

## A FEW DAYS IN FRANCE, 1944-1945

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A/714

12<sup>th</sup> Armored Division

E T O World War II

After an enlightened view of sexual liberalism, bare breasts, in the outskirts of Auffay, France, just east of the Seine River and north of Rouen, the 714<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion remained in convoy across the northern section of central France. A bivouac was established at Luneville, some units in roofed billets, with the third platoon of A/714 using their tents, blankets, and mess kits.

A plague of dysentery struck our company at the same time that we were receiving and training our first 'filler replacements.' My tank crew of driver George Hood of Charlotte, No. Carolina, gunner Joe Montgomery of Hillsville, Va., loader Jose Villalobos of Wichita Falls, Tex., accepted and congratulated the addition of Walter Kelly, Jr. of Payette, Idaho as our new bow gunner or assistant driver.

Our next stop on that 1944 fall journey to the east was at Bar-le-Duc and our 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon was assigned a roofed billet on the main street. A large Catholic church was a mere two blocks (squares) from our merchant building billet. A few errors in supply were balanced at this step just prior to our east-southeast trek or road march.

It was at an overnight stop in an open field that the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon received its first 'combat order' to 'take a village,' Bittwiller. I never did know who did the recon on that small village but that was the assignment of A/714, parts of the 152<sup>nd</sup> Signal Company, B/119 of the Armored Combat Engineers, and a retrieving squad of the 134<sup>th</sup> Ordnance Battalion.

Bittwiller was on a small hill to the east of a creek that only flowed from the rainy efforts of nature. Yes, it rained, and rained, and rained, this being the middle of December. Two tanks of the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon became mired in that 'ditch' just to the south and west of the village. To the north, in my squad of two tanks, was Howard Vance's tank and crew with driver Ralph Vinson of California, gunner Francis Datti of Framingham, Mass., bow-gunner Eugene Wilson of Ava, Mo., and Antonio Portilla of Brooklyn, N.Y. BN/119 was making a crossing over that swollen creek. We were all under the fire of German artillery. Lt. McLaughin and I had our first 'close-call' while waiting for the Mullett-Beagle retriever crew to 'move us to the east.' Meanwhile the unsung heroes of the 152nd were trying to make sure that 'communications' to the rear were in high frequency order.

The 56<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion and those previously mentioned took the village unscathed. Our 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon was assigned a 'forward outpost' line of resistance on the east side of the village. A variety of noises were heard during the night, most of which was caused by mines laid in the streets by teenage boys. The infantry had a half track run over one of them and two other vehicles were damaged

by the same method. The 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon played it close to the vest that night. Early morning disclosed our chosen spots of forward observance to an open field to the east. We had used what few buildings we could by backing the medium tanks into them, using the lofts for what little rest could be obtained. Vance's tank had backed into a farm shed and stopped just short of a huge radio communications system that had been charged for immediate destruction. Alden Bengtson of Luck, Wisconsin, with his crew of driver Amos Downes of southern Illinois, bow-gunner Leland Morton of Michigan, gunner Peter Dutchka of Framingham, Mass., and cannoneer John Critzas of St. Louis, Mo., had parked to the south side of the building that had been a Prisoner of War Camp just a day or two before. We ransacked that small camp for some foods but nothing edible could be found. We found a few garments that families had sent the captured tanks, marked by the American Red Cross, a few things that the Krauts could not use. It was here that we 'plucked the feathers' from two white Peking ducks and tried to 'boil them in a helmet.' Also in that small village was a Woolworth's store that had managed to avoid the war as its' frontal windows were intact until that mid-December morning when we again moved eastward, this time toward the northeast.

About one mile east of Bittwiller the silence was broken with a radio order from Col. Joseph 'Smoky Joe' Phelan, West Point of '28, for Moss to exchange tanks with Capt. Clayton of C/714. His tank had been assigned the flame thrower while Moss's tank had the '76 MM rifle' which had been assigned to him in England. The flame thrower was used by the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon to set fire to 'harmless hay and straw stacks,' to burn innocent appearing buildings, and to blast the openings in the pill-boxes that constituted the Maginot Line, the defensive gem of Andre Maginot in 1925, to hold off the Germans. And we always had good success with the operation of the flame thrower.

