



FALL EDITION

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A “Farewell to Arms”:

As publisher and editor, Rob Smith and I (Ray Smith) have grown to dread the prospect of continuing to be first-hand witnesses to the inevitable passing of the army friends we'd grown to care about through the years since we've been publishing the Message Center. For me, the feeling grew to be sort of like the dread I felt in mid-1945 in the AAC's Camp St Louis, at the prospect being orphaned from army brothers who I'd come to view as family. That prospect, plus our growing need to be relieved from an oft-felt obligation to keep Rudy Gillen's dream of AT togetherness alive, has brought us to a mutually agreed upon resolve to discontinue the Message Center with this issue. It will be our last. After nearly 20 years of meeting deadlines and soliciting operating funds, we'd both rather quit now and resume the more passive roles of retirees. So this is good-bye. It's been a rewarding ride, and both of us thank you sincerely for seeing us through it.

Colmar (a 290th rifleman's view of it) by Gil Nelson:

Forword: This will be a short summary covering about eight days of the Colmar campaign, as experienced by Gilbert M. Nelson, a 2nd squad member of the 290th's Company L, 2nd Platoon. For the past two decades, Gil has assumed the active role of an L Company's volunteer historian. He has made it one of his goals to study and understand the campaigns in which he participated. But what has been of more importance, to unselfishly share that which he learned, not only with his comrades in the 3rd Battalion, but as a speaker reunions reaching all members of the 75th Division Association. We have prevailed upon him to share his experiences at Colmar which most of us in AT Co. missed as we performed a defensive role rather than that of shock troops assigned to help the French reclaim from Germany that part of their country sacred to their leader, DeGaulle. However, as it turned out, shortly after a short reprieve from action in Belgium in late January, Gil developed near pneumonia and was hospitalized. He didn't return to L Company until February 7, and because of the absence didn't participate in its actions from February 1st through the 6th. Thus, there is a seven or eight day gap in his notes and memory, much like the gap in the memories of 290th AT company members who had little or no action to remember, being primarily in a defensive rather than attack mode in France. In spite of our plan to do otherwise, there is little detail we can provide about that period except to describe the conditions the men experienced as they moved from place to place while in reserve or defensive positions. We start with Company L's move from Belgium to southern France, accomplished mostly by rail.

28 January 1945: Company L en route to Luneville, France by rail in “40&8” freight cars, a journey Gil describes as indescribable, to wit: These infamous French 40&8s were allegedly intended to hold 40 men or 8 horses. At this point in time, such “cars” were loaded with about a platoon, totaling about 25 men including just the equipment and gear they would carry in battle: their individual back packs, weapons, and ammunition. A few bales of hay had been provided for each car's floor. The train of unknown length was drawn by a coal-burning steam engine. It could provide lots of black smoke but neither heat, light, sanitary facilities, nor other amenities. It was a primitive experience compared to the conditions within motorized convoys that were transporting those parts of the Division who rode in their permanently assigned battle vehicles (like AT, Cannon, Service, HQ, Heavy Weapons, etc.).

13-14 February 1945: At Doncieres, France, Gil's platoon was billeted on the second floor of a school. The first floor included two large school rooms and the apartment-home of the school marm and her family. Gil explains: “Apparently, our room was also served as the town's assembly room. During the afternoon, I met with the school marm with the hope of improving my French. She had two little girls who were intrigued with their first meeting with an American GI. It was a unique experience for me. When I returned to the second floor, the men were enjoying a veritable smorgasbord of French cuisine, complemented by wine. Without questioning the source of such largesse, I helped enjoy the preserved meats and fruits, dark bread, real butter, and red wine. Suddenly, the school marm burst into the room, shouting at me in French, “Your men have stolen my mirabelles (plums)”. Recognizing our propensity to liberate such goodies, I stammered an apology, but my French was inadequate. Somehow, I calmed her with assurances that there would be ample reparation. She left knowing that I would let her know what that would be. Fortunately, Manny, a new man in my squad who was a Cuban fluent in French, became our moderator. Lt. Jim provided official aura. He observed that several of us had three or four grey English blankets that had been liberated much earlier together with a Coleman heater donated by some artillery outfit. We also pooled our currencies, U.S., Belgian, French, and German and it all in a brand new gas-mask container. All of this was neatly stacked on a table in front of Lt. Jim and many. The men stood contritely behind it. I summoned the school marm who, accompanied by her husband, shortly appeared before us. I don't know what Manny said, but the lady felt the blankets, her husband examined the heater, and both nodded their approval of the exchange. Hopefully we didn't contribute too much to the French negativity toward Americans.”

A Concluding Remembrance from K-291: Excerpted from Sgt. Donald R. Pierce's journal:

Crossing the Rhine!

