

MEMORIES of CAPTAIN CARL J. HELTON
COMPANY A, 17TH ARMORED INFANTRY BATTALION

With the 12th Armored Division in the European Theater of Operations, I was the Commanding Officer, Company A, 17th Armored Infantry Battalion (AIB). My responsibilities included the planning, training, operations and administration of that unit. In order words, I was responsible for everything the company did or failed to do.

At the outset, I should say that the preparation of this memoir of combat experiences was quite a challenge since I'm writing about things that happened over fifty years ago. A multitude of details which I thought would stay with me forever have completely vanished from my mind. In a few instances, I've looked for reminders from Marvin R. Drum and other former members of my company. Also, I've relied on various documents, such as a "History of Company A, 17th Armored Infantry Battalion" by Ernest Wallander* for dates and times of certain events. For the benefit of the readers, an armored infantry rifle company, like Company A, 17th AIB, was authorized 251 personnel, including seven officers. Depending on their jobs, individuals were armed with a Cal. .30 MI Rifle, a Cal. .30 MI Carbine or a Cal. .45 Submachine Gun. They traveled in twenty half-tracks from points A to B or when exploiting a breakthrough of enemy lines. The half-track was a thin-skin armored personnel carrier with wheels in front and tracks in the rear. Some had ring-mounts for Cal. .50 Machine Guns. The company commander's half-track contained mounted radios for communication with higher and adjacent headquarters, and organic platoons. Platoon leaders had radios for communication with the company commander and other platoon leaders. With difficulty, radios could be dismounted and carried for ground communications when vehicles could not be used. Additional vehicles included two jeeps and several 2 ½-ton trucks used by mess, supply and maintenance personnel. Company A managed to obtain an extra jeep and another half-track which was used to deliver supplies when the company was under fire.

The company was organized into a company headquarters, three rifle platoons and an anti-tank platoon. A rifle platoon had three rifle squads, a machine gun squad and a 60mm Mortar squad. The latter two provided fire support for the platoon in accordance with the platoon leader's direction. Occasionally, they were consolidated under company control. The anti-tank platoon had three 57mm

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* Ernest H. Wallander of Maytown, PA handled the procurement, accountability and issue of maps and aerial photographs for Company A and served as company navigator. He rode in the company commander's half-track with his eyes glued to a map and the odometer, ready to announce our current location and each turn on a timely basis. His performance of this job and other assigned functions was always characterized by excellence. Ernest was one of about sixty students assigned to Company A from the ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program) in the spring of 1944. This group provided an infusion of intelligence for key positions within the company.

anti-tank guns (one for each squad) which we found generally ineffective against German tanks. As a result, the guns often were left hooked to their prime movers and the personnel used as an additional rifle platoon. Personnel assigned to the company headquarters were those concerned with command and control, motor maintenance, supplies and operation of the company mess.

Under combat conditions, a Forward Observer (FO) from the supporting artillery battalion accompanied the company commander. In addition, an FO from the 81mm Mortar platoon from the battalion headquarters company was usually available for support. Other supporting fires were sometimes available from the battalion machine gun platoon and the 105mm assault gun platoon. A platoon of five tanks was often attached to the company.

INTRODUCTION TO COMBAT. Approximately three weeks after landing at Le Havre, France on 12 November 1944, the 17th AIB, as part of the 12th Armored Division, had assembled, received all of its equipment and moved to the vicinity of Rahling, France in preparation for combat. There, the 17th received orders to relieve a battalion of the 26th Infantry Division which was holding the southern part of Bining, France. Since the Rahling-Bining Road was under direct enemy observation from high ground to the east, daylight movement was subject to enemy fire and thus limited. All vehicles were kept in the Rahling area while troops moved on foot during darkness. I and other company commanders went forward on 7 December, during the early hours of darkness, to meet company commanders being relieved and arrange for the relief. Our company were brought forward later under command of executive officers. All companies were in position in Bining by 0300 8 December. An immediate problem was how crowded it was. Our 251 man companies were large compared to those in the infantry division at full strength. Leaving about fifty men behind with the vehicles and rear echelon, we took about 200 men per company into Bining. The companies we relieved had a strength of about 80-90 personnel. The result was insufficient space for 17th personnel. If the Germans had detected the relief, artillery fire could have caused heavy casualties.

Once my platoons were settled, I threw myself across as bed in my command post (CP) for a couple of hours of sleep. I was awakened suddenly at daylight by a noise and from being bounced in bed. I soon discovered that an enemy 88mm anti-tank gun had fired an armor piercing shell at one of our tank destroyers which was parked at the corner of my building. The shell had cut through the corner of the building and grazed the bed frame as it went underneath my bed. The tank destroyer was destroyed. What an introduction to combat!

