morphine when they bandaged him.

By the time he was ready to be sent back to the PW enclosure for more medical care and further interrogation, the platoon leader's men had cooled off, and no more was said about killing the hapless prisoner.

That was my only hitch as a liaison officer, and I seldom saw Lt Drake after that, but I heard about him occasionally, chiefly through Captain Richter, who became our regular liaison officer with the 3rd Battalion, and a close friend of Lt Drake. Richter also spoke German, albeit with a Texas accent.

After we finally broke out of the hedgerow country, we began to advance rapidly against a retreating enemy. Since the Germans tended to defend, not the high ground, as we Americans had been taught, but built-up areas (the Battle for Billets, we called it), our infantry learned to approach each village with slow caution before attempting to enter it. And after occupying it, they tore down the telephone wires leading to the next town to prevent any spies from reporting our progress. These precautions necessarily slowed down our advance.

Oscar Drake

One day 3rd Battalion troops had overrun a hamlet and a few men had just thrown a long rope up and across the telephone wires between poles when Lt Drake had a brainstorm. "Vait! Don't pull 'em down yet." He found a telephone at the post office and called the switchboard at the next village. "This is *Oberleutenant* Drake," he said in broken French with a German accent. "I have lost contact with my company. Are there any *Wehrmacht* troops in your village? ... What, no? Alas, I must try somewhere else. "

Hanging up the phone, Drake turned to the company commander. "Nobody there. You can go straight on in!"

Months later, in bitterly cold February weather, we found ourselves up against the Siegfried Line. Located in hilly country, it was an irregular line several kilometers deep. It consisted of thick concrete pillboxes dug into the hillsides, hellishly difficult to approach because they were carefully staggered in depth and situated to cover each other by fire. One moonless night Lt Drake crept forward in the dark to find out what he could see, hear, or feel. What he felt was a number of rough hands which grabbed him and hustled him through a concealed door and into one of the pillboxes, where he was relieved of his carbine.

"Herr Hauptmann!" cried one of his captors (in German), "we have a prisoner who is an American officer!"

Drake was glancing around the dimly lit interior looking for useful information, when the German's words caught his attention. "Prisoner, hell!" he said in polished *Hochdeutsch,* "I am an emissary, come to save your lives. You are all but surrounded and cut off: your position is hopeless. This is your last chance. If right after daylight you and your company will come out of your pillboxes with your hands up, you will all be spared, well fed, and sent to a comfortable prisoner of war camp."

"Ridiculous!" answered the German captain. "No man of honor would agree to that!"

"All right, then!" snapped Drake. "I'll go back and tell my commander." He picked up his carbine, walked out of the pillbox, staggered back to the 3rd Battalion CP, and collapsed.

Three days later, our troops managed to infiltrate the line and blow open the pillboxes with satchel charges. They captured the German captain with what was left of his company.

When the captain was brought to Drake for interrogation, he grinned ruefully. "In a way, it's a comfort to be captured," he confided. "I was in deep trouble for letting you get away!"

Upstarts

Oscar Drake stayed in the army after the war and eventually retired as a full colonel. I don't understand it. Anyone with that kind of imagination and sheer *chutzpa* should have been a major general at least.

Chapter 17

The Rhine

As I pulled on my boots, I remembered the scene in the movie *Gone With the Wind* in which Scarlett shoots the solitary Yankee soldier who enters her house, presumably bent on looting or worse. How would a German *Hausfrau* react to the presence of a solitary Yankee soldier violating the sanctity of **her** home?

I tiptoed down the stairs, hoping that the German conversation would cover any noise I made. Half a dozen startled faces turned toward me as I entered the kitchen.

I did not pause to parley. Before anyone recovered from the shock sufficiently to reach for a butcher knife, I charged across the room and out the door, then double-timed to the main road. There I recovered my breath and watched for a GI vehicle of some kind, glancing occasionally over my shoulder to make sure no one had followed me.

No one had, and within five minutes a wire truck from some Corps artillery battalion came by, and from there on it was clear sailing. I don't know what the driver thought at the sight of an American major standing by the road with his thumb in the air, but he gave me a lift to his CP, where I hitched a ride to their Group CP, from which I got transportation to the 90th Div Arty, where I found our message center jeep about to leave for the 915th. I arrived about dusk, just as they were dispatching a vehicle to go back and rescue me.

Don Thomson was apologetic. He said that since I generally went on reconnaissance with Col Hughes, he had assumed I was with him today. When I pointed out that I had told him where I would be, he mumbled.

There wasn't much time for recriminations anyhow. North of us, in the First Army zone, the 9th Armored Division had captured a bridge across the Rhine at Remagen and established a bridgehead. The Third Army was to go into overdrive to catch up.

Consequently, the 359th Regimental Combat Team had been attached to the 4th Armored Division, which was already swinging south in a sweep to clear the area between the Moselle and the Rhine. Its first objective was the city of Bad Kreuznach.

When I showed up, Bob Hughes had already started to assemble a command group basically a stripped-down reconnaissance party - to follow the 359th regimental command group on the road to catch up with the commander of Combat Command B of the 4th Armored. [A combat command was a sort of task force made up of whatever seemed appropriate to its mission. Typically it comprised a tank battalion, an armored infantry battalion, a field artillery battalion, and smaller units of engineers, medics, etc. On this occasion, CCB had all this, and the 359th Regimental Combat Team too.]

This was the first time we had worked with an Armored Division, and we had to make some changes in our basic assumptions. Just for starters, instead of waiting for orders telling us where to go and what to do when we got there, here we had to get on the road first, following the armor, and find out where we were going after we got there.

Upstarts

All our infantry was loaded onto quartermaster trucks because they couldn't be expected to keep up on foot. They got on the road in approach march formation, with our artillery batteries interspersed among them.

And then there was the use of radios. We had been carefully taught not to say anything over the radio **in the clear** (not in code), that might be of value to the enemy. Specifically, that included the designation of units, such as 90th Division, 915th Field Artillery Battalion, etc., or the locations of friendly troops, even without unit designation.

Fire missions **were** sent in the clear, because it would take too much time to encode and decode them, and besides, the enemy already knew where they were, and by the time they got word where we were going to shoot, it would be too late to do much about it. .

I was with the command party, bouncing around in the back seat of Col Hughes command car, listening to the crackle of the SCR 608 radio and trying to stay awake. It was nightfall before we got started, and my mid-day nap had not completely caught me up on sleep. We were driving blackout, with the driver straining to guide on the tiny red cat-eye tail lights of the vehicle ahead.

It was well past midnight when we halted for no apparent reason, and Bob Hughes and I dismounted and walked forward to see if we could find out what was going on. (This was standard procedure, to make sure that a whole column was not stopping because some driver had gone to sleep.) We stumbled through the dark along the shoulder of the road, past a couple of dozen vehicles, until we got to a place where we saw the tall shadowy figure of Col Bell talking to a Military Policeman (MP). We had arrived at a fork in the road, and no one knew which branch to take.

The **MP** went to the radio in his jeep, and I heard him say, "The Commanding Officer of the 359th Infantry is here at coordinates 753-658, and he wants to know which road to take. "

This outrageous violation of radio security almost made me dive for a ditch, expecting that artillery fire would be coming in any moment, but everyone else seemed take it calmly. I was soon to find that as long as they were moving, armored units didn't worry about some German intercept radios listening in. They knew it would be hours - perhaps days - before the information would filter down to a combat unit which could react to it, and by then our people would be miles away, and the situation completely changed.

Col Bell got his answer and we drove on, down the right fork, I believe. Or maybe the left. Anyhow, he got into contact with the commanding general of CCB, and got some idea of what road to take to follow the armor.

I think it was at the time we were following the 4th Armored Division that we made three rather long moves in one day, which kept us busy. On the second displacement we ended up with the FDC in a deserted pig-sty, so we were glad to make

the third, where we finally got the CP tent set up well after dark. We were in a grove of trees, at the bottom of a deep ravine. I had not been on this reconnaissance, so I did not have the locations of the firing batteries clearly in mind.

I made up the schedule of H & I firing for the night and sent the data down to the executive of C Battery. Pretty soon my phone rang. It was Capt Lew Fauble, commanding C Battery. "Hey, Bob, what do you think you're doing? It's not our turn for H & I. We had it night before last!"

"Yes," I said, "and B and A batteries both had it last night, so it is your turn. Now stop arguing and start shooting. "

Fauble said, "All right, you bastard, I'll do it. But you aren't going to like it!"

I should have felt sorry for those cannoneers who had to stay awake and fire the cannon, because they must have been tired. But no more tired than I was. I went out and crawled into my sleeping bag, not even taking time to blow up the air mattress.

KAH-WHAM! The first round lifted me and the sleeping bag at least a foot off the ground. C Battery, it seemed, was located right behind the CP, and the howitzer that fired must have been about twenty feet away. In the bottom of the ravine the sound and blast were confined and magnified.

Well, I told myself, that was only the first one, and I wasn't braced for it. I'll get used to this. I squirmed into a better position and dozed off.

KAH-WHAM! It was no good. I wasn't going to get used to it. I was sure Lew Fauble had chosen the howitzer nearest to me to do the night's firing, but I was also sure that the other three were still too close. By the time the third round came, I was already in the CP tent, putting in a phone call to Upstart Charley Guns. "Cease firing. I'll see if I can get the Cannon Company to fire it. "

Then one morning our infantry deployed along the outskirts of the city of Bad Kreuznach, and the 915th went into position to support them.

The 4th Armored Division had encircled Bad Kreuznach, effectively cutting off the garrison inside the city, and the job of the 359th RCT was to clean it out. They did, in about two days.

[Note: In 1950, as a student at The Armored School at Fort Knox, I heard a presentation on that campaign. When the presenter stated that CCB captured Bad Kreuznach, I felt compelled to get to my feet and object that they were able to do it only because most of the work was accomplished by an attached infantry regimental combat team larger than all the rest of CCB put together. He listened courteously, then went on as if he had not been interrupted.]

Bad Kreuznach, it turned out, was important to the German war effort because it was a center of the optical glass industry, with a huge factory manufacturing lenses and accompanying equipment. US Army authorities seized the plant and sealed it to prevent looting, but not before several hundred, if not thousand, souvenir cameras, magnifying glasses, binoculars, etc. were in the hands of our noble troops.

But we didn't linger long at Bad Kreuznach. There was **The River,** the Rhine, to be crossed, and the 90th Division now had an aggressive Commanding General, Brig Gen Herbert Earnest, a man experienced with armored troops and used to rapid, decisive action. Furthermore, it was now assigned to the aggressive XII Corps. [I used to feel that if the XII Corps were assigned the 4th Armored Division plus the 90th and 5th Infantry Divisions, as it now was, we could win the war without the rest of the army. Of course that wasn't true, but it was a good feeling to have.]