Moving up to the west bank of the Rhine River proved to be a thrill because although we had engaged in some of the most vicious fighting in the war, the 75th had yet to battle the Germans on their own soil. The Ardennes, Alsace-Lorraine, and the Netherlands had been the scenes of our action. All of these were in friendly countries. With the 9th Army's drive to the Rhine complete, we were shifted into position to take over a large part of this German area. We had been assigned to a sector which extended from a point opposite the town of Wesel, south of Duisberg. Attached to the XVI Corps, our task was to help incapacitate the important Ruhr industrial area. Eighty percent of Germany's coal, iron, steel, synthetic rubber and chemicals were produced in this area. Here were the war plants that furnished the German military with the means to do battle. Cutting off the Ruhr meant that the German war machine, having no way to continue the fight, would grind to a halt.

The 9th Army's XVI Corps was given the task of eliminating the Ruhr Pocket. Formidable obstacles lay ahead, beginning with a gravelly plateau, covered with heavy forests, which limited our fields of fire. The terrain was interlaced with a system of canals averaging 10 feet deep and 100 feet wide. They were ready-made barriers, with water and steep banks halting our progress. There were many villages, cities, and industrial plants. All of these structures were potentially strong defensive points and they provided cover for the deadly snipers. The area bristled with anti-aircraft weapons, which were being used against ground targets. Several crack German divisions including the 116th Panzer, the 180th and 190th, and the 2nd Para Divisions were all deployed in our area. We knew the 75th had a formidable task ahead.

Basically, the job of seizing and holding was for the infantry. With this realization came a sense of terror never experienced before. Having lost my sense of invulnerability, a new sense of terror seized me. My gut feeling was that this was going to be my last fight. The pit of my stomach reacted to this reflection. I hastened to change these thoughts by readying my new squad for the task ahead.

It had been a happy day when one of our experienced mortar men returned. Ronald Lindy became the new gunner for the 3rd Squad. "Mac" became his assistant and Renfro and Fingers were the ammo bearers. Now all we had to do was find out how well we coordinated as a team!

Our area was near Wesel, along the Rhine river. A solid farmhouse provided good shelter. Our first assignment was to secure the positions. We rounded up civilians and cows to transport them to safety in the rear. It was a funny sight to see us Doughboys trying to be cowboys. Riding bareback and trying to herd cows caused more than one G.I. to bite the mud. Dauntlessly, they would rise and continue with the fun. Civilians waiting for the trucks joined us in the laughter. It was a noisy confusion of animals, soldiers and civilians causing a clamor which had caught the attention of enemy observers.

I had been standing by the front door of the farmhouse laughing and enjoying the scene with my old friend Eliasoph. He said he had to get back to his platoon, slung his rifle over his shoulder and started to walk up the drive toward the scene. It was at this moment that the artillery came screaming in towards the farmyard. There was a tree burst over Eliasoph's head; he and two civilians went down. A moment of panic made me gasp. I started up towards the no-longer comical scene. Jeep stood up, picked up his rifle, brushed off his clothes, looked up at the tree, shrugged, and continued to walk back to his platoon. The two civilians were not so fortunate. One was killed outright, the other wounded. Shrapnel is very unpredictable stuff with razor-sharp, jagged edges and no sense of justice. Gene's sense of invulnerability must have gotten a boost from his latest escape. It certainly impressed me.

Once having cleared the area, we helped ourselves to our farmer's rich food stocks. These included some very tasty molasses, eggs, and milk. Just up stream we discovered a vintner's supply of wine in large casks. Canteens full of Rhine wine soon helped to ease the tension. They definitely added to our fun. Five gallon gas cans were pressed into service, becoming essential to company supply! Defensive positions along this part of the Rhine were certainly enjoyed by all. We slept, ate, and wrote letters home. However, it was not exactly a tourist haven. There were dangers and responsibilities. The Nazis knew that if the 9th Army attacked across the Rhine, elements would undoubtedly be launched from our area. The Germans had to know our plans and strategy in order to set up a strong defense. Such would spell disaster for an Allied crossing.

The job of veiling operations, to prevent the enemy from learning our plans, fell to the 75th Division. Each probe had been discovered by our alert guards on night watch. So far as we knew, no German patrol ever returned across the river with any information concerning our movements. There were levees – earthen banks sloping down some thirty feet – on both sides of the river. They went down to the water on our side, but down to a flat delta on the German side. There had to have been a thousand yards separating the levees.

"K" Company caught a combat patrol attempting to land in our area, shooting the hell out of the boat. It drifted down the river with every green gunner firing wildly. Enough ammo had been expended to wipe out an enemy company. Still, two Germans managed to get out of the boat. Our German-speaking G.I. shouted to them to get in the boat and surrender by rowing to us. They responded by attempting to walk toward their positions. One had a leg wound and the other an arm wound. We shouted not to try it, but they opted to flee.

Having landed just across from our mortar positions on the levee, we had a front row seat. It was now my chance to test the squad I called to Lindy, "Zero stake. Four hundred. One round." Mac, the assistant gunner, called out the reading from the chart and the number of increments to be left in the shell. Lindy swung into action. He set the degrees, leveled the bubbles on the sight, and called, "Fire one!" Mac slid his hand up along the tube and dropped the shell down the barrel. A "pong" and it was off to burst on the far shore. It was obvious after the explosion that we had missed by a wide margin! The riflemen were not having any better luck than we were. The enemy were still moving slowly as they attempted to escape to safety.