To the north of these incentive destructions was the village of Uttwiller as all of A/714 was placed in hull defilade positions to lay indirect fire beyond that small sleeping village. It was while A/714 was in this firing position that we lost our first men to the war. Col. Phelan's crew, which had been Capt. Harrington's crew, consisted of Robert York of Palestine, Illinois as driver, gunner Erwin Godwin of North Carolina, Hoard Peterson of Pickerington, Ohio, was rapped by an indirect shell while they were outside of their tank. It killed Godwin and Peterson instantly and seriously wounded York, to the extent that he was shipped stateside (Zone of Interior) immediately. This was December 21, 1944 and A/714 did not realize that this event took place until after we had worked with C/56 to liberate Uttwiller.

We returned to the scene of that hull defilade position where Amos Downes, driver of Bengtson's crew, was killed by concussion just two days later, December 23<sup>rd</sup>. Peter Dutchka was seriously wounded by that indirect fire that bounced on through his right leg. Norton received shrapnel in his chest from that shell (and died within two years of it). None of the other crew members, Bengtson, Critzas, Portilla, received a scratch. I never did learn what the hell Portilla was doing in the company at that time of disaster.

A/714 had been relieved of front line contact for a three-day period between the Bittwiller and Uttwiller actions. A tank destroyer unit had come to relieve us the same day that Frank Welliver was shot in the thigh while he was getting an early shave at the rear of his tank. A sniper had picked him out during that cool morning with the vapor rising from the warm helmet. His 'million dollar wound' only

delayed his further war action a few weeks as he rejoined the company after Herrlisheim. When we moved west and stopped for the 'shit-shampoo-shower-shave' routine, plus ammo and petrol and personal gear, we got our first ration supply that included beer, can, Miller's!!! That goddam T D outfit was less than 24 hours behind us. AND it was back to the front – for Uttwiller, or 'no rest for the wicked.' It was during that 'beer ration breakdown' that an A-17 bomber had to drop its load because of engine trouble.

That was a break in the action for A/714 as we moved in a slow procession to Bischwiller, to the south and west of Uttwiller. We were able to billet in a school in Bischwiller while devious methods of attack were being studied in CCA and CCB and Corps Headquarters. The assignment for the recon of Herrlisheim was given to Capt. McGuff, B Troop of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Recon Squadron. The medium tank crew of George Moss of the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon of A/714 was assigned to support the recon that was to begin at 6 AM January 6, 1945. With McGuff leading the way that mission was accomplished without any enemy reports. All of that morning and most of that afternoon was taken in exploring the details of our advance for the afternoon of January 7, 1945.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon was the point unit to Rohrwiller, a small village on the north bank of the Moder River. We were to move across the bridge to the chosen hull defilade position on the south side of the Moder River. Howard Vance's tank was the first one to cross that bridge the afternoon of January 7<sup>th</sup>. It was fired upon as it left that bridge and just before they made a right flank along the river. Datti had fired one round into a building where he and Vance had thought the enemy fire had come from. Moss's tank followed across the bridge, with Bengtson's, Nagen's, and Schmidt's following in that order. Then followed the remainder of the line company, between shots of direct fire, most of it 75 MM, from the Germans on the northeast side of Herrlisheim. The bridge was hit several times and the 119<sup>th</sup> Engineers were gallant in their efforts to keep the bridge in condition for all of A/714 to cross so that they could position themselves for indirect firing on the AM of January 8, 1945.

Everyone was set. Fuel supply good, ammo rounds diversified, rations laid in for a snow covered escapade with the krauts. Attack orders were given the afternoon of the 8<sup>th</sup>. The 56<sup>th</sup> A I B was already moving in to the town of Herrlisheim on the 8<sup>th</sup>. The 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon was to make the initial tank assault on the early afternoon of the 9<sup>th</sup>. Petrol was rationed to 145 gallons per tank. Cannon ammo was limited to 23 rounds per tank with smoke and phosphorous limited to those in the second attack. Orders were given by Col. Phelan that all tanks were to hold their fire until given clearance by the 56<sup>th</sup> advancing from the left into the town on the northwest side. No firing, but advance. A radio argument between Harrington, Moss and Phelan ensued – Moss simply said no firing, no attack, get Moulder with the artillery from C/494 of CCB. Phelan threatened a charge of treason and Moss moved forward with the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon of A/714 that cold, snowy afternoon of January 9, 1945.