But before crossing the Rhine, there was a major city, well defended, to be taken. **Mainz** was located astride the Rhine at the place where the Main River flowed into it. The other two RCTs of the 90th had been rampaging up the west bank of the Rhine and had now arrived at the northern and western outskirts of Mainz as the 359th detached from the 4th Armored and Bad Kreuznach to approach it from the south.

Mainz was defended, but the commandant there surrendered the part west of the river after less than a day of fighting.

I had visions of our capturing a bridge intact, like the one at Remagen, but they had all been destroyed. The story I heard was that the commander of the troops on the east side of the river blew up the city's bridges too soon, so that the Germans we were fighting could neither retreat or be reinforced. The same story said that he was executed for this error in judgment. I don't know if any or all of this is true, but if it is, it would help account for the quick surrender.

Sometime during this campaign, we heard that a few combat troops were to be given three-day passes for a recreational visit to Paris! Paris, France, that is. Some of the troops would have preferred Paris, Texas, but since that wasn't an option, the fabulous European city was a mouth-watering treat for battle-weary men. And the 915th actually got a quota!

I don't recall how many enlisted men we were allowed, but three officer slots were included, and Major Doug Myers, the Battalion Executive, and Capt Louis Fauble, commanding Battery C, were two of them. The third may have been Bob Wilson of Battery C, but I'm not sure. The chosen three were eager, and the rest of us were jealous. Captain John Klas, now recuperated from his operation, was to fill in for Doug Myers as executive officer during his absence.

* * * * *

While the 90th Division was taking Mainz, the 5th Division, on our right, had forced a crossing of the Rhine River a few miles to the south near the towns of Nierstein and Oppenheim. The 357th Infantry was rushed across behind them to help hold and extend the bridgehead, and the following day the rest of us followed across on a ponton bridge. The land was level around the crossing, and the Rhine flowed smoothly.

The Rhine

There was a catch, however. The bridge carried traffic one way only - forward, or east. Of course the engineers would have to build a west-bound bridge later, but there was no assurance it would be done in time for our Paris-bound group to get back and meet the rendezvous for their anticipated vacation. So they stayed behind, assuring us that they would catch up with us later.

We went into position within sight of the bridge, and the next day I got to watch the crossing of the 4th Armored Division. It was a marvelous example of march discipline. The vehicles, ranging in size from heavy tanks to jeeps, rolled across the bridge and onto the paved road at precise fifty-yard intervals and proceeded at a uniform speed and interval until they were out of sight. There were necessary longer gaps between march units, but aside from that they moved continuously all day. I heard firing in the distance, so I knew the front of the column must have run into some resistance, but the tail never even slowed down.

[Note: Years later, at the Armored School, I learned that this phenomenon was possible because of the doctrine of **coiling.** When the front of the column was stopped, the vehicles moved into fields on either side to clear the road for units following.]

The armor raised huge clouds of dust. That was something I never got completely used to: the pounding given a road by an armored column **always** raised dust, even if it had been raining for two weeks and the highway virtually floated on mud. It made no difference whether the roadway was reinforced concrete, blacktop, gravel, or plain dirt, by the time the first battalion had gone by, the dust would be billowing up.

In addition to that, after an armored column had passed, the road would be in urgent need of repair. Concrete would crumble into irregular slabs, blacktop would dissolve into a series of potholes, gravel and dirt would disintegrate completely. I don't know how an *Autobahn* or freeway would have held up, because I never saw one that our troops could use for more than a mile or two. All the bridges and overpasses had been blown.

We moved pretty rapidly after that, and it was more than a week before the Paris vacationers found us. The three days in Paris had been augmented by travel time. And Major Doug Myers never got back at all. He had been evacuated, deathly sick. John Klas was no longer a fill-in; he was our executive officer for the rest of the war.

Lew Fauble gave me the story about Major Myers. Lew was a lean, weather-beaten man in his mid-twenties. He was rapidly losing his fine blond hair to premature balding, and he had a malocclusion, his lower jaw protruding forward past the upper. Nonetheless, he was a warm friend as well as a top-notch officer.

"Doug and I shared a hotel room," he said, "and Doug hardly left it. All the rest of us were out sightseeing or carousing, drinking and chasing, but it was all wasted on Doug, because he didn't feel good. He couldn't even hold food down, let alone liquor.

"And then when we were on the way back, on a train headed for Verdun, I took a good look at him and he was as yellow as a canary bird! Hepatitis, the medics said when they took him off the train. They said we probably wouldn't see him again this war."

Well, I had heard of combat fatigue, but I never expected Doug Myers to turn yellow when we crossed the Rhine!

Lieutenant David Davis, our battalion surgeon, was a round little man with soulful brown eyes. When he took off his helmet, the top of his head shone like a mirror framed with dark brown hair. He was usually cheerful, amazingly so, considering his situation.

In the first place, although he was an M. D., he felt out of place as a surgeon; in civilian life he was a pathologist. He was probably a good one, but he had little chance to use his specialty while with us.

He did have some background in the treatment of wounds: he told of his internship at a hospital in one of the rougher sections of Los Angeles. Cuts with a straight-edge razor, the weapon of choice for barroom brawlers in his area, were his favorite, he said, because they were usually clean and not deep. Unless they had opened a major blood vessel like the carotid artery or the jugular vein, they could be stitched neatly, leaving nice thin scars. In this respect, they were unlike wounds from shell fragments, which tended to be random, jagged, and often deep.

However, he studied the latest theories on the treatment of battle wounds and waited for an opportunity to use them. Meanwhile he was the family physician to our battalion. On desert maneuvers he washed out a plug of wax that was making Major Costain deaf in one ear. In England he treated the sty in my left eye. He dispensed nose drops for head colds and gallons of bismuth and paregoric, the current specific for diarrhea, and took care of occasional cases of VD. But with a practice limited to some five hundred healthy young men, he really had little to do. On maneuvers he would usually have finished his work by nine in the morning and found himself with the rest of the day to kill.

The aid station, his place of business, was always set up near the battalion CP, a location handy to the firing batteries as well as Headquarters Battery. Doc got in the habit of wandering over to the S-2 section to see what was going on. Sometimes he would spend most of the day there, chatting with me and anyone else who came by. I was happy to have him, because he was cheerful and witty, and because he was sensitive enough to see when we were busy, and to stay out of the way. He speedily learned not to enter the fire direction center, where they had to be ready for immediate action in an already crowded space.

His life must have been one of loneliness as well as boredom. Although he associated with the other officers of the battalion and ate at the officers' mess, he was a lone M.D. surrounded by artillerymen whose conversation consisted mainly of shop talk carried on in a technical jargon with its own "in" jokes and dramatic pauses, meaningless and bewildering to the uninitiated. I'm sure he often longed to work in a hospital in the company of other doctors, whose conversation would also consist mainly of shop talk, but carried on in his technical jargon with "in" jokes and dramatic pauses that meant something to **him.**

One of his assistants was the aptly named Sgt John S. Haydock (pronounced Hey, Doc!), a well-qualified senior non-com who liked to tell anyone who would listen the sad story that he was a doctor himself, kept from becoming an officer by a sinister conspiracy. His tone implied that Doc Davis was a co-conspirator.

"What he won't tell you," Davis pointed out, "is that he is an **osteopath!"** He pronounced the word with all the scorn that the medical profession feels for homeopaths, chiropractors, faith healers, acupuncturists, and other rival disciplines in the healing arts. [I have been told by doctors of osteopathy (D.O.) that they have to take a doctoral course as long and rigorous as that of an M. D. However, they were not recognized by the U. S. Army. So Sgt Doctor Haydock had a legitimate complaint, but Doc Davis had nothing to do with it.]

Another member of the Medical Detachment, Corporal Henry Zirngibl, was a great letter-writer. He belonged to a small but devout religious sect, and he wrote long epistles to other members, perhaps on the order of the ones St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, Thessalonians, et al. Lt Rodman, who had to read and censor all correspondence written by the enlisted men in the Medical Detachment as well as Hq Btry, hated him because in addition to his own writing, he got equally long letters in response, and he tended to pass them on as enclosures to his letters, so they had to be censored too. But the man was a conscientious medic who did his job, and Doc Davis found him most valuable.

I suspect that Lt Davis looked forward to combat. Not that he wanted anyone to be wounded, but it would give him a chance to do his stuff.

But it did not turn out that way. Certainly we took casualties, but very few men were wounded in our battalion area. Most of the casualties were among the forward observer and liaison parties, up with the infantry, where people did get wounded. A lot.

And because they got wounded when up with the infantry, it would not have made sense to transport them back to us for medical care. They were treated by the infantry's medics, often evacuated to hospitals in the rear before we even heard about it. Doc Davis was simply not included in the chain.

He did get an occasional chance. We were still in Normandy when one afternoon our command post was shelled heavily by German artillery. Everybody ducked, into foxholes or slit trenches if they had them, flat on the ground if they did not. There was the usual wise guy who raised his head long enough to shout, "Hey, cut out that damn' foolishness. Somebody is liable to get hurt!"

That was good for a nervous laugh, and it broke the tension. But when it was all over and the smoke had drifted away, Doc Davis did have one patient. Ironically, it was his own medic, the religious letter writer Zirngibl. He got a shell fragment, which destroyed one eye, and Doc had to evacuate him.

Lt Rodman, the censor, refused to mourn.

Doc Davis

The only people who felt nearly as useless as Doc Davis did were Mayfair First Dog, the lst Platoon of Battery D, 537th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion. They were attached to the 915th to protect us from attacks by enemy aircraft, but after our first few weeks in Normandy, the allied air superiority had pretty well swept the German *Luftwaffe* out of the skies. As I have written elsewhere, our attached AAA did nobly at protecting us from ground attack by enemy infiltrators and small units, which had been by-passed. However, they never forgot that their primary job was to shoot down hostile airplanes, and felt that their talents were being wasted from lack of opportunity.

We did get an aerial bombing the night our CP was in the chateau with the 359th CP, but since it was after dark, our AAA could not see the bombers, and not being equipped with radar, they could not fire. And I don't believe the attack left any casualties for Doc Davis to work on either.

When we were stopped for so long near Gravelotte, Major Bob Swatosh, our S-3, had the ends of several fingers blown off by the booster of a souvenir shell he had disassembled, and Davis treated and bandaged the hand. He made out the tag, which accompanied any medical evacuee, marking it **NLD** (not in line of duty) meaning that the injury was the fault of the patient, not resulting from enemy action or from anything associated with his duties.

Some time after V-E Day when Major Swatosh returned to us, he was sporting a Purple Heart Medal, a decoration awarded to people with combat wounds. Lt Davis fussed and fumed about that, made dark threats about starting an official letter through channels, demanding that the Purple Heart be withdrawn. But I don't think he ever did, or would have succeeded if he had.