I called a correction to the right and I shortened the distance for the next shot. Degrees and increments were recited and a second shell lobbed over the river. Something was not going right because we were just too far away again. A third try produced a slightly better result and the man with the arm wound let his companion fall. He staggered off by himself. Lindy was obviously having trouble with the baseplate which held the tube. It was shifting in the sand, causing the corrections to fail. Seven shells had been expended and our man was still crawling towards safety. He refused to try for the boat. We continued to try to kill him. It was a brutal game which had no appeal to me whatsoever. Finally, a shell hit about five feet from him. The explosion flattened his body and the game had mercifully ended. Scaldy, Lippert and I had often hit on the very first try. With us, three shots were a lot. My squad would have to improve. I called a halt to mortar use and took up my trusty rifle.

The second man had been playing dead with our riflemen. He was still very much alive and between breaks, he would creep ever closer to his own lines. This patrol had been roving our area before they had been spotted and we knew they could not return because they had valuable information about our positions. The riflemen had been trying to finish off the last man in the patrol for over an hour. He moved again, so I took careful aim with the sight set for 300 yards – battle range. I eased my finger on the trigger, squeezed off the first shot, and observed dirt kick up well short of the target. I raised the sight to 500 yards, took careful aim, and squeezed off a second try. This hit just to the left of the man. He still failed to indicate anything but the will to escape. Such could not be allowed. I gave a bit of “Kentucky windage” to the next shot, squeezed it off, and saw it hit home. Two more followed with equal success. With a prayer offered for his soul, I headed back to the farmhouse. He never moved again.

It had been a long episode of not very heroic action. Only the old firing range training had kept me shooting at his prone figure. “German, Jap or Bull’s Eye. Half a breath and squeeze.” Converting his figure into a bull’s eye target had made it tolerable. I cursed those riflemen who could not shoot any better. It had been too long of an ordeal.

Desperate for information, German patrols kept coming our way. One night a particularly large combat patrol crossed over to probe our defenses. They were ready to fight us if necessary, and it became necessary just as soon as they were spotted. It was a lopsided encounter and they quickly decided to surrender. The prisoners were held by “K” Company men as intelligence officers questioned them.

I did not witness an event which sullied all of us, but believed it when I heard of it. Frustrated by a rather arrogant prisoner who smirked his name, rank and serial number and nothing else, an intelligence officer told our guard to “take that son of a bitch out and shoot him!” Prodding him with a captured pistol, our guard led him out toward the river, raised it, and shot him through the head. We were battle-hardened and used to unseemly events sometimes witnessed, but this was still more than we could condone. It lowered us to the enemy’s level and made us feel dirty. Cold shoulders were given to our man, but it did not wash away the blood which had been spilled without passion. It might have been more understandable if the angry officer had shot him. No matter who did the shooting, it did not conform with the Geneva Convention rules for treating prisoners. We were shamed by such a wanton killing, but no forms were filled out. One more dead German was one less enemy. Our man would have to live with his conscience, as would that intelligence officer who gave the order.

Not all the action came as a result of German patrols. One night an American patrol was spotted as they attempted to infiltrate German lines. Our 75th sergeant had noticed a shadow near the bank he was approaching and decided to drift down stream. The shadow followed. Wisely the sergeant decided to get away from there. The shooting started with the paddling and we were called to fall out to cover their escape.

The river bank was alive with shooting. The cold, dark Rhine water was also alive, but with swimming figures. Some six or seven men were swimming for their lives. They came into our positions and we hurried them up to the farmhouse. A stove in the kitchen and dry blankets helped to stop their shivering. They told us their story, thanked us profusely for saving them with our gunfire, and then went off to report to headquarters. Being lucky with bad luck may have saved them, but “K” Company was asked to do the next night what they had failed to do.

Sergeant Emmet McDowell was called upon to lead our “K” Company patrol across the river. The assignment: to bring back a German prisoner for interrogation. It was not an easy assignment, but McDowell’s squad had no choice in the matter. This included my old buddy, Eliasoph. Having been told, Gene came to me shortly before he was to go on patrol. He handed me a packet. Apparently, he too was beginning to lose his sense of invulnerability.

“Don, if we don’t get back, I want you to see that my mother gets these personal belonging,” he said. “I know you’ll be sure they get home.” Jeep was deadly serious and I knew he had the pit-of-the-stomach sense of terror gnawing at him.

“Hey,” I joked, “with your luck you’ll be back within an hour and you’ll end up getting decorated. Just to humor you, I’ll take good care of them until you return.” Gene smiled.

“Thanks, Don. You’re a true friend.” Away he went, joining the rest of the patrol. The whole company turned out along the levee to give covering fire. Waiting is always a difficult time. Waiting for Eliasoph to return was especially so. All of us were infantry brothers, but some were closer than others. Jeep and I were too close to the end to lose each other. I prayed with my rifle in hand, straining my eyes to read the darkness. A shadow moved, closing in to our side of the bank. It was the “K” Patrol returning. They had a prisoner. In fact, they could have gotten two prisoners. The one they captured said he had a friend who was also waiting for a chance to surrender to the Americans. Needless to say, they decided not to wait for the friend. Happily, I returned Eliasoph’s personal belongings with a joyful, “I told you so!” Off they went to headquarters to get debriefed. A Bronze Star went to the squad leader, as well as an interview on the radio. He was a hero who helped the 75th come of age. All of us were glad things had gone so well.