Across the road were two dead soldiers from the 26th Infantry Division who, apparently, had been negotiating concertina wire during an attack when killed. Entangled in the wire, they gave the impression of being in a state of suspended animation except for their faces which were drained of color. In another sense, they appeared to be mannequins dressed in the uniform of the day. They were later removed by our graves registration personnel but my memory of those American soldiers lingers on.

Two of my men were killed in different accidents on 8 December. I dashed across the road to investigate and drew fire from a German machine gunner en route. The road ran straight through town

then turned around the hill where the gunner was located. Each time he saw someone, he touched the trigger and rounds ricocheted down the road. After drawing his fire again on my return trip, I took my artillery FO to the top floor where he allowed me to call for artillery fire, one gun only. The machine gunner was still sitting behind his gun when we went by there the following day.

One of my platoon leaders (Lt. Yarborough) and two of his men were wounded while laying wire to my CP during the night of 8-9 December. His platoon failed to get wire in as required by company Standing Operation Procedure (SOP) and I ordered him to get it done without delay. Instead of sending a non-commissioned officer (NCO) to do the job, he went himself. As they were huddled in the road trying to solve some problem, a German patrol rolled a grenade into their midst.

At 0800 on 9 December, the 17th attacked to seize Bining Barracks on the high ground north of Bining. My Company A was on the right and Company C on the left. Resistance was light and the objective was taken by 1030 along with fourteen prisoners. During the attack, we received tank fire from our right rear. With my binoculars, I located the firing tank unit, later identified as our 23rd Tank Battalion, and reported this by radio to the battalion CP. The firing was stopped but not before five men in Company C were killed. From this incident, we learned to be constantly alert to the dangers of friendly fire. Bining Barracks was organized for defense and we spent the night there.

To see Carl Helton's Map 1, click here. (Source: Ernest H. Wallander's narrative history on the 17th AB.)

Early on 10 December, the battalion commander issued a verbal order to attack with two companies (A and B), seize Rohrbach and the high grounds to the immediate north. It was issued hastily without any provision for supporting fires. Tank support was not provided. The customary artillery FOs were not provided then or later. Although the battalion journal indicates that an artillery preparation was fired on Rohrbach, I don't recall or believe this since company commanders had no means to control artillery fire. Missions were not assigned to battalion fire support units (81mm Mortars, machine guns, and assault guns). I noticed an 81mm Mortar FO standing nearby and directed him to accompany me. It's a good thing I did because that FO was the only fire support for the two companies during a critical time.

The attack jumped off at the time ordered and both companies entered Rohrbach without opposition. In fact, we emerged on the north side without seeing an enemy soldier or receiving any fire. When we started up the high ground north of the town, after moving perhaps 100-150 yards, both companies were pinned down by enemy machine gun fire. My command group and I had cover behind a pill box at that time. Since the hill was barren with no concealment for maneuver of my reserve platoon, I looked to the 81mm Mortar FO for supporting fire. He informed me that the mortar platoon had displaced and he didn't know its location. I directed him to make an educated guess, add 400 yards, drop a smoke round then keep adjusting until he could smoke the hill. He did this and was soon ready. Meanwhile, gunners * had gone to the assault platoons with the simple order to assault with bayonets when smoke covered the hill. The same information was transmitted to Company B by radio and both companies went up together. Battalion made no effort to influence the action. Smoking the hill seemed to be the only viable course of action and we needed something done quickly.

It worked because the defending German troops took advantage of the smoke and withdrew although I received a report that some of the gunners were caught at their guns. **We captured the high ground, our objective, then found that it was untenable due to direct fire from many 88mm guns in the distance. Accordingly, we organized a reverse slope defense.

While moving up the hill with assault elements, I noticed a door leading into the hillside, opened it, threw in a grenade and heard women scream. I descended many steps into a large cavern which had been a mine. Most of the population of Rohrbach, including the mayor, was there with their bed clothing and other necessities. The mayor, an engineer who helped construct the Maginot Line, produced blueprints of the fortifications which we were about to enter. These were sent to higher headquarters. They could have been useful if we'd had to fight for that structure. I should add that my grenade injured no one.