And the doctor experienced a change in life style as an indirect result of Swatosh's departure. I became the S-3, so we got a new S-2, Capt Arlo Knowles. Arlo had been a liaison officer in the 344th FA Bn until he was wounded and evacuated. When he returned from the hospital, there was no vacancy for him in the 344th, so they sent him to us just in time to fill the S-2 vacancy. I don't know how Knowles was before his wound, but now his outlook on life was bitter, and he was subject to violent prejudices. One of them seems to have been against the medical profession, perhaps because of his treatment when wounded. Anyhow, he couldn't stand the sight of the inoffensive Lt Davis. "Doc, get out of the way!" or "Doc, don't you have something you could be doing?" Soon it became clear that Capt Knowles felt that battalion surgeons should stay at their aid stations, where they belonged, instead of getting underfoot in his S-2 Section.

Doc Davis crawled further into his shell. Only occasionally would he venture over when he knew Capt Knowles was gone. Sgt Johnson, the operations sergeant, would show him the situation map and brief him on what was happening, for although not an artilleryman, he could understand a map well enough. Don Thomson and I would pass the time of day if we weren't busy, but we saw less and less of him.

Upstarts

One day toward the end of the war we were deep in Germany when Bob Wilson of B Battery told me, "I've started letting my men smoke at night around the battery position. With the German Air Force so short of planes, I think cigarettes have a low priority as targets."

I stopped and thought. Sure enough, it had been months since I last heard "Bedcheck Charley" fly over after dark. And equally as long since we had seen more than one or two enemy aircraft in a day's time.

So on April, when we saw a flight of ten or twelve aircraft overhead, flying east, someone in the CP waved to them and shouted, "Atta Boy! Go get' em!"

The flight turned in a wide loop and came at us, concentrating on B Battery, strafing and dropping bombs!

Now we could see the German crosses on their wings.

Everybody dived for cover - everybody but the AA gunners of Mayfair First Dog, who leaped into the action they had been ready for all along, and men firing our own truck-mounted .50 caliber machine guns. In the next ten minutes, the First Platoon of Battery D, 537th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion, earned their pay for all their months in combat. More than half the enemy planes fell in flames before the rest gave up and flew away.

Doc Davis did a month's work in the hours that followed. This time there were enough casualties to keep him, his ambulance driver, and his aid men all busy - eight casualties in B Battery alone, including First Sergeant Lonnie Hester. As a matter of fact, I believe Davis even set the broken leg of one German pilot who had managed to bailout.

And he came to supper that night radiating fulfillment.

Chapter 18

Pursuit Across Germany

After the Rhine crossing, we went into another phase like the one I earlier called "The Glamour War." Much of the time we were moving rapidly, either following or actually attached to an armored division. There was one difference, however: the German civilians definitely were not standing beside the road cheering us on. Mostly they tried to keep out of sight, and the few who were visible looked stunned and glum. Nobody enjoyed losing the war, not even the ones - the vast majority - who proclaimed loudly that they were *"nichs Nazi."* And if not hostile) they were not friendly or cooperative, either.

Don Thomson ran into one surprising exception. He and John Klas were in a command car, coming up to a new CP, when they found themselves lost in the streets of a town. It was twilight, and all they could tell from the map was that they were supposed to pass through town and proceed toward Budweis, a little farther on. They stopped at an intersection where there was what looked like a sign, and Don got out to see if he could read it.

A voice came out of the dusk. "Can I be of assistance?"

Thomson turned, and seeing a man in civilian clothes, mustered most of his German vocabulary to ask, *"Wo ist Budweis'l"*

"Oh," said the civilian, "straightaway here, then take the next turning to the right."

"Danke," said Captain Thomson.

"Oh, don't mention it," the German replied.

Don got back into the car, and went two miles before he realized he had made a fool of himself.

Perhaps more typical was the response Doc Davis got to a question. He was more proficient in German than Don Thomson, and he enjoyed fishing. When we stopped near a little lake, he wondered if there were fish in it.

He knocked on the door of a house along the bank. "Can one fish here?" he asked in German.

The housewife shrugged and replied bitterly. "Why not? You won the war, didn't you?"

Of course even had the German citizenry been disposed to be friendly, our own anti-fraternization regulations required us to keep them at arm's length. So most of our communication was strictly business-like, as when we directed a family to vacate their house within twenty minutes because we needed to use it. Even this amount of conversation was complicated, of course, by the language barrier, but we did have a few soldiers who spoke usable German. Our Chief Computor, S/Sgt Hallick, was one, and he was a handy person to have around when we started to move in.

Upstarts

I am sure that there were some illicit communications carried on in the shadows. What red-blooded American soldier could resist treating a thin, wistful little boy to a piece of chocolate? Or his somewhat bigger sister to a whole bar? And what sweet-starved German youngster would have the strength to refuse?

At least one German citizen had mixed emotions about our arrival. He was a young man we found in a farmhouse as we moved into it to set up our CP. When Sgt Hallick asked about him, it turned out that he was a deserter from the German Army. We treated him as a prisoner of war and took him over to Major Boers, S-2 of the 359th Infantry, [Unique 2] for interrogation. While he waited to be taken, he sat with blank brown eyes staring into space, presumably trying to guess whether what we would do to him would be worse than being shot for desertion by the *Wehrmacht.*

Or maybe he was just dreaming of a decent drink of water.

The house where we found him in was a duplex: the family lived in half of it and their cows occupied the other half. The water supply was a well under the house. We thought this would be handy in case we wanted coffee when it wasn't available from the kitchen truck. We had been issued halazone tablets to sterilize water from questionable sources.

The first bucketful made us thoughtful. It was not exactly muddy, but it was a medium brown in color and gave off a rich odor of cattle. We added twice the recommended amount of halazone and let it sit for an hour or so, in hopes some of the brown would settle out.

It didn't.

We boiled it for a good long time before adding the powdered coffee. Then we tasted it and poured it out in the barnyard, where it probably percolated through the ground and added still more flavor to the well water.

We did have one sort of cheering section as we crossed Germany: long columns of displaced persons trudging westward along the roads. Some of them were newly released inmates of German PW camps, some were a mixed bag of forced laborers, Czech, Polish, Russian, Yugoslavs. Some were Jews, Gypsies, and other "undesirables" from concentration camps. Most of them were burdened with impromptu back packs; some had push carts, wheelbarrows, or coaster wagons to carry their possessions. An occasional lucky or affluent one might have an ox, donkey or even a horse to pull his cart.

They were a docile bunch: they made an honest effort to stay out of our way by keeping to the shoulders of the roads, and those who still had energy enough would smile and even shout encouragement. They might be bewildered and exhausted, but there was no question about whose side they were on!

Most of the released PsW were French, but there was everyone else imaginable. John Klas, an incorrigible extrovert, liked to lean out of his command car, shout, *"Francais)"* in his huge voice, and wait for the answering chorus of "*Qui "*

One time, however, he got a surprise: a booming bass, *"A Rus!"*

Pursuit Across Germany

Almost everyone has seen pictures of American soldiers opening the gates of PW camps, but one bizarre incident escaped public notice. One of the two 90th Div Arty chaplains was en route between two battalions on pastoral business when he made a wrong turn and was about to enter a village when he realized that there were no white flags displayed in token of surrender. He told his assistant-driver, organist, secretary, and altar boy - to stop while he checked his map. At this point a ragged man jumped out of the roadside ditch and addressed the chaplain in English with a heavy French accent. "Don't go in there! There are German SS troops guarding the prison camp in the village. Go back and bring your army to storm the place."

The man was an escaped PW from the camp he mentioned, and he thought that the other PsW would probably rise up and overpower their guards, or at least distract them enough to keep them from resisting the Americans.

The chaplain thought it over. Neither he nor his assistant was armed: medics and chaplain personnel were not allowed to carry weapons. He didn't know much about our tactical plans, nor how soon infantry would be available for this mission. But he did know the protocol for surrendering a village, so he decided to bluff.

After making sure the PW spoke German as well as French and English, he told him, "You go back into the village and tell the burgomeister that I am here to save as many lives as I can. I can hold off our soldiers for two hours, but unless by that time the village, including the SS soldiers, have surrendered and all the firearms, knives, and cameras have been collected and white flags put up, his village will be turned to rubble by artillery fire. Can you do that without being recaptured?"

And well within the two hours, white flags were flying. The chaplain drove in, armed the PsW with the collected weapons, and told them to take over until the American troops arrived.

As he climbed back into his jeep to leave, the French PW who had first seen him asked, "Sir, is it a custom in the American Army for two unarmed men to capture villages?"

Late in the spring we occupied what looked like an ordinary farmhouse with a stable across the courtyard. It appeared to be deserted, so we didn't have the usual problem of getting the Germans moved out. But other hazards started turning up as soon as we arrived. Everywhere we had to step over little piles or puddles of stinking dung: on the floors of the house, in the courtyard, in the stable. Out in the courtyard there sat a man who looked like a scarecrow made of sticks with rags hung on them. It took me awhile to realize that he was in the last stages of starvation, exacerbated by an acute diarrhea. Inside the stable I found the most shocking sight I had seen since the burnt German tanker at the Falaise Gap. This was a man who was beyond the last stages of starvation. On the straw in one of the stalls, he lay on his side, his pelvic bone showing through his thin trousers. His buttocks were so shrunken that his seat was concave instead of convex. I stood for a long moment while the truth seeped through. This stable was not for cattle or horses, but for slave labor who worked the farm to grow food for people who didn't share it with them. No wonder the German proprietors had left before we could catch them and hold them as war criminals!

Upstarts

When, nauseated in mind and body, I came back into the courtyard, the scarecrow was listlessly trying to eat a C ration that someone had given him. I don't know what ever happened to him: Captain Jacobs was already out looking for a less filthy location for a CP, and we moved out as soon as he got back.

For awhile the 359th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) was again attached to the 4th Armored Division, an outfit we always enjoyed working with, both because by now we were on the same wave length and because they knew how to break through enemy resistance and to advance rapidly in **pursuit** after the breakthrough was made.

[They also enjoyed a not-so-secret weapon, an officer named Creighton Abrams, who had already become legendary as a Lt Col commanding a tank battalion, because whichever Combat Command his battalion was with always advanced fastest. At the time I met him, he had been promoted to Colonel and given a Combat Command - a brigadier general's job. He was a big, ebullient man with a loud, infectious laugh. And he was destined to wear four stars as Army Chief of Staff.]

The 359th RCT followed the forward elements of the 4th Armored Division to protect the flanks and to clean out any pockets of resistance they might have by-passed. One day we advanced along a road, which followed the course of a small river - the Werra, I believe. Our battalion would go into a hasty position, then move by bounds to keep up.

As they rolled along the road, the leading tank battalion was fired on from across the stream. The threat was not enough to make them halt, but after they had gone by, they sent word back with the location of the village whence the enemy had fired. A couple of companies of the 359th were ordered to cross the river and capture or drive the nuisance away. They wanted the 915th to be ready to fire for them.

We had already occupied positions well beyond the village, and were faced with the unique situation of firing backward, more or less over our right shoulder. It was going to be a small operation, so I decided to have only one battery turn around to support them, leaving the other two available to fire in the direction of the main attack.