Waiting for the big attack was not unpleasant because it kept us snug most of the time. Once in a while a startling event would happen, such as the time I looked up to see a navy Admiral or Captain, or some such rank requiring a lot of gold braiding. He had plenty of army brass with him, so I popped to with infantry-trained reflexes, saluted, and

showed him our position. With the navy brains checking out the area, it began to look like we would be in the center of action on the big day. We still did not know who was going to cross, nor how they would do it.

The strangest event of my combat experience was still to come. The next night, we were alerted to look for two civilians who would be crossing the Rhine in a small boat. "Do not shoot at them!" was the explicit command. They were Germans who were spies for us! They spoke no English, so we prepared for the unexpected. And the unexpected happened. Out of the gloom, at the appointed hour, came the small boat. Much to our surprise, there was a woman with a man. We pulled the boat up on the bank and helped them up the steep levee. It was a brief stroll to headquarters, where we passed them up the line. Important information to facilitate the big attack was undoubtedly part of their mission.

Moments of suspense continued to come, but not the expected crossing. One such moment occurred when Smitty asked me to go out to do a bit of sniping. The weather was good, warm and pleasant, so I said sure. Off we went to the one foxhole up on top of the levee. Smitty crawled into the hole as I stretched out on the top. We started looking for something that might be worthy of a shot. I picked out what could have been an observation post, sighted my rifle for a maximum shot, and peered through the peep hole.

At that precise moment, I noticed a tiny speck coming right at me. It was a dive bomber trying to sink the barge in front of our position. I whirled to find some cover. The plane roared over my head; a tremendous explosion totally disoriented me. I was literally scared out of my wits. A moment of panic seized me. Completely losing control, I ran down the levee bank. How I passed cow wire fencing I do not know. Did I go over it? Under it? Through it? All I remembered was that I came to my senses at the bottom of the levee. I crouched by a tree and I checked a bowel movement which had started involuntarily.

A second plane was coming along the levee. He dropped his bomb. Along with the explosion came three of our men running past me for the farmhouse. I am pleased to report that I caught them before they got there! Fear had certainly given wings to my feet! I continued sprinting into the "John" to finish what had started out on the slope. My knees were still shaking as I remembered Smitty and headed out to find him.

He was covered with sand, helmet gone, and sore at me for having left him buried in the foxhole. "Foxhole, hell! I had nothing to hide in," I replied to his comments. We both laughed because it wasn't clear who had been the most scared G.I. on the levee. The miscellaneous strafing that followed the bombs was not even worthy of comment. The barge that had caused all the excitement was still there. It was never to be used in the crossing, but German efficiency left nothing to chance. The bombing had left me with a lifetime terror of loud noises. This brand new terror twisted my stomach into one big knot, causing me great stress. Bombs and I just did not mix, but there was no way to choose.

The waiting was not without such continuing episodes. Another one occurred shortly thereafter. Mac had a way about hearing things, seeing things in the dark and of telling combat tales which upset his foxhole buddies. His imagination got to us after a while, making us edgy. It did not surprise me, therefore, when "Fingers" came up to me with a hole drilled neatly in the center of his index finger. If I ever saw an S.I.W. from a carbine, this was it. The story was that he had accidentally shot himself. Looking at the wound I was impressed at how calmly it must have been done. His broad finger was shot from the nail side through. A carbine was a small rifle and it wasn't hard to get a finger in front of the muzzle. Well, at least their story was in keeping with the latest directive concerning S.I.W.'s. Mac was his witness to the accidental shooting. We bandaged his finger and sent him off to the medics for evacuation.

Missing his new buddy, Mac proceeded to get involved with some riflemen. They were all hot about going down to the barge to find some souvenirs. "Mac," I said, "you have been around up here long enough to know you don't take any unnecessary chances."

"Ah, Don. We'll be O.K. It won't take long." Bowing to their wishes, I said "Mac, if I were you I wouldn't do it, but I'm not going to say don't." Off he went, happily looking forward to a new souvenir. It wasn't five minutes later that we heard artillery shells screaming into the levee near the barge area. I closed my eyes as I listened, quietly saying a prayer. Moments later, he appeared with blood streaming down his cheek. Sticking out of his temple bone was a piece of shrapnel, firmly embedded, but not fatal. I looked closely at his wound and laughed.

"Well, Mac, your new souvenir is a million dollar piece of shrapnel. It's your ticket home. If I thought I could get a wound like yours, I would have gone with you!" He was off to the medics at the aid station. Soon he would be home.