At that stage of our operations, the 17th had serious operating difficulties which became exacerbated during the Rohrbach attack. Rations, ammunition and other supplies did not arrive when needed, supporting fires were not arranged or coordinated, and command and control procedures at battalion level were badly flawed. Troops were exposed to severe weather conditions and unable to take rudimentary precautions such as keeping their feet dry. They had arrived at the point where they were completely exhausted. Many cases of frostbite developed. The mine was used as a warm-up area allowing troops, on a rotating basis, to get themselves warm and dry some of their clothing. The company executive officer, with a supply detail, was in the rear attempting to expedite our supplies to include sleeping bags for the men. Company B commander took identical action. The traditional impetus on supply from rear to front was not working.

During the hours of darkness on 10 December, a written operations order was delivered to me and the Company B commander (we were together in the mine) by a junior battalion staff officer. This is most unusual at battalion level. Normally, company commanders are called to the CP or other location where the battalion commander issues the order. At times, the battalion commander comes to the company commanders for this purpose. Above all, it's essential that a commander meet face-to-face with subordinate commanders so he will know first-hand the problems facing the troops. We

* Runners were used at all times to carry verbal and written messages between commanders. I had runners from my platoons present with me and company runners were provided to the battalion CP. Runners were carefully selected for their intelligence, dependability and land navigation ability.

** F. George Hatt, Jr., of Fort Worth, Texas, a member of the third platoon mortar squad was one of the first to reach the crest of Rohrbach Hill. From his vantage point, he saw one badly wounded German soldier, who had been left behind, but no prisoners. (George later assumed the position of squad leader and led his squad during all combat operations until the end of the war. Nearly five decades later, as a patriotic senior citizen, George chaired a committee which designed and constructed the 12th Armored Division Monument which stands majestically near Abilene, Texas where the division trained at Camp Barkeley. As I pen this note, he is writing the history of the 17th Armored Infantry Division.

explained our problems to the staff officer and informed him that the troops were not in a condition to continue the attack by the time directed. Moreover, we sent word by him that we wanted the battalion commander to come forward for a discussion with his company commanders. He did this, with his plans and operations officer (S-3) the following morning. As spokesman, I enumerated our problems and stated frankly that they should start doing their jobs so we could do ours. The S-3 admitted that he had not been doing his job and said he would try to make up for it. (About 30 minutes later, he was observing enemy guns firing on our position, from the aperture of a pill box, when an 88mm round splattered his face and chest. He was medically evacuated.) The battalion commander was not sympathetic and said that he would have been relieved if he had not been doing his job. Furthermore, he stated that he would be preferring court-martial charges against us as soon as he returned to the battalion CP. Soon after darkness of 11 December, company commanders were ordered to report to Col. Evans,* CCR Commander, at the battalion CP in Bining. Col. Evans was an infantry officer who commanded the 56th Armored Infantry Regiment, the original infantry component of the 12th Armored Division. He had been responsible for the training and development of young officers, such as myself, and the selection of those who would command companies. He knew us well and we respected him highly. A very professional and knowledgeable officer, he was serious about training and would tolerate no nonsense.

As we entered the large room, I noticed the battalion commander, Major John W. Cunningham, sitting on the floor in a corner with his head down dejectedly. I sensed at that instance that he had been relieved and Col. Evans assumed commander. The colonel pointed us to seats in front of his small desk and offered us a drink of Kentucky bourbon which we gratefully accepted. First, he wanted to hear about the condition of the troops. Being aware that 1st Lt. Michael Muska had served as my company executive officer, he expected me to respond. I briefed him on some of the operating difficulties we had experienced and their adverse impact on the troops, emphasizing that they had reached the point of exhaustion. With this understanding, he asked if they would be able to march if they didn't have to fight. My response was yes, if we could keep them on their feet and moving, however, if they had to stop for any reason, they would fall asleep. Col. Evans emphasized that they would not have to fight because there would be no enemy opposition, however, they would have to march cross-country at night under blackout conditions. (I wondered how he could be so certain about the enemy situation but, as it turned out, he was right.)

The colonel went on to explain the plan in detail, including the marking of our route (on the left flank) with artillery white phosphorous shells. He also revealed that we would have the new SCR 300

* While training at Camp Barkeley, TX, each rifle company was issued several 1903 Springfield .30-06 Rifles, each was a star gauge barrel, which were capable of extraordinary accuracy by expert snipers. Col. Evans published detailed instructions for the care and use of the weapon, which prohibited the firing of tracer ammunition since it could damage the bores. One day, while undergoing small unit field firing, the colonel and I were watching Ed Logue, our best rifle shot, firing at a distant target. Suddenly, we saw a round of tracer ammunition go down range. Col. Evans was so angry that I thought for a moment he would relieve me. He didn't, but the chewing out he gave me I still remember.