I phoned C Battery and gave the executive explicit instructions as to what direction they would be firing in. There are two methods of "laying" a battery for direction. The most accurate one, which we generally used, gave them an angle from a line on the ground, but the angle could be either one of two directions, front or rear. This was rarely a problem, since everybody knew which direction we were headed, but under the circumstances, I felt it better to "lay by compass," using the angle of direction from north, which could only be interpreted one way.

I added, "That's going to be a big shift!"

"Yes, sir, it sure is."

"OK. Report when laid and ready to fire."

About half an hour later he had reported ready to fire, and Captain Larrey, the LnO with the unit making the attack called in that they were about to start across the river.

"Can you see the village?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. How about me zeroing in on it while the companies cross?"

"Good idea," I told him. "After a big shift like this, the battery needs some kind of registration. "

We agreed on the location to fire on, and I sent orders to C Battery to fire one howitzer until we were sure we were on target.

Pretty soon they reported "On the way," and I relayed it to Larrey.

There was a lengthy pause. Then Larrey said, "Lost." That meant he hadn't seen the burst or the smoke from it.

I looked at the firing chart map. The village didn't look big enough to hide the smoke from a bursting shell, but funny things happen.

"I'll fire a round of red smoke, " I told Captain Larrey. "You're sure to see that." And I did. And he said, "Lost."

"Good God! I'll fire a round with a fuze timed to burst about 50 yards in the air. "

"Wait a minute, Major. I just realized that I not only haven't seen either of those rounds, I haven't even **heard** either of them, and I'm only a couple of hundred yards from the target. "

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jones*, the C Battery computor, waving at me. "It's Captain Fauble, sir! He says, 'Cease firing; I have to check on something!'"

When Lew Fauble, the embarrassed commander of C Battery, called back, he reported that his exec, despite all my precautions, had fired exactly 180^0 in the wrong direction: toward the front instead of the rear! "I'm sorry as hell, Bob. I was taking a nap, and I just now woke up. "

Before we had time to turn the battery around again, our infantry was already in the village. Fortunately, the enemy troops who had shot at our column had departed, so our help was not necessary.

And our two rounds had not hit any friendly troops, because they had been fired forward, well in front of our advance, instead of to the rear.

The 90th Division did not capture major cities very often; we were carefully routed around them and through the rural areas, so we didn't get as much publicity as we would have liked. On the other hand, we didn't take the horrendous losses that city fighting might have entailed. So after Mainz, we didn't take any place one might have heard of.

Upstarts

We did seize Zella Mehlis. If you have never heard of Zella Mehlis, you are in the majority. It was a pretty town, nestled in the valley of the Werra River, between the wooded hills of the Thuringian Forest. It was not a big city, and I had never heard of it before either, but it was of considerable military importance, because it contained the huge Walther gun factory, manufacturing all kinds of small arms. A bonanza for souvenir hunters/looters. Everyone in the infantry and almost everybody in the artillery ended up with at least one pistol. The most popular was the P38, a weapon that fired a smaller bullet than the clumsy .45 caliber Colt automatic we used, but was much better balanced and easier to fire accurately.

Lew Fauble, who was a gun buff, actually went into the factory and put together his own pistol, selecting individual parts that fit each other perfectly, so that he had a much more smoothly-operating pistol than the ones that came off the assembly line. At least so he said.

About that time, an order from higher headquarters interrupted the people who were assembling two pistols with gold engraving as a gift for General Patton. The factory was to be sealed, and all the weapons and parts therein were declared contraband, property of the United States. Nothing would be removed, and commanders would take appropriate steps to see that any items, which might have been already taken were returned forthwith.

That last part would have been impossible to enforce without calling off the war long enough to simultaneously strip-search every soldier and all equipment he might have had contact with. Realizing this, Bob Hughes called the battery commanders together and directed each of them to find and confiscate one pistol to be turned in. This token compliance was made, and the matter was dropped.

Essay Eleven

Hold Your Breath

At an Army school I attended after the war, I saw a movie of some men who had been experimentally subjected to a light dose of a new military gas. This chemical weapon was not supposed to do any permanent damage to the human body: it only made people act silly and "incapable of taking purposeful action appropriate to the situation." It seemed to work; at least the subjects were unable to follow orders in a simple marching drill. They all turned in different directions, bumping into each other and eventually collapsing in a fit of giggles.

But it didn't take a new gas to make people act silly. All it needed was the mere **suggestion** of gas - any kind of gas - to make clowns out of soldiers.

The last gas scare we had was sometime in the spring of 1945, when we were loping across Germany like a dog chasing a large cat - trying to keep it moving fast enough so it wouldn't have time to turn and give us a face full of claws.

Arlo Knowles, who had replaced me as S-2, came to me in the fire direction center. "Major, this just came in by radio from Mendicino. What do you think I should do about it?"

I looked at the decoded message in his hand. "There is an unconfirmed, repeat unconfirmed report that we have had some casualties from gas. Am investigating. Recommend necessary precautions."

I held the scrap of paper in my hand, absently noting the coffee stain in the corner. A number of thoughts ran through my mind. Vince Mendicino was liaison officer with the 3rd Battalion of the 359th, and he was not a man to panic easily. If he thought this rumor was worth reporting, it probably should be taken seriously, and the men should be warned to collect up their gas masks and prepare to don them.

However ...

I tried to think when I had last seen my own gas mask. I seemed to remember hanging it on a nail in the kitchen of a farmhouse we were using as a CP, back in November - or was it December? I could not recall taking it down again, nor having seen it since.

How many of our people were in the same situation? I tried to think if I had noticed anyone carrying a mask recently, but could not. If they had not lost them, they had them stashed on a truck somewhere.

If we warned everyone to prepare for a gas attack, it might save the lives or lungs of those who had and could find theirs, but wouldn't it cause a panic among those who did not or could not?

Panic was a word that I associated with warnings of gas attack.

Even away back, during training at Camp Barkeley, Chemical Warfare instruction was associated with pandemonium. When a bunch of men attempt to put on gas masks while holding their helmets between their knees and remembering not to breathe - well, visualize it.

The battalion gas officer and was in charge of that training. He passed around the sniff sets and explained which gas smelled like geraniums, which like garlic, and which like new mown hay. He taught them how and why to put on masks. Also that you never put anything but the mask and its accessories into the canvas carrier, which fitted uncomfortably under your left armpit. And particularly that the first thing you do when someone yells "Gas!" is to **hold** your breath.

One day a captain with a clipboard came from Division headquarters to check on how training was progressing. He asked the class, "What's *the first* thing you do when you hear the command 'Gas!'?" and singled out a stupid-looking recruit to answer.

I relaxed. This recruit looked stupid, but he was one of the brightest. In fact, he had been a student at West Point until he failed an advanced math course.

"Sir," he said, "You take off your helmet and hold it between your knees. Then you reach over and unsnap your mask carrier, take out the face-piece ... "

I closed my eyes and held my breath. The man was reciting almost verbatim from the field manual, but he was leaving out the key answer to the catch question. When I looked again, he had progressed to the point where he was about to put the helmet back on over the mask, when he paused and a cunning look came over his face. " ... and all the time you're doing this," he finished, "you hold your breath."

I released my own breath. The inspector made a little mark on his check list and turned to Fauble. "Lieutenant, you have obviously done a fine job of instructing." Fauble thanked him and recommended the recruit for a three day pass.

We carried those god-forsaken masks through dozens of field exercises and maneuvers; we cared for them, cursed them, and abused them. Before going overseas, we were issued a newer model, which was lighter weight and more convenient to carry - but not much. And just before the invasion we were issued detector arm bands which turned red in the presence of poison gas - at least so we were told. The gas NCOs were also given sticks of chalk which made a blue mark that turned red when gas was around.

Still studying the coffee-stained message about the "unconfirmed, repeat unconfirmed report," I remembered the mad scramble when someone yelled "Gas!" aboard the *Frank R. Stockton*, described in Chapter 1.

Then my mind raced on to the events of the night of D+5.

All three firing batteries were ashore by then, but we were still trying to dry out, get used to combat noises, and get over being trigger-happy. Col Costain was getting us ready to make a night move into a new position, where we could all be together and support an attack in a new direction. We were supposed to start moving at midnight, and about eleven o'clock (2300 hours) we got a radio message from the 343rd FA Bn. It was in code, and something was wrong, because we couldn't decode it into anything that made sense.

Hold Your Breath

Finally Costain sent me out to find the 343rd CP and get the message from the horse's mouth. "And hurry back," he told me. "This might make a difference in our move."

One thing about the trip - it wasn't very far. You couldn't go very far without running out of American-held territory. But I certainly did not hurry. The night was dark as the inside of a Black Angus, we had to drive without lights, and the country was infested with soldiers nervous enough to shoot anything that moved. Joe B. Davis kept his foot very lightly on the gas pedal, so he could slap on the brakes quickly if someone hollered "Halt" or if I thought I saw a clue as to which way to go. Every couple of hundred yards we'd stop so I could look at my map by the faint glow of my flashlight. All our flashlights had red plastic disks over the lenses, so they'd be hard for Bedcheck Charley to pick up.

Having studied how to avoid overloading myself, I had by now hung my musette bag on the jeep, tossed my gas mask in between the two front seats, taken off the suspenders to my pistol belt, and made myself generally more comfortable.

Earlier in the evening the Germans had fired considerable artillery into the area, and the smoke still hung along the ground, mixing with the evening fog. It smelled sharp, but not really unpleasant, unless you thought of what had caused it.

It was Joe B. Davis who saw the glow of the 343rd fluorescent CP sign. I got out and led the jeep into the field through a break in the hedgerow. That was necessary at night. There might be chuck holes or men sleeping on the ground.

Once the jeep was parked, I went in search of the CP tent. Each person I asked sent me somewhere else, but after I had blundered around for perhaps fifteen minutes, I finally came in sight of the square black shadow of the light-proof tent. Then a weird figure stepped from behind a tree and nearly ran into me. It was as tall as me, had a trunk like a small elephant and eyes like a man from Mars. This apparition blubbered, "Bubba babba, bo boo babba gab bab?" It took me a few seconds to translate this as "What's the matter, don't you have a gas mask?"

The first thing you do is hold your breath. Then you remove your helmet and put on your mask. But my jeep, containing aforesaid mask, was about two hundred yards away, and getting there without breathing was out of the question. The problem was: Should I run there, thus getting to the mask more quickly, but necessarily speeding up my breathing, or should I walk, breathing shallowly all the while? Considering the fact that it was pitch dark, I would quite probably stumble and fall down several times if I ran, and might possibly run past the jeep besides. So I walked as briskly as I could. Nevertheless, by the time I got to the jeep, I had bootlegged myself several small breaths, smelled nothing but the HE smoke I had been smelling all along, and still seemed healthy. So I was able to say rather casually to Joe B. Davis, "These jokers seem to think there's some gas around, so I guess we'd better put our masks on."