As I saw Mac heading towards the aid station, my sense of terror really hit the pit of my stomach. Now only one man was left from our original mortar squad. He stood there feeling mighty scared and lonely. For a quiet sector of defense positions, my mortar men were having more casualties than at any other tie. Here I was "the last man," with two friends dead and two wounded. Add one new man to the wounded list, and if I had any delusions about getting back home without being hit, they were fading fast. These were my thoughts as I watched McMillen walk away. Instead of shooting myself through the calf, I prayed to God to let me get hit in the arm or leg before I cracked. The extra pressure of being a sergeant did not help the nervous strain a bit. Being responsible for my own actions was enough, but with new men looking to me for leadership, the burden grew even heavier.

"God, please let us get on with the big attack! Please let us finish this nasty business. Please give me a million dollar wound!" It was a lot to ask for, but it came from the depth of my heart.

The next event seemed to come as an answer to my prayers. For over two weeks we had been awaiting the big attack, waves of aircraft attacking the German positions on the other side of the river. Showers of tinfoil fell into our positions as the bombers attempted to throw enemy radar off the target. Massive explosions all over the area made the earth beneath our feet tremble. What must the enemy have experienced? Thank god for our air superiority. I had enough bombing with the two small ones that had hit our positions. This assault from the air was the beginning of the end. We knew something big was about to happen.

Early in the morning of 24 March, 1945, the 79th and 30th Infantry Divisions moved up to our sector. Shortly thereafter came salvo after salvo of the greatest artillery bombardment of the war. For two hours the shells went screaming over us and crashed into the city across the way. The infantry prepared for the assault. Our artillery fire was so awesome that we failed to even hear a German shell as it came screaming in, hitting our barn. Everything seemed to vibrate from our attack.

The assault boats moved out under the covering of fire; no enemy effort was made to stop them. There seemed to be no casualties. Could things really be going so well? I was not inclined to sit out and watch the show because I practiced what I preached: taking unnecessary chances did not make for long living. I hoped to survive.

The first reports came in. The attack was an outstanding success. Indeed, the assault boats had landed without casualties, and for the first four miles they found only shell-shocked Germans sitting in their shelters. They had lost the will to fight. Later it was learned that 52 artillery battalions had fired 26,999 rounds during the preparation for the attack.

As fast as possible, the engineer battalions pushed pontoon bridges across the Rhine. Our regiment was assigned to secure bridges L and N. We packed up and moved out to protect them. We would soon be fighting across the Rhine!

Approaching the bridge area with our packs and mortar equipment proved difficult but interesting. The place was a beehive of activity as the engineers continued working on Bailey bridge construction and otherwise making the bridgehead more secure. Part of the defenses being set up were barrage balloons with heavy cable dangling from them. These were designed to snare any unwary pilots trying to bomb the bridges. Assisting with the air defense were ack-ack gun emplacements spread around the area. We were told to dig in and set up positions guarding the rear of the bridge from paratroop attack. It was a whole new scene for the 75th. We quickly established our positions and prepared to defend the bridges.

The first effort to erase our roadway across the Rhine came in the form of a dive bomber. It made a run down the river and the sky was filled with the pom-pom of ack-ack fire. It skillfully dodged the cables, and fire, and released its bomb. A geyser of water went up near the bridge, but it was unharmed. The distractions had been good enough to cause a miss. The next plane to show up was one of our artillery observation planes. The pilot got careless and a cable almost sheered off a wing. He crash-landed on the delta-type river bank without serious damage to the plane. It was soon to become a favorite toy for all us frustrated "airmen." We jacked it up, fixed the broken landing strut, and tested the motor. With only part of the prop damaged, it could be taxied around the ground. It was a lot of fun until it finally pooped out and we had to turn to other activities.

To keep my mind off the bombs, I decided that the bloated carcass of a cow needed to be buried. Prisoners of War were being held near our positions. I went over to the officer in charge, explained the problem, and requested a work detail to bury the cow. We soon had a detail of enlisted men, one sergeant, and one officer. The work was begun.

More than once I had taken exception to the manner of treatment some Germans used in relation with others. I had heard stories were even the noncommissioned officers did not associate with the enlisted men. Filled with the "superman" propaganda, and such other tales, I had found it easy to take exception to certain "arrogant" types. The officer and sergeant lay sprawled on the ground, smoking cigarettes, as their men were sweating away in the rather large hole. My attitude problem got the best of me and I walked over to them. I motioned to two of the men in the hole to climb out as I made it clear to the two smokers that they were to replace them. It was not being well received. The two had climbed out, but the other two had not moved.

Taking my M-1 rifle in hand, I jabbed it into the officer's stomach and indicated that he had better get down there and dig. The sergeant did not hesitate. The officer, seeing something in my face, hastened to join him. It was my lesson in "democracy," I rationalized, but it was more likely my way of getting rid of my fear and hate. I was not quite sure what had motivated me, but it did help the cow get buried. It was also thoroughly enjoyed by the German privates, which definitely made me feel better.