Radio issued for communications. One would be placed on the high ground at Rohrbach for relay purposes. The SCR 300 was a lightweight radio which was carried on a radio operator's back and could be operated continuously while moving. (Our vehicular radios, in a dismounted role, had to be carried in two parts then assembled before using.) Muska and I agreed that the job could be done.

Finally, Col. Evans alluded to the difficulties we had been having then asked what we thought the battalion commander needed. I responded, and Muska agreed, that we needed Major Logan back as our battalion commander. The colonel indicated that Major Logan had a better job at division headquarters and may not want to come back. My final comment was that Major Logan would come if he was told we needed him. Col. Evans said he would check and wished us good luck. Mike Muska and I returned to our companies. I assembled my platoon leaders and other key personnel and issued the order. At 0400 on 12 December, Company A, followed by Company B, moved out on a course diagonally through the Maginot Line on a pitch-dark night. At one point, I stopped the column to locate a subdued, intermittent light which could possibly reveal our movement to the enemy. We discovered that the light was the luminous wrist watch of Lt. Marvin R. Drum* who was commanding the lead platoon. Moving his watch up under his shirt sleeve solved the minor problem. (I had forgotten the reason for stopping the column until Marvin reminded me recently.) Now, I had the problem of getting the men on their feet and moving. I had prearranged with my executive officer at the end of the column to move forward waking the troops. I, in turn, worked from the front to the rear. We met in the center then reversed the process. I recall having difficulty waking one soldier. No matter how hard I shook him he wouldn't move. Finally, I used my flashlight with blackout lens and recognized the shape of the helmet. He was a dead German soldier. We reached our attack position near daylight, deployed, and moved into the objective. Upon entering one large pillbox, we discovered that enemy soldiers had vacated quickly leaving rations and some automatic weapons behind. Supply vehicles with rations, dry socks, ammunition, etc. soon arrived and a well-deserved rest followed. At 1400 on 12 December, Company A was given the mission to seize Hoeling. No resistance was encountered and the town was occupied by 1530.

On 13 December, Major James W. Logan joined the battalion at Hoeling as new commanding officer of the 17th AIB. Major Logan was no stranger having trained the battalion at Camp Campbell, KY and Camp Barkeley, TX. He enjoyed a reputation as a fine soldier and was highly respected by all who knew him. Mike Muska and I located ingredients for a celebration which followed.

On 14 December, the battalion was relieved and moved to Eywiller where an impressive memorial service was held for those killed in action. Everyone was touched deeply by the occasion and memories

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* Marvin R. Drum was a fine, dependable officer and his platoon sergeant, Al Funk, was one of the best NCOs I've served with. It was a winning combination that always got the job done.

emanating from combat. Afterwards, all personnel became seriously involved in the care and maintenance of weapons and equipment. There was no time to waste since more combat was just around the corner.

On 20 December, Company A moved with the battalion to Bining Barracks as part of the division reserve. Christmas was spent at Bining with a move the following day to Inswiller where we conducted field training exercises to sharpen squad and platoon units. We stayed there until 7 January when we moved to Schweighausen where we stayed about a week. Each time we stopped for a day or longer, training of some type was conducted.

STEINWALD FIASCO. Early 16 January, the entire battalion moved to an assembly area near Weyersheim for offensive action that day. Orders were issued to cross the Zorn River, bypass Steinwald to the north and attack with the 43rd Tank Bn to seize Offendorf. Making this attack possible, the 119th Armored Engineer Bn (ARB) would construct bridges across the Zorn, one for tanks in the north and one for infantry in the south. Of far greater importance, the 66th AIB had been given the mission of capturing Steinwald, a large wooded area which controlled the route the 43rd and 17th must take to reach Offendorf. CCA plans provided for the capture of Steinwald at daylight on 16 January before attacking Offendorf. Thus, we assumed that the woods were in the hands of the 66th when we received the order to attack.