Davis was all soldier. He didn't waste time on questions; he just held his breath while he reached between the seats, handed me my mask, and put on his own in one continuous movement. I took my time, making sure the waterproof patch was off this time. If there was gas, I'd already been pretty well exposed, so there was no point in making a jackass of myself as I had on the ship.

Then I went back to the CP tent and asked questions about the message. It wasn't easy to communicate through those masks, but by a combination of grunts, sign language and written notes, I learned that the message hadn't been meant for us anyhow, and that the encoder had used a mysterious mix of today's and yesterday's codes, probably because it was so close to midnight.

I looked at my watch. Twelve-thirty. Col Costain would be frantic by now. I asked them to send another message canceling the first one, then got back in the jeep and headed for home as fast as you can go at five miles an hour. The mask was uncomfortable and made visibility even worse, if possible. I lifted a corner of it cautiously to test for gas. I still couldn't smell anything except the artillery fumes, so I took it off. Joe B. Davis pulled his far enough away from his mouth to ask, "Is it all right to take these off now, sir?"

"I guess so. If there was any gas around, we'd both be dead already." He stripped the mask the rest of the way off.

Our own CP was in chaos. The first thing I heard was two men arguing. They had their masks out of the carrying cases, but not on their faces. They were shining a blackout flashlight at a chalk mark on a tree. "Look at the damn' thing," one of them shouted. "It's red!"

"Of course it **looks** red, shit-for-brains! You've got that red thing on your flashlight. Everything looks red. Lemme see your armband."

"It's red too."

"It don't look red to me. Ain't anything red but your dumb face."

I pushed past them. Obviously our scientific means of detection were useless in the dark. Everything had been loaded onto trucks and most of the vehicles had their motors running and spewing out exhaust. Half the men had their masks off and were engaged in putting them on. The other half already had them on and were taking them off.

At the center of things I found Col Costain and Major Hughes carrying on a conversation of sorts with Capt Bob Wilson. The discussion was as heated as the one between the men with the flashlight, but harder to understand, because they were all masked. Wilson seemed to be saying that he knew there was phosgene gas around because he had been up the road a ways and had gotten a definite smell of new-mown hay.

I entered the argument. "Maybe some farmer has been cutting hay," I suggested.

Anyhow, there's no gas up that road, because I just came from there with no mask on, and I'm still alive."

Hold Your Breath

Capt Wilson said something indignant but inarticulate through his rubber facepiece.

Col Costain turned toward me and took his mask off. "Well," he said, "if you're sure ... "

Major Hughes grabbed him by the arm from the other side. I did not get what he was saying, partly because it was muffled by the mask and partly because some trucks were roaring up the road and turning in to a field across the road.

The colonel turned back to me. "What do you say to that?" "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't hear it."

He thinks you or Fauble ought to go check the new position to make sure we aren't running into a gassed area. Matter of fact, he just stopped A Battery on the road and had 'em loop the loop back here so we can hold 'em until you've checked." He started to put his mask back on again.

"Colonel, I can go, but I can't make a decent check before daylight. In the dark it's impossible to see whether these indicators have changed colors, especially with these flashlights. "

"God Almighty!" said Costain, as nearly as I could tell through the mask.

"We've got to be in position and firing before daylight."

"Sir, I'm morally certain there is no gas anywhere in the area. These high explosive fumes smell funny, but that's all. It's just like it was on the ship."

Captain Wilson said something I didn't catch. Probably Costain didn't either, because some more of A Battery's trucks were going by in both directions, "looping the loop" according to Major Hughes orders. There were trucks spread from Beersheba even unto Dan, because the drivers were all fiddling with their gas masks, and no one, not even John Klas, who had a voice like a built-in bullhorn, was able to tell them what to do audibly from under a gas mask.

The colonel took off his mask again and threw it on the ground. "All right," he bawled, "everybody get those goddam gas masks off, and let's get this circus on the road."

I had won the argument, not by superior logic, but because I could talk out loud with a bare face.

Costain turned to his executive. You may be right, Bob, but I'll take the responsibility. I'd rather be dead doing something than standing here holding my breath. "

Soon I heard Klas's voice bellowing orders to his drivers, and after while everything got straightened out, and life went on.

So here it was ten months later, and I stood with the coffee-stained report from Lt Mendicino in my hand. If I put out the word, the silly season would be on us again. If I didn't, the whole battalion might be sentenced to a horrible death. But even if I did notify everybody, what about the careless ones like me who had no masks? What would they do - steal one from a buddy? Go insane? Hold their breath?

Fortunately, I didn't have to make the decision. Commanders make decisions. I carried the message to Bob T. Hughes, now Lieutenant Colonel Hughes, handed it to him, and waited for his instructions.

When I got back to my phone, Mendicino was on the line. "Major? This is Vince. You know that message I sent you? The mysterious one?"

"I sure do."

"Well, forget it. It turned out some of our men were passing a water purification plant and a stray bullet put a hole in the chlorine tank."

"Thank God! Oh, thank God!"

"Your voice sounds funny, Bob. Like you had a mouth full of mush."

"Paper, Vince. Coffee-flavored paper. Col Hughes ordered me to chew up your message and swallow it. He said he'd rather die doing something than stand here holding his breath.

Chapter 19

Cease Firing, End of Mission

I believe it was the 344th FA Bn that achieved a coup by firing the first artillery round into Germany. Of course it was a publicity stunt, and they cheated to do it: they moved one howitzer section forward several miles to get within range, fired one or two rounds for the photographer, then hitched up and went back where they belonged. But they did get a lot of publicity for it: illustrated write-ups in the *Stars and Stripes* and in home-town newspapers, and the rest of us were all jealous.

And now we saw an opportunity for a scoop of our own. We were nearly across the narrow part of Germany and coming down the Saal River in Thuringia. The inspiration may have come the night we had our CP in a fabulous castle. I don't remember any details of the castle except for parquet floors and a sense of history because I wondered if it was where the Elector [Landgrave? Duke?] of Thuringia had hidden Martin Luther when he was on the run.

Anyhow, the situation was that we were headed toward Hof, near the westernmost tip of the pre-Hitler boundary of Czechoslovakia. We could be the first to have gone all the way across Germany and fired into the next country!

We made our plans, selected the battery-by lot, I think - who would send one howitzer section forward within range of the border as soon as it was reasonably safe.

And a day or two later the time came. We picked a spot on the map and told the battery commander to find an exact location for the howitzer. Then we called the Public Relations Officer at Division Headquarters and asked him to bring down a photographer to record the occasion.

"What!" he said. "You must be joking. Don't tell me you are planning to fire into Czechoslovakia for a publicity stunt!"

"Why not?"

"What do you mean, 'Why not?' The Czechs are our friends! We're here to liberate them from German oppression, not to shoot up their country. "

"But-"

"Look, you can shoot at Germans in Czechoslovakia, but not at the countryside. Think how the second-generation Bohemians and Moravians in the States would react!"

We radioed the battery commander to bring his gun back.

We did enter Czechoslovakia shortly after that. I am vague about the details, and can't even get a map location, but I do remember that it was in the Sudetenland, the German-speaking part of the country, and the people didn't seem any more enthusiastic about our arrival than the Germans themselves. But then we were pulled back out, and the 90th Division turned to drive southeast, along the German side of the national boundary. I understood that this was by agreement with the Russians. They were to get the credit for liberating their fellow Slavs.

Upstarts

The German defense was sporadic by now. There weren't many German troops left, and most of them were too discouraged to resist, but there were fanatical exceptions, mostly the super-patriot SS, who preferred to die rather than surrender. One example was the village I mentioned in the article "Ammunition," defended by the loyal but foolhardy *Hitler Jugend.*

We went down the border until we got near the town of Furth im Wald, then abruptly turned east again, into Czechoslovakia. We were excited by the news that our Corps objective was Prague. Maybe we could beat the Russians there!

I went with Bob Hughes on reconnaissance. After the recon party had split up due to their respective tasks, we were sitting in the command car on a country road, looking at peasants in the adjoining fields. They did not glower and turn away like the German civilians, but they did not rush up to us either. They looked pretty tentative.

I heard a message coming in on the radio.

Our battalion had a simple little code that we used for normal radio communications. It was composed of two-letter groups, each of which meant some commonly used word or phrase, or one letter or number if it was necessary to spell something out. Anyhow, the message that came in on the command car radio was, "Fox Roger, Able Tare, Oboe King." The radio operator wrote it down and gave it to Col Hughes. He looked at it, frowned, and handed it to me. What do you make of this, Bob?"

I took out a ragged copy of the code for the day and examined the message. Fox Roger was FR. Able Tare was AT. Oboe King was OK. Finally I said, "Whoever sent this must have been drunk. None of these groups is on today's code."

"Let me see it again," he said.

And then it dawned on both of us at once. It wasn't code; it was only an abbreviation. FRAT for fraternization, OK for OK.

Two minutes later we were out of the vehicle, leaning over the fence and offering cigarettes to the loitering farmers. Each of them refused with a wistful smile, but accepted when the offer was repeated. The ice was broken, and within five more minutes we were accepting drinks of an amber liquor with an orange flavor.

About this time the 90th Division was halted and put in Corps reserve so we could accept the surrender of the German 11th Panzer Division, a crack outfit that had opposed us on several occasions - in between dashing across Germany to fight the Russians. The 915th had no part in this operation, but the 359th Infantry did, and I went over to one of the release points and watched the process for about a half hour.

I had seen plenty of German PsW before. Sometimes on the way across Germany I had even seen bypassed groups of enemy soldiers standing along the road trying to flag down someone who would take time to accept their surrender. One thing all prisoners of war had in common was their bedraggled, woebegone look. If they had been dogs, they would have had their tails between their legs.

But this bunch was different. They were dressed in their best uniforms - I wasn't close enough to see if their trousers were creased, but I had the feeling that they were and the tanks rolled up, one at a time, the tank commanders standing at attention in the turrets, and stopped at the exact spot where the tank commander handed down the ammunition, one round at a time, to an American soldier on the ground. The GI passed it on to another, who put it in a stack to be carried away.

It all went with great precision. The German tankers did not look happy, but they managed to look proud. I wondered why, but pretty soon it made sense. They were like the battalion in *The Bridge on the River Kwai,* who had been **ordered** to surrender, and who were still all together as a unit, with their own officers. This Panzer Division had not been defeated; they had run out of gasoline to maneuver with. (I understand we had to - send some gasoline to them to enable them to drive in to give themselves up.) And if they had to surrender, they wanted it to be to us instead of the Russians. They even picked the 90th Division to surrender to: they considered us worthy foes.

Even after they had been disarmed, they were not immediately herded into PW enclosures - there were far too many of them to manage - but were given assembly areas, as if they were our own troops, and directed to go there and camp. Their officers kept their pistols, and one rifle was allowed to each company for guard duty.