With defense positions improving, the next bomber to try for the bridge was not so fortunate. He was shot down. All of this bombing activity was getting on my nerves. I could no longer watch. Hiding in the mortar emplacement made me feel a bit more secure, but I still had the jitters. Worse, the air attacks were often at night. I tried to get to sleep before they came, but this only aggravated my sense of despair. I would lie there in the dark. My heart was racing, as was my mind. I realized this was not the place for me to be. Fortunately, we got the order to move out. We were going on the attack in the Ruhr. We moved out and across the Rhine. A final big push and V.E. Day was near! It was near the end of March, and Spring held the promise of peace. I stepped off the pontoon bridge, and into the Ruhr, with a feeling of elation.

The Ruhr Pocket:

Optimism ran high as we crossed the Rhine. It had been a long-standing barrier, seemingly impossible to cross. Now it would be easier to finish our job of defeating the Nazi forces and going home! We eagerly walked into the Ruhr seeking the disheartened Germans who were fighting with little chance of winning. We knew, as did they, the end was in sight. It was the 31st of March, 1945, when the 291st Infantry was ordered to attack again. "K" Company was part of the team. We were in the vicinity of Dortmund, an important industrial center of the Ruhr. We were to aid in its capture. The second step had been taken, and now we formed up for the push.

Our billet was a German farmhouse, where fresh troops were anxious to get at the enemy. Not so with a shaking 19 year old sergeant. Fear gripped me as my stomach contracted into a knot, terror grasping my mind. I felt like I was shaking all over and it was difficult not to run from this terror. Don Pierce turned coward was an image I refused to accept. The reality of my body was hard to ignore, but I did my best. I went up to my buddy Smitty and told him to

stay with me. I was afraid I was going over the hill. Cowardice in the face of the enemy could get you shot, but when as scared as I, it doesn't really register. Like me, Smitty was a new sergeant with new squad members, and he knew only too well the feelings of battle-weary veterans. He, too, was one at 19.

Just where the push was to take us was the usual guess. Never being shown a map, nor really being briefed as to where we were going, we did what every good infantryman always did. The motto of the infantry school at Ft. Benning had been "Follow Me!" That is what we did – we followed the officers with blind faith that they knew where they were going.

After a night of restless sleep, we prepared for the attack. The way led through various wooded areas, and past a few farm buildings. We just tagged along. We were not too far into the attack when we heard artillery fire ahead. It was soon after that we countered bodies sprawled on the ground. Three riflemen had been wounded by the "to whom it may concern" shelling. The medics were tending to them, and as new men, this would be their only experience to relieve later. Luck devils. No nightmares, no terror. Just a purple heart to go with their combat infantry badge and battle star.

This encounter did something to me. Angered by the sight of our wounded, and anxious to finish the fighting, I came out of my depression. Once again I was ready for action and out to kill Germans. Let's see who makes whom shake! I grasped my rifle with new resolve and led my men forward.

We advanced through more forests until we were finally ordered to dig in for the night. I took out my trusty shovel and my M1 entrenching tool, which swiveled from a shovel into a hoe, and had sharp edges to serve as an ax. It folded flat to fit a canvas carrier on my pack or belt. I started to dig, fold it into a hoe, or pick, and started to chop. Just then, a screaming white phosphorus shell lit up the area just to our right.

Diving flat out, I grabbed my rifle in preparation for the attack we thought was to come. Two regular shells boomed into the same area, but no infantrymen appeared. Our own tanks moved up, and the Panzers moved out! It had been a delaying tactic, which inspired our resolve to dig. It was but a few minutes later that my prone shelter was ready for the night.

With regiments abreast, the 75th Division had been advancing on a line toward the Dortmund Emms Canal. Huls, the Die Haard Forest, Kol Brassiet, Oer, Alt, Horneburg, and other areas were to be cleared. We had begun to go to work. Blindly following along behind the officer, scouts and riflemen were we mortar men. It was never easy for us to carry all the heavy equipment plus our packs and keep up with the rest of the company. When the weapons jeep carried the guns and ammo, we had it made. On this attack we were just pack animals. It was not my job to carry, but being one of the most rugged men in the section, I often helped. A spell from being under the load helped the morale of my men. At least I hoped it did, and that it made me a bit more acceptable as their leader.

Strange sights were seen in the forests, but just ahead was one of the strangest we had ever seen. Three men were standing out in the woods with white flags plainly in sight. One held a big staff, wore a sash across his breast, and a formal top hat. We used to call them "stovepipes," but his was much more impressive than that. It appeared that we were approaching a town ahead and that this was the Burgomaster, and two others, sent out to surrender it to us. They did not want their homes and buildings blasted near the end of the war. Wisely, they had chosen to call a halt to the fighting over their town.

We approached the city, with the Germans leading the way, and noticed white flags flying from many of the second floor windows. There were some grim-faced, if not scared-looking, civilians in the streets, but there were others cheering and dancing merrily along with us. To these latter ones we were not "conquerors" but "liberators!" It was our introduction to "D.P.'s" (displaced persons) who had been used as slave labor in German factories. They shook our hands, kissed us, and otherwise showed their delight at having been freed by the Americans. Some were French, others were Slavic, but all were happy. It was a happy quiescence in our otherwise deadly day.