A creek, twelve feet wide, was to their rear, it being a tributary of the Moder. The Zorn-Moder canal was to their front, about one hundred yards, it being about two and a half to three feet deep and twenty feet across, banks approximately six feet to the water line. Absolutely no problem for a medium tank. Moss and Hood had gone over this obstacle a few times on the inter-com. Moss and Montgomery had already decided to have the cannon zeroed in on the 75's sitting alongside of a road-railroad leading

northeast toward Gamsheim. The flame thrower had been replaced with a 30 caliber machine gun at Bischwiller, and Kelly was not to fire under any circumstances. Villalobos was informed by Montgomery and Moss that we would use all nine rounds of the H.E. first. The Germans, or the French, were into furrow farming and there were ridges of plowed earth under the eight inches of snow that had fallen on January 8<sup>th</sup>. The tank would rise and fall with those furrows as we moved toward the canal. The 56<sup>th</sup> A I B was moving toward Herrlisheim on the west side of the 'levee-road' that came from the direction of Rohrwiller, past the Waterworks, into that extreme northwest corner of Herrlisheim. When Moss's tank reached the canal, Vance's tank was to the left and about 25 yards to the rear, the second tank supposed to cross the canal. Hood stopped momentarily, at the brink of the bank (that blind spot eighteen feet in front on the tank for the driver), and KAPOW – a 75 MM armored piercing shell hit the ring of the turret hatch.

Col. Phelan had given explicit orders that all tank commanders were to be 'unbuttoned,' open hatch, and Moss bore the initial brunt of that military command. The French 75 MM had been fired by a kraut at about 600 yards, the turret hatch went flying to the right rear, away from the tank. It is terrible seeing a shell coming at you and you trying to keep from being hit by that shall, AND, you are right, you do not hear the one that hits you!! Hood started to reverse on orders from Moss at the same time that Montgomery hit the cannon that had fired. Of the six guns along that road-railroad, Joe Montgomery got four of them. Of the nine H E rounds that we started the day with, five of them malfunctioned!! The shell came out of the casing and Villalobos handed the live shell to Moss who threw them, one at a time, to the right side of the backward moving tank. All of these things are going on simultaneously and Moss is bleeding like a stuck hog from a cut artery on the left side of his nose and another shrapnel cut at the lower part of the left ear. Vance's tank had been immobilized for fire power use by having three A P rounds pierce the gun shield of the 75 MM in his turret. Schmidt's tank was also immobilized at the same time. His tank was positioned second to our right.

In reversing to the creek, through the snow, over the deep furrows, Moss fell from the back deck of the tank and was helped to that creek by Datti, gunner of Vance's tank. We lay on the bank of the creek trying to get al of the platoon together for a 'last ditch fight' with our personal weapons. C/714 was having their problems about a half mile to the south. Col. Phelan gave a radio command for D/714 to retrieve a wounded man in C/714 with a busted leg. Well, the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon of A/714 was trying to save their platoon sergeant. Ralph Wilson gave his two shots of morphine while Howard Vance tried to stop the facial bleeding with sulfanilamide powders but they could only pray that he would pull through.

A light tank of D/714 was stuck in that creek, to the north about 100 yards, and they needed help to retrieve the man from C/714 per Col. Phelan's orders. Bengtson asked that the light tank take Moss first, which they refused to do. Alden C. Bengtson took his M4A3 with crew and towed that light tank to our position. Sgt. Fred Hagen bodily placed Moss on that light tank and Bengtson towed it back across the creek and then towed it once more so that they could go to C/714 and get Lt. William Manders back to the Battalion aid station in Rohrwiller.

Through some very gallant efforts the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon of A/714 did not lose a life that day, but several were laid up in the hospitals. Most were returned to A/714 while Moss laid in hospitals in France and England, and France again until May 29, 1945, a few weeks after V-E day.

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