A friend of mine was in his jeep when he found himself caught up in a convoy of trucks from the 11th Panzer Division on the way to their assembly area. They came to an unexplained halt, as military columns often do, and a German soldier put his head out the back of the truck and tried to look forward, up the road. "Jesus Christ!" he said in unaccented American, "They've got it all screwed up again. "

My friend dismounted from his jeep. "Where did you learn English?" he asked.

"In Philly, where I was born and went to school. I came to Germany in 1939 to visit my grandparents, and I got drafted. Been in the army six years, and it's been this way all the time - all screwed up!"

This was the grass-roots commentary on one of the crack units in the awesome German military machine. Come to think about it, it would apply to the 90th Division, and presumably to the phalanxes of Alexander the Great, Caesar's legions, the hordes of Genghis Khan, or any military unit of any time.

We never got to Prague, because by the time the 11th Panzer was taken care of, the whole Third Army was halted in place to await VE Day.

Our battalion position was clustered around two Czech villages. C Battery was near one, the rest of us closer to another. The villagers were among the most hospitable people I have known. Bob Hughes and I, as the two senior officers, were invited to stay in the guest room of a prominent citizen, where we slept on real beds with mattresses and pillows and goose-down feather beds for covers. In the morning the lady of the house brought us breakfast in bed, with soft-boiled eggs, toast, and glasses of hot tea with a half-inch of sugar in the bottom and a shot of the orange liquor to give it flavor. [I never heard what they called that liquor, but it tasted like Dutch Curacao.]

I don't know how they managed this magnificent menu, since I am sure they had been on short rations for a long time, but we accepted it gratefully and told ourselves that we didn't want to hurt their feelings by refusing.

The actions of the first peasants we offered cigarettes to was typical. They were proud people, and their etiquette demanded that they avoid any appearance of asking for something that was not freely offered.

Even the children were indoctrinated. We were used to the English kids' "Got any gum, chum?" and the French *"Cigarette pour Papa?"* Even the German children, despite the prohibition on fraternization, occasionally had put in a timid "*Schokolate?"* But not these Czech youngsters.

By way of example, if you were surrounded by English "gum chums" and handed one of them a package of gum (five sticks) he would open the pack and share with four friends. A French lad would snatch it and run like hell with his friends in hot pursuit. I don't know what a German would do, but a Czech kid would refuse it until offered again.

One day the fire direction crew took advantage of the lull to clean out the interior of the truck, with a gaggle of local eight-to-ten-year-olds as fascinated spectators. There was a box into which unwanted items of K- and C-rations had been tossed, and in straightening out the contents, someone inadvertently let a chocolate bar fall off the tailgate of the truck.

One of the youngsters retrieved it and solemnly stretched to hand it back up to the soldier in the truck.

I don't know who suggested that there be a dance in our honor, but everyone was enthusiastic about the idea. It was a street dance, since the weather was fine and there were no buildings of suitable size. The lights were dim, but blackout was not complete: nobody was worried about aerial attack now. The dancing ranged from Czech matrons teaching GIs native folk dances to GIs teaching Czech matrons to jitterbug.

Note the term Czech **matrons.** There was almost no one in the village in the eighteen-to-forty age bracket. All the young people had been taken away to serve in the armed forces or in factories supporting the war effort. So romantic interludes between townspeople and guests were rare if not non-existent, but friendship and fun were warm.

The first dance was so successful that we had one every night we were there. Some of the dancers became proficient at the cross-cultural dances, and most of us learned to hum along with the folk songs the people sang. One of them in particular had a very catchy tune. Unfortunately, according to some Germans I met later, the SS had picked up the melody, written some raunchy words for it, and made it their own.

Cease Firing, End of Mission

I have said that there were no young people in the villages. There was one outstanding exception. The smaller village where C Battery was located had one tall, comely girl of definitely nubile age. I don't suppose she was a raving beauty, but she was attractive and enough of a novelty so that men were making up excuses to visit C Battery in hopes of getting a glimpse of her.

I went over too, and found Capt Fauble, the battery commander, talking to himself. "That son-of-a-bitch, " he mumbled. "Just let me get my hands on that son-of-a-bitch, and he won't live to get off extra duty!"

"What's the problem, Lew?"

"You know about that good-looking girl that lives in the village?" "I've heard about her, yes. Don't tell me that somebody-"

"Some son-of-a-bitch has been teaching her English. "

"So?"

"So now every time she sees anyone in an OD uniform, she gives him a big smile and says, 'Fuck you!'"

Essay Twelve

My Talisman

In the Normandy invasion, the troops that came ashore in landing craft to storm the beaches were not the first to arrive. The 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions landed first, behind the beaches. They came arrived in two different ways: by parachute and by glider.

The gliders were made of plywood, which was light in weight and cheap to construct. Flimsy, too, it turned out. They were manufactured in Great Britain, and the model used was called the "Horsa" after a leader of the Jutes, who spearheaded the Anglo-Saxon invasion of England during the Dark Ages.

Gliders were towed by aircraft and released high over the target area, or **drop zone (DZ).** Then the glider pilots tried to make a soft landing near the spot the troops in the glider were supposed to assemble. This was a tricky job, because there was no engine in the glider, and it could only glide. And until it landed, it was a slow, easy target for anti-aircraft fire.

Landing was made even trickier by the fact that there aren't many good spots to land in Normandy. Roads were about the only places long and straight enough for runways, and they were mostly overhung by trees. I have told elsewhere about the tiny fields surrounded by tree-high hedges. Furthermore, as a final gesture of inhospitality, the Germans had planted the larger fields with heavy, sharp-pointed steel stakes.

A day or two before the invasion, all allied aircraft, including gliders, were painted with broad black and white stripes on the wings and fuselage, so they would not be mistaken for enemy planes and shot down by our own troops.

And that is why, when we landed, we saw fields full of shattered pieces of gaudy black-and-white plywood, and why almost all the glider troops had broken bones.

So far as I know, this was the last time airborne troops used gliders. Jumping was safer.

The paratroopers left evidence of their drop, too. Each man came down by aid of a nylon parachute with a camouflage pattern in shades of green and brown. Pretty, in its way. Items of equipment and supplies had their own parachutes, in bright solid colors. Each type of cargo was identified by the color of the 'chute.

Since tens of thousands of men had jumped, and most of them had better things to do than worry about policing up their parachutes, there were acres and acres of nylon cloth all over and around the beachhead. I'm sure someone was charged with making an organized effort to salvage the stuff for recycling, but a lot of it got picked up as souvenirs.

Our battery barber had a big piece of it to spread over his customers to catch the cut hairs. Most soldiers, however, were satisfied with smaller samples. I had a scrap of my own, not a prepossessing one, since it was made up of two narrow strips set on a bias to one another, with a heavy flat-felled seam holding them together.

Upstarts

It became a fad to wear parachute nylon as a scarf around the neck, knotted in anyone of a variety of styles. I thought it was pretty silly, and it was certainly not an authorized part of the uniform, so I did not wear mine. I tended to go "by the book" in case of doubt, and anyhow my own little rag would look pretty skimpy alongside some of the flowing pseudo-ascots being worn. At this time we were in Normandy, struggling through the hedgerows.

About the time we got into the *Foret de Mont Castre*, I noticed that not only had no one expressed official disapproval, but that a number of senior officers were sporting parachute neckwear. So I got mine out, put it on, and tied it with a sort of rakish four-in-hand knot under my right ear.

As if by magic, within days after I started wearing my scarf, the war opened up. No longer bogged down in the hedgerows, we broke out and roared across Northern France, and except for the period where we ran out of gas in Champagne, continued to roar toward the Moselle River and the Franco-German city of Metz.

Sometime in September a person in authority - possibly General Patton - noticed that American troops were beginning to look like the soldiers in Bill Mauldin's cartoons. Fearing that the French civilians might think we were a bunch of ragged bums, he issued a decree that we would shape up our uniforms and stand tall. There was a long list of forbidden garments, and one of them was any scarf or neckwear other than a GI (government issue) necktie.

Regretfully, I removed my rag of parachute cloth. By then I had become attached

to it. And we moved into the position near Gravelotte where we stayed for a month and a half. Then, after taking part in the crossing of the Moselle River and the liberation of Metz, we slogged through the autumn mud to the Saar River, forced a crossing, and were stopped in our tracks again, this time by the German troops occupying the pillboxes of the Siegfried Line. [I understand we broke a world's record for the length of time a bridgehead has been held without ever getting in a bridge for resupply or reinforcement.]

Finally we withdrew, not to lick our wounds, but to rush north to help stem the massive German counter-offensive in what was called the Battle of the Bulge. Here we were fighting, not only the Germans, but the weather, the deep snow, and the abysmal excuses for roads. Our efforts were successful, but slow and painful. The weather was so cold that everyone piled on all the clothes he could bear, without much regard for uniform regulations.

Then, when the Bulge had been eliminated, we turned again and fought and wormed our way through another segment of the Siegfried Line. Noticing the current laxness in uniform codes, I ventured to put on my neck-cloth again, and immediately we burst through the Siegfried Line, plunged across the Moselle River [again], on to the Rhine, across it, and into the heart of Germany.

By this time it was spring, the weather was bearable, and there was no excuse for piling on clothes. [Except for me. Being cold-blooded, I had bought a tanker jacket and pants with heavy woolen linings. They were part of the uniform, at least for tankers, and I

continued wearing mine until just before VE Day. Later I heard that the FDC personnel had gotten up a pool to see who could guess nearest to the date I would take them off.] Again orders came from on high about wearing of the uniform, and again unauthorized neckwear was prohibited.

This time I ignored it. In my mind, having that scarf knotted around my neck was associated with rapid and successful campaigns. We hadn't gotten home for Christmas 1944, and I wanted to be sure we made it by Christmas 1945, or at least New Year 1946.

I got a number of hints that I was in violation of orders, but I managed to ignore them - after all, I was second-ranking officer in the battalion, and entitled to some privileges until Capt Jacobs approached the battalion commander, Bob T. Hughes, and asked, "Colonel, how the hell can I be expected to enforce discipline in my men when senior officers flout uniform regulations by wearing unauthorized rags around their necks?"

Hughes called me aside and said, "Sorry, Bob, you've got to stop wearing that damned parachute necktie."

"But, Bob," I protested, "this scarf is a good-luck charm. When I take it off, we bog down. When I wear it, we take off like the proverbial ruptured duck." And I proceeded to outline the history of the war and my talisman.

"Take it off," he said.

"I hope you realize that you may be jeopardizing the momentum of the war."

"I'll take that chance. "

So I took it off just as we entered Czechoslovakia. And sure enough, we stopped.

But this time it was because the war was over.