Noticed, too, were young, healthy-looking Germans mixed in with the others. They looked like they had just taken off their uniforms and put on civilian clothes. Such suspicions were later proven to be correct. It was a sign that German resistance was crumbling in the Ruhr. Factories, refineries, synthetic rubber [manufacturing] plants, thousands of slave laborers, P.O.W.'s and other items were coming under our control. The vaunted German soldiers were starting to surrender in large groups. With helmets knocked off, hands behind their heads, and calling "Kamerade," they were sent back to rear prison compounds. Searching them was a chore, but some soldiers found it a source of booty.

One young German had a fine, gold pocket watch on a fob that dangled from his pocket. One of our men began to "liberate" it from him. This caused the young prisoner to protest, saying, "bitte, das ist mein grossvaters." It was obvious that the watch was a family heirloom, much prized by the German and he was pleading to keep it. I made our man give it back. Perhaps some garratrooper in the rear would "liberate" it from him anyway, but we would not. I couldn't stand by and witness robbery. The German expressed his thanks, took the watch and hid it elsewhere on his person in a much wiser move than letting it dangle in plain sight from his pocket.

The first of April found us on the move. The Germans were withdrawing quite rapidly before our attack. Young kids and old men were being asked to hold against us, and this just did not happen. Three times during the day, we received orders to dig in. Each time it was accomplished we got orders to move out again. Was this a sick April Fool's prank by the brass or what? A final hole had been dug and once again a runner called for me to go to the C.P. Once again we were ordered on the attack.

I had just handed Lindy my rifle, relieving him of the 35lbs of mortar shells he was packing. Artillery shells began screaming in again and in my usual lighting manner, I hit the pavement. It was the road into a small town, and there were three houses in a row, a gap as the road turned to the left, and then more houses. The artillery fire stopped and I cautiously lifted my head. My eyes, and certainly not my mind, could not believe what they saw: everyone had disappeared. I was lying on the road alone. A jeep was pulled over by a house, hit and burning, but nowhere could I see anyone.

I quickly dashed over to the shelter of the middle of the house. In a loud voice, I shouted for Lindy. No answer. I went down two steps and then yelled out the back door. Still, my cries went unanswered. This time the cellar entrance lifted and a German woman motioned for me to come down. I wasn't about to go down there with my rifle in Lindy's hands instead of mine. In fact, I was remembering the story of Commando Kelly's Italian exploits. He had managed to stand off a whole German company, firing until his ammunition ran out, and then began to throw mortar shells. He knew that a different procedure was needed to get the shell's safety pin to eject and have the powder train line up for detonation. So he had held the shell in his hand, banged its bottom edge, and thrown it like a hand grenade. It was a story that had provoked many discussions among mortar men, but nobody I knew had been willing to risk slamming a mortar shell down to see what would happen. Only in my situation did I become willing to try it! Fortunately, I looked ahead toward the town and spotted [enemy] soldiers moving along the ditch by the road. With the jeep burning and an ammunition trailer alongside the house, I decided to take off.

Swiftly, I took the shortcut across the field. It was surprising how effortlessly I seemed to cover that distance in record time. Even so, an 88mm shell went screaming by as some artillery joker tried to pick me off. I flew over a fence and caught up to the company. The only problem was that it was not the entire company. Somewhere we had lost the whole 3rd platoon and a couple of mortar squads. Mine was among the missing. Smitty was not interested in my suggestion that he go back with me and look for them. There were no other volunteers, so I directed one of our new men to come with me. We started back across the field. Once again, that playful artillery man tried his marksmanship with a cannon. Once again, the shell went screaming harmlessly by.

We ignored the house with the German civilians in the cellar, and the middle house where I had been earlier. It was in the third house that I shouted once again. Again there was no answer. Going to the cellar door, I opened it and loudly called, "Lindy? Are you down there, Lindy?" This time a sheepish voice answered, "Yeah, Don." I had found my missing squad and rifle. Lindy appeared with my piece, and we headed back towards the company.

This time I took the long route, following the ditch by the side of the road. It was safer, but not foolproof. The first few hundred feet went well, but then an observant enemy artillery man spotted us moving up towards the first house in the village. Once again he opened fire. He was getting more accurate, so I led the men in a rush towards the safety of the first house's cellar stairs. I was only a few feet from the doorway when I was hit. I spun around in the midst of smoke and dust, my right hand went numb, and my rifle dropped to the ground. I realized that an artillery shell I hadn't heard had come in and exploded.

Stumbling and crawling back through the smoke, I passed over what I thought were two bodies. I ducked behind the front of the house. Only then did I become aware that my ammo bag had been cut off of me by shrapnel and that blood was dripping from my right hand. A hole in my jacket showed me where the shrapnel had wounded me, but all the other parts were intact. My men came up to me and it seemed that nobody else had been hit and the bodies I had crawled over were very much alive. Relieved, I directed them to carefully enter the house. I followed our leading ammo bearer, who was armed with a rifle, and directed his actions. We opened the door, peered into the hall up the stairway, and all around. No one was there. We went in to a room on the left, and it was a bedroom in the front of the house. The gun outside was firing again, so I sat down by a bureau and leaned against the wall. I directed the new man to undo the dressing packet from my belt. He was scared and all thumbs. I was the first man he had even seen wounded and he was going to dress the wound. It must have been a trifle upsetting and it made me recall seeing Arnold, my first wounded soldier. Seeing his stomach wound had had a sobering effect.

We took off my combat jacket and rolled up my combat sweater. Then I had him cut off the blood-soaked sleeve of my wool O.D. shirt. The neat hole in my wrist became apparent. I directed him to sprinkle the sulfur powder into the wound. Next he took the dressing, opened it, and proceeded to do a creditable job of bandaging me. Renfro was going to be a good soldier with a bit more seasoning.

By now, Lindy had returned from checking upstairs and the basement. He stopped to see how I was doing. We were ready to join him in the safety of the cellar. I had my million dollar wound! I was delighted with it and wanted no minor events to end up killing me now. As we descended, I asked if they had checked the outside cellar entrance. They had not, so I directed a search be done. Quite to their surprise, they flushed a mother and two young girls from their hiding place. All were quite terrified. The German propaganda had filled them with ugly tales akin to what our side was saying about the die-hard fighters known as "Werewolfs." The three were brought to me.

My German language skills had been practically nil, and except for a few phrases like "come out with your hands up," as well as a few words about food and drink, I really could not say anything to allay their fears. Pointing to my wounded arm, I said that I was "kaput". And "Alles" (everything) was "kaput" (ruined) in Germany. The words seemed to ease the tension. The mother nodded politely but [continued to] smile nervously. Then I questioned her for something to drink. "Schnapps" produced another not, and before I knew it, a bottle of clear-colored liquid appeared. I had her open it and take a sip [to reassure me that it wasn't booby-trapped], which she did with no ill effects. Then I tried it and found it to be delicious plum schnapps, and never since have I tasted any better. It was about nine o'clock in the morning. I had a happy buzz on, and felt nothing but love for my fellow man. It looked like my prayers had been answered!

Some of the 3rd Platoon riflemen started to work their way up into town and into our house came a few of them. One was a veteran of the Africa fighting, Orchid, and he saw me with my bandaged arm. He smiled and said, "Pierce, you got the million dollar ticket home!" Next, a runner appeared from the C.P. looking for me. "Smokey" had been worrying about me and my wound. He had fixed a bed up in his C.P. and he wanted me to come up there. They would try to get an ambulance to take me back to the field hospital as soon as possible. The plan was sound, except it called for me to leave this snug cellar. To do this would expose me to shellfire. I showed my arm to the runner and told him there was nothing the matter with my legs. When we left the house, he was to run as fast as he could run and lead me to the C.P. We took off and I stuck to him like glue. Moments later we panted into Lt. Smorack's new quarters. He

was happy to see me in such relatively good condition and was impressed with how fast we had returned to the C.P. I settled down on the bed. I found being wounded had its compensations. It wasn't long before I was sleeping soundly.

Food always got me attention and, even in the form of rations, was always appreciated. Some had just arrived up front. I tuned in, awoke hungry and was ready to eat. There was still no possibility of getting me out by ambulance but I was in no rush. A comfortable bed and food were luxuries to an infantry soldier. The old saying, 'I never had it so good,' certainly applied to my present situation. Even the rations tasted better in the C.P.

Finally, at about 1600 hrs, word arrived that an ambulance was ready to try a run to the rear. An exposed highway was not a place where a driver felt comfortable, especially behind the wheel of a vehicle with a big, red cross on it! Medics often joked that the red cross served as an artillery target. Nevertheless, I was ready to try for it, if the driver was ready to go. I said goodbye to the guys in "K" Company with a lump in my throat. They led me to the aid station nearby and I, their only customer, climbed into the ambulance.

"Driver," I said, "I have one good arm to hold on with, and there's nothing wrong with the rest of me. You floor that gas pedal and don't worry about me!" He did just that. He spun his wheels and we flew out of town. It was a bit rough bouncing about in the back, but it was definitely a fun ride. No shells bothered us and it was not too long before my driver slowed down. It looked like I just might get back home!

We pulled into a field hospital and stopped. A stretcher team opened the rear door, stopping me as I attempted to climb out and walk into the tent. They told me I had to lie down on their stretcher and be carried into the hospital tent. It seemed silly to me, but I relented and let them carry me into a waiting room. This was different though, and the difference was a pretty American nurse doing the diagnosis. I enjoyed answering all of her questions.

Finally, they took me in for treatment. My arm was un-bandaged, the wound cleaned up, and probing for the shrapnel begun, but ended when it couldn't be readily reached and dealt with. Besides, although my arm was a bit numb, the doctor's probing had been anything but pleasurable. They decided to evacuate me to a larger hospital in Liege where they could operate on my arm. For the moment, I was re-bandaged, and classified as "walking wounded".

I may have walked across the Rhine and into the Ruhr, but it seemed that now I was going to ride out in style. I didn't even worry about what the medics had in store for me. The euphoria of my million dollar wound made the world a lovely, warm and happy place. Thoughts of going home brought tears to my eyes, but they were happy ones. The ride back was welcomed.

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