Corporal Martin was the ration clerk for the 915th FA Bn. I don't remember his first name, but the men called him "Pops," because, being in his early 60's, he was the oldest man in the battalion. He sported a full set of dental plates and was a benign father figure for the soldiers, most of them 40 years his junior. Born in Austria, he still had a middleweight German accent, though he had done one prior hitch in the US army - in World War I. Someone once asked how he felt about fighting against his fatherland, and he replied, "Vell, ve hot to do it before; now ve haf to do it again. "

Although only a corporal, he had a key job as ration clerk: he saw that we got food. Each morning he took his truck to the quartermaster ration distribution point, picked up all the day's rations, drove back to the battalion, and issued to each battery kitchen its proper share based on its morning report strength (actual number of warm bodies to be fed). He soon developed a reputation for scrupulous integrity, for he had to satisfy five jealously suspicious mess sergeants, each determined that any errors made should be in his own favor.

The job was routine while we were in garrison. Corporal Martin and his truck driver knew exactly where the ration distribution point was, and where the battery mess halls were. Since none of them moved, the truck itself probably would have gotten from one to the other with little guidance. But in the field, on maneuvers, it was not so simple. The quartermaster didn't move his facilities very often, but field artillery units displace frequently, either forward to keep a retreating enemy within range, or backward, to keep a safe cushion of infantry between them and an advancing enemy. Sometimes we moved twice or even three times in a single day: The record was four times in 24 hours; however we didn't have time to do much shooting that day.

So when the ration truck went after the chow every morning, Corporal Martin had no way of knowing where the batteries would be when he returned. And it was up to him to find them, or face the wrath of 500-odd hungry soldiers. This was especially hard during war games on the California-Arizona Desert Maneuver Area, where thousands of vehicles spread out over the trackless desert, leaving hundreds of new tracks and trails every day (and doubtless doing irreparable damage to the fragile desert ecology). Nevertheless, every day (except one) he tracked us down, so we were able to eat.

"Corporal Martin," I once asked him, "how do you manage to find us wherever we are?"

"Sir, I think it iss vat you call. . . intuition. "

Of course it was more than that. It was the open-space equivalent of street smarts. I developed some of that myself when out looking for other units: the eye for bumper markings that showed the unit a vehicle belonged to; the presence of telephone wire left behind on the ground when the unit moved, which usually meant that wire truck would be coming back to pick it up for future use; the instinct for which of the soldiers standing by the road might be able to answer a question. Anyhow, call it what you will, Corporal Martin had it.

Upstarts

Even the one time he did not arrive, it wasn't because he got lost, but because his 6x6 GMC truck got mired down in deep sand, and it took many hours to find help digging and winching it out. I was acting as battalion executive officer (second in command) that day, and about noon I started getting frantic calls from the battery executives. "The ration truck hasn't come yet, and the cooks can't fix dinner! [the noon meal] What shall I do?"

The battalion commander, Col. Costain, was out reconnoitering our next destination, and all the battery commanders were with him, so it was up to the second string to handle the problem. I knew that each kitchen truck carried a couple of days of emergency rations (C- and K-rations) so it wasn't hard to come to a decision: I told the battery exec's to have the cooks heat up some C-rations and serve them out.

Lt Vincent R. Mendicino, Battery B, protested, "But Captain Wilson said those were to be saved for an emergency!"

"I have just declared an official emergency. You may quote me to Captain Wilson."

I was surprised when I heard that Corporal Martin was from Santa Fe. Of course I hadn't known quite everyone in town, and he was one that I hadn't. But when I heard that he was going home on furlough, I urged him to make a courtesy call on my father at the store. Dad was a patriotic supporter of the war - a minor league flag-waver and president of the local draft board - and I knew that he would be interested in anyone in the service, especially in the service with me and most especially, a contemporary of his own. (I once committed an unpardonable gaffe while speaking to Dad: I referred to Corporal Martin as "an old man with false teeth." Dad said thoughtfully, "Yes. Sixtytwo," and I realized that Dad was only two years younger, and that he too had China clippers all around.)

He later quoted Corporal Martin's private report on me: "Captain Moore has the reputation for knowing that viskey von't spoil if you don't trink it all at once." I don't know how he came by that opinion, unless it was from a sergeant who acted as bartender at Lt Rodman's wedding reception, and whom I chided for putting more liquor than cola in my Whiskey & Coke.

Corporal Martin was the bane of bureaucrats: a man who didn't fit the pattern.

Each of us was entitled to $10,000 worth of government life insurance, with a spouse or near relative as beneficiary. Martin wanted the insurance, but he was an old bachelor with no known relations. He was finally and grudgingly granted permission to make his business partner in Santa Fe his beneficiary.

When it was time to go overseas, he was urged to take an early discharge. Sexagenarians were too old for combat duty, even as ration clerks. But he stubbornly refused to do that, and he also declined to accept a stateside job. The men in Service Battery, 915th FA Bn, were all the family he had, and he wanted to stay with them. The personnel officer withdrew, licking his wounds. Corporal Martin came with us to Europe.

Pops Martin

He didn't land on D Day, or for about a week afterward. He was with our rear echelon, which included most of Service Battery and all the kitchen trucks and mess personnel. We subsisted on C-, K-, and 5-in-1 rations, which we ate right out of the packages or cooked ourselves over little fires or Coleman burners. We were happy to see the kitchens and to have Corporal Martin bring real food again.

It was late in the severe winter of 1944-45 when Corporal Martin fell out of the hayloft of a barn where he and some others were sleeping. I don't recall what bone he broke, but it was a serious one, and he had to be evacuated back to a base hospital. We never expected to see him again.

At the time of the accident, Service Battery had a vacancy for a sergeant's position, and Captain I. W. Smith, commanding, had not yet filled it. So when Pops Martin fell out of the loft, he was a corporal, but when he landed, he had become a sergeant. His job didn't call for a sergeancy, but he had performed nobly, and he might as well draw a sergeant's pay while he was a patient. And we never expected to see him again,

But he surprised us. In the spring, shortly after the war was over, here he came, showing his dentures in a big grin, his sleeves emblazoned with sergeant's chevrons. Someone else was now ration clerk, but Sergeant Martin made himself useful as an interpreter in doing business with the officials of Schwandorf, the major town in our zone of occupation. His German was pretty rusty, but much better than mine.

How had he gotten back? An interesting story. He had been told by the hospital personnel that as soon as he was well enough to be released from the hospital, he would be shipped back to the States for discharge. The war, after all, was about over, and so was his life.

The news filled him with gloom. He had hoped to come back to his boys in Service Battery, 915th. He was sitting on the side of his bed with big tears streaming down the wrinkles in his cheeks when the hospital commander, a grizzled colonel of medics, came by on an inspection of his domain.

"What's your trouble, Sergeant?"

"Dey say I can't go back to my outfit, sir. Dey say I'm too oldt. "

"Too old," muttered the colonel, looking at the age spots on his own hands.

"How old are you?"

"Sixty-three, sir."

"Too old! Why Son, you're right in the prime of life! Who told you that?" And so, true to form, Pops Martin found us again.

Chapter 20

Close Station

Well, that about did it. But there are always a few loose ends to pick up, so here goes.

Right after VE Day we got orders to move into an "occupation zone" in Germany, not far from the border. Just as we were getting ready to leave, we noticed the Czech villagers out washing windows and sweeping their doorsteps and even the streets. Were they cleaning up after the celebration?

No, for now they were hanging out more Czech flags and bunting, as if they were getting ready for a still bigger celebration! It seemed they had heard that the Russians were coming, and they wanted to put on a **real** welcome for them, the true, the Slavic heroes of the war.

We had to leave minus two men. One of them, who spoke Czech. had said he had relatives a mere fifty miles east of where we already were, so Col Hughes and Capt Jacobs gave him permission to take a jeep and a driver-companion, with extra cans of gas, to go find them. They were to be back within three days.

We left word at the village as to where we were going, and sure enough they found us by the end of the three days. They had some wild tales to tell of what they saw en route: first, little groups of German soldiers too busy trying to escape to bother one American jeep, then bands of Czech partisans hunting for the German soldiers, and eventually, advance scouts of the Russian forces, who greeted them with astonishment and joy. And they had found the village with our hero's grandparents and assorted aunts, uncles, and kissing cousins, who were even more astonished and joyful.

Our occupation zone was the northern half of *Landkreis* Burglengenfeld, around the town of Schwandorf. [A *Landkreis* is like one of our counties.] The new mayor of Schwandorf showed us around in our search for billets for our men.

[I say the **new** mayor because our CIC (Counter-Intelligence Corps) had just taken the old one in detention as a suspected Nazi collaborator. Since almost anyone in a position of authority during the war was necessarily a Nazi or a collaborator, this was not surprising. Nor, I suppose, was it surprising that the "new" mayor was removed in a few days for the same reason, as was his successor. It was hard to find anyone with administrative experience who was not tainted. The situation was exacerbated by the CIC method of operation, which consisted of setting up in an unobtrusive building with a private entrance and letting it be known that they welcomed informers. They got much good information that way, but they also got a lot of witnesses eager to settle old grudges.]

Now that the war was over, the policy was that, although we were still not to fraternize with Germans, we were not to mistreat them either, nor turn them out of their homes to make billets for troops - unless the people being displaced were known Nazis or Nazi sympathizers. Based on a presumption of guilt, we found housing for all our men. We officers occupied a row of small houses in Fronberg, a suburb on the north edge of Schwandorf.

Upstarts

The house I occupied with Bob Hughes and John Klas was cleaned daily by two middle-aged German chambermaids, although it contained almost no furniture. Being accustomed to sleeping on the ground, I laid out my sleeping bag on the floor and slept there for the first week or so. Meanwhile, most of the other officers had managed to scrounge up beds.

On the whole, our cleaning ladies did a good job for us, cleaning, dusting, and swabbing the indoor privy, a primitive affair unattached to either a water supply or a cesspool/sewer, but using a container which had to be emptied daily. However, though they scrupulously swept and dusted the rest of the house, my bedroom got a lick and a promise. Every morning as I lay on my back on my bedroll, I could see a cobweb at the corner of the ceiling. Finally I got tired of the same old cobweb, so I hung around until the housemaids appeared, took one by the arm, led her into my room, and pointed at the cobweb. "Tsk, tsk, tsk," I said.

Apparently "tsk" is the same in German as in English, for that evening when I came home, I found the cobweb gone. Moreover, my room now contained a bed, a chair, a table, and a vase with flowers in it. Sometimes a wheel doesn't even have to squeak very loudly to get the grease.

At other times, stronger measures need to be taken. A couple of months later, there was a problem in one of the larger houses with the hot water supply. The "hot" water ambled out of the pipes at just above blood heat. There was a coal-burning water heater, and when our billeting officer complained to the German who tended it, the temperature improved by about two degrees Fahrenheit .. The stoker said that was the best he could do with the lousy brown coal which was all that was available. Get him some good bituminous coal, and he could heat the water.

After several days of parley and a vain search for good coal, our lieutenant lost patience. Grabbing the man by the shirt front, he said in his best Pidgin German, *"Nichs heisse Wasser, nichs essen!"* Since all food was still rationed, this was no empty threat. And from then on the water boiled out of the faucets.

Capt Van den Bark, a devoted family man, was appointed town Provost Marshall, with the mission of keeping the soldiers of the battalion from violating laws or regulations such as not entering any house or building inhabited by civilians, not carrying their weapons except as required for guard or some other authorized duty, and not getting drunk and/or disorderly.

Van didn't know much about law enforcement, but he took the job seriously and set out learn as much as he could about Schwandorf and its possible pitfalls. For instance, he immediately went to the German police chief and demanded the locations of local brothels. The chief assured him, "Why, Lieutenant, you don't have to resort to that! You can have any woman in town."

Van blushed heatedly and explained his purpose.

Close Station

Once we were settled in, with our battalion headquarters in a schoolhouse (the Germans were not to reopen their schools until they had been checked out and de-nazified), someone mentioned casually that we really should have a US flag flying out in front. That jogged the memory of someone else, who recalled passing a flag factory in a town along the border. M/Sgt Kennedy, our sergeant major, looked through the Army Regulations and dug out the specifications for Old Glory, and a jeep laden with occupation marks and cartons of cigarettes went back to find the factory and have a flag made.

The factory did not have the exact shade of blue, but we settled for one a bit lighter, and our flag became the pride and admiration of all Americans who saw it.

Envy, too. Someone from the 344th FA Bn, stationed at the town of Burglengenfeld, saw it and wanted one like it. We told them where the factory was, and they got their own.

Alas, hardly had they run it up with solemn ceremony when a gust of wind blew the unsteady flagpole down. The battalion personnel officer took one look at the disaster lying in the dust and turned to the Army Regulations, which said that when a flag had touched the ground, it must not be moved, but be burned on the spot.

"I'll be damned!" roared Major Bob Lippard, executive officer of the 344th, mindful of all the effort put into the project. "That flag never touched the ground! Now put the pole up good and solid and run our new flag up again before I get mad!"

The Division Special Services Officer somehow found a number of European variety shows and sent them on a circuit to wherever troops were stationed. We got them fairly frequently: about once a week, I believe. I noticed an interesting fact. The soldiers all whooped and whistled when the dancing girls appeared, but the people who got the most rapt attention and applause were the magicians and, even more, the jugglers.

A group of us officers were walking home to Fronberg after an evening performance when we passed a German house just as a feckless soldier staggered out the door, brandishing his carbine. We stopped to ask questions, since he was obviously in violation of the rules against not only entering a civilian home, but also carrying a weapon. It soon became evident that he was also drunk, if not disorderly. He stood and confronted us, waving the muzzle of his carbine so randomly that it might have wounded someone had it gone off.

Thinking to keep the muzzle elevated, I reached out and caught the carbine by the barrel. This was the routine move that an inspecting officer made before checking a weapon for Cleanliness, so reflex action made the soldier let go of the carbine and snap his hands to his sides, leaving me with the firearm. [I gained an entirely undeserved reputation for machismo for having "disarmed" a crazed soldier.]

Upstarts

Already in trouble up to his neck, the soldier dug himself deeper by calling me, an officer in execution of his duties, nasty names, another criminal offense. He was still doing it when a jeep rolled up with one of Van den Bark's MP sergeants in it. The sergeant took charge of both the man and the carbine, which turned out to be unloaded.

I was a witness at the court martial, wearing my Class A uniform with all the ribbons and decorations I was entitled to. I noticed that Capt Wilborn, a member of the court, paid rapt attention while I was on the stand, and I wondered why my testimony was so impressive. After the trial, he sought me out. "Bob," he asked, "did you know you had your ETO ribbon on upside down?"

Captain John Klas had become the battalion executive when Major Doug Myers came down with hepatitis at the time we crossed the Rhine. John was a big man with a huge voice and a forceful but engaging personality. Nicknamed "Bear Tracks" by his men, he was generally liked and universally respected. He did well in his new job, which called for the rank of major, so Colonel Hughes put him in for promotion.

About that time, however, we got a new Division Artillery Commander. Colonel Pyle, the new man, was an improvement over General Bixby, but he was cautious, and he was not yet acquainted with the officers in the various battalions, so he held up his approval of the promotion until he was sure that Klas was the most deserving, not only in our battalion, but in the entire Div Arty. That took up some time, but eventually, a few weeks after VE Day, he agreed that John was outstanding enough to deserve it.

Then, just as he was ready to sign the endorsement "Recommend approval," our door opened, and here came Major Myers to rejoin us. Everyone, including even Capt Klas, was delighted to see him, but wished he could have waited another week before returning.

But all was not lost. It turned out there had been **two** vacancies for majors within the Div Arty, so there was still one left. Colonel Pyle again studied and considered which candidate was best qualified, and decided that Klas was the one.

At this point Major Robert Swatosh came back, minus the ends of a few fingers. He had spent the winter months in Paris, sitting on a General Court Martial trying soldiers in the supply branches for theft and black marketing government property.

Swatosh had never been accepted as one of the Battalion **in** group, and now he was distinctly unwelcome. We did not have a spot for him in the 915th, already having our full quota of majors, so he was transferred to the 344th; however, he still plugged up the last vacancy for a major, and John Klas, a thoroughly deserving officer, went home as a captain.

Occupation duty was dull, like the duller days of combat. For awhile we had a PW enclosure in our area, little more than an open field with a fence of sorts, more to indicate where the boundaries were than to keep prisoners from escaping. We held them only until the Division cage could handle them, and I don't recall our having more than a few of them at a time.

Close Station

Then there came the problems of repatriation. The war had forced a lot of people to move from their homes, often to places far away. Some had been moved at bayonet point, others had houses destroyed by bombs or artillery, or had moved voluntarily to places they thought had more food or lodging available. Many of them were German, others were foreigners.

For the first few weeks the main roads were thronged with people trying to get home, or at least to somewhere else. Most of them were afoot, carrying as much of their property as they could. The railroads and autobahns had been badly damaged, and it would be some time before they were back in use, but there was a sort of informal bus service between Schwandorf and Burglengenfeld, consisting of a truck towing two or three flat-bed wagons jammed with people and their household goods.

But there were other people who were from afar off and needed help to get back home. *Landkreis* Burglengenfeld contained a lot of foreign displaced persons (DPs). We got a daily roster of their number from the office of the *Landrat.* There were Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians. There were Poles, Czechs, and Yugoslavs. There were a lot of Russians, and one Hungarian. Some of them were living in the community, some were in DP camps.

The two biggest camps were for Poles and for Jews. The Jews were mostly German, but they were being treated as DPs, which was at least better than being sent to a concentration camp. These DP camps were not prisons, but they were the places that rations were issued, so few tried to escape. As a matter of fact, we were trying to get everybody back to where they came from - at least everyone who wanted to go, or who had a place to go to.

There was a problem with the displaced Balts - Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians - for although their homes might still be there, their nations were not, having been absorbed by the USSR. The Poles had a similar problem, because no one knew where their national boundaries would be when the treaty was complete, and they hated the Russians as much as they did the Germans. The thought of living under either appalled them. Furthermore, anyone who had lived in Germany during the war would be viewed with suspicion by Soviet authorities.

Nevertheless, a majority of the DPs wanted to go home, and arrangements were made as soon as transport was available. A few railroads were patched up, and we were notified when we could truck groups of the appropriate nationalities to the railheads. As soon as we got the word, we would notify the local mayors when and where to have their DPs of any particular group assembled and ready to be picked up.

I have said that we repatriated those who wanted to go. There was an exception: At the Potsdam Conference it had been agreed that **all** Russian DPs would be returned to Russia. So when the time came for us to ship out the Russians, we notified the mayors of the villages where they lived to have them all ready at 8:00 a.m. The trucks arrived at the rendezvous, but there were no Russians.

We reiterated the same instructions for the following day, with the same result. This time I took an armed delegation to visit the mayors. "When we say assemble the Russians, we mean it!"

"Wait," protested the mayors. "If you want those Russians, you had better assemble them yourselves. We would have them there if we could find them. They are all hiding out in the woods somewhere. You have the manpower and weapons to dig them out, but we don't."

The war was over, and the thought of using force on peaceful civilians, possibly having to shoot a few, was not appealing. So I took another tack and asked some questions. "What part of Russia are these Russians from?"

"Why, I suppose from various locations."

"Are they from southern Russia?"

"They might be. "

"Well," I said, "since they are from southern Russia, they must be Ukrainians. We don't have any orders to repatriate Ukrainians. Change their nationality on your reports, and we'll wait until they're called for."

Col Hughes backed my solution, and we heard no more. Our motives were perhaps not so much humanitarian as to avoid unpleasant work, but we may have saved some lives. Later I talked to an officer who had drawn the duty of turning over a large number of Russian DPs to a Russian liaison officer. The Russian and his men screened the persons involved and divided them into two groups. He had the first loaded into boxcars, then turned to my friend. "Please get out some machine guns and shoot the rest of these."

The American officer emphatically refused to do so, and the Russian shrugged.

"It would save the cost of transporting them back to Russia first."

I practiced typing on a "liberated" German typewriter. I had learned the keyboard a dozen years before, but never used it enough to get up reasonable speed. Now I did better, despite the fact that the German keyboard reversed the positions of the y and z keys. Sometimes the results were diyyzing.

But most of the time I felt I was not earning my pay, and it occurred to me that now that the shooting was over, the army had more medical facilities than it knew what to do with, and perhaps there was time to explore what was wrong with me that caused my chronic eyestrain, photophobia, and headaches.

I consulted Lt Davis, the battalion surgeon, and after he exhausted his diagnostic facilities, he sent me to the hospital in Regensburg, where they had equipment to do more thorough testing.

Close Station

The hospital was pleasant enough. The buildings were German, taken over by the US Army. The wards were in two buildings, the *Mannerkrankenhaus* and the *Frauenkrankenhaus.* The officer patients were put in the women's building: we had bidets in the bathrooms.

I had expected to be there a day or two, taking the battery of tests that Doc Davis had called for, then returning to duty and awaiting the results. But it seemed that the hospital did not have all the apparatus required for the tests, so I had to wait.

I suggested going back to Schwandorf and returning when it was ready, but the doctors kept assuring me that it would arrive any day and that it would be simpler just to wait there. And it may be that Doc Davis asked them to see that I got a good rest. At any rate, it was a month before my basal metabolism, along with everything else, checked out normal, and I returned to Schwandorf. And to the ruins of the 915th.

Oh, it was still a good outfit, but it wasn't the same. About half the personnel had already been shipped out into the pipeline that was to take them back to the States and to civilian life, and other personnel had transferred in. The remaining old-timers were of two kinds: the ones with insufficient "points" for discharge and those, like me, who had volunteered to stay in the service until VJ Day and the end of the war.

Bob Hughes was gone, and a Lt Col Harold Brooks was in command. He was all right, and so were the other newcomers, but they were no substitute for the men who had fought the war with me. And I think the remainder of those who had shared my experience felt the same way.

So when VJ Day came and the war was completely over, I felt no regrets at being transferred into the pipeline myself. The Upstarts of the 915th had been a great team; now that team was only memories.

But such memories!

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