The engineers did not get the infantry bridge constructed on time. The 43rd had already crossed while my company was held up in an exposed position vulnerable to artillery fire and air attack. By the time Company A crossed and deployed, the 43rd was heavily engaged in a fire-fight with enemy anti-tank (AT) guns located near the railroad tracks, northern Steinwald and the Herrlisheim. By the time we came abreast of the tanks, we began receiving some small arms fire from Steinwald. This firing was sporadic as if a few soldiers fired when they were not supposed to. I reported this to Major Logan and requested status of the 66th. By mid-afternoon, we learned that the 66th had failed to take Steinwald and suffered horrendous casualties in the process. We knew the Steinwald was heavily defended since our patrols, including one from my company, probed the woods the night before. For this reason, the 66th planned to go in at night without an artillery preparation and take the objective by surprise. I understand that one company became disoriented and alerted the enemy. German troops fired their final protective fires before the company deployed and a massacre resulted. Major Logan received permission to withdraw closer to the Zorn River. He called in an attack on the woods to help cover the withdrawal. (To see Carl Helton's Map 2, click here. Source: Lise M. Pommois' *Winter Storm*.)

Meanwhile, the 43rd Tank Bn had been in an extended fire-fight losing 12 tanks and having 11 others damaged. My Company A personnel and those of Company B were intermingled with the tanks and taking a lot of punishment. I walked across checking my men and personally experienced what was happening. It was a living hell with 85mm guns firing at our tanks from about three position areas and mortar and machine gun fire directed at my infantry from the vicinity of the railroad. I had several close calls by the time I returned to my position. (It's important, however, for troops to see their commander checking on their welfare while exposed to enemy fire.) I estimate that the forward elements of the company had advanced about one-third of the distance along the woods toward the railroad tracks. We did not get to the railroad tracks as reported in a battalion journal and some other publications. If we

had, we would have suffered very heavy casualties trying to extricate ourselves from an entrapment set by the enemy. I discovered the entrapment when I walked back to my right rear to talk with Major Logan while we were waiting for news of the 66th. Major Logan and his command group were in a partially protected position on the bank of the Lendgraben Canal which ran along my exposed right flank and along the north side of Steinwald. En route, I noticed a German machine gun point down the canal towards Major Logan. No gunners were visible so I walked over to check it and discovered the machine gunners sitting down in their foxhole behind the gun. After shooting them, I found two German soldiers out of sight in the next foxhole. Using my bayonet on one, I took the other prisoner. Observing foxholes extending along the canal to the Steinwald, I sent in reserve platoon personnel with an interpreter* and a platoon of German soldiers surrendered. That action was quite a surprise to Major Logan** and his command group who thought they were in a secure position. German troops in that platoon had been ordered to remain concealed until the American troops passed at which time they would open fire from the flank and rear. In addition, German troops in the northwest part of Steinwald must have been participating in this deception since Company A had received very little fire from that sector. We were already receiving fire from our front, some of which was in connection with the tank battle. If the 17th had reached the railroad tracks, as records indicate, we would have been in serious trouble. Involvement with Steinwald was a frustrating experience for me to see my company and the 43rd shot to hell for about three hours and be unable to do anything about it. Once the battalion commander received authorization, we moved to the rear, organized a defense for the night, took care of our wounded, replaced needed supplies, and tried to get some sleep in snow-covered foxholes. Our position remained southeast of the Zorn River.

BATTLE OF HERRLISHEIM. Major Logan reported to the CCA CP in the evening of 16 January to receive new orders. He returned with the mission to attack and seize the town of Herrlisheim on 17 January in conjunction with the 43rd Tank Bn. Intelligence estimates indicated that the town was lightly defended with second-rate German troops. After careful coordination with the Commanding Officer, 43rd Tank Bn and the supporting artillery commander, Major Logan developed his plan then issued his attack order to the company commanders and other key personnel that night, before midnight as I recall. The company commanders, Mike Muska and I, studied the map and aerial photographs together, while in the blackout tent, and coordinated our route plan and plans of attack. Our artillery FOs were with us, of course.

*The interpreter was Charles J. Wallman of Watertown, WI. Whatever Chuck told the Germans was effective because they came out of their holes quickly and were very cooperative. <p>

**Those who have had the honor and privilege of knowing Professor Raymond O. Collier, Jr., of Longview, TX, and enjoying his humor and wisdom, will be interested to learn that Ray was seriously wounded near Steinwald about 40-50 yards from where I was talking with Major Logan. After much unpleasant time in various hospitals, the only effect noticeable by others is the prosthesis used to replace his right arm.

By the time I issued my order to platoon leaders and key personnel and prepared my personal equipment, there was little time left for sleep. There was noise and some confusion with the 43rd tanks moving through and around my company en route to their attack position around the right flank. At the proper time, Company A, preceded by scouts* and followed by Company B, moved out during pitch-black darkness and followed the Zorn River to a predetermined position where we deployed in skirmish line to attack the town. En route, we could hear German soldiers talking but always managed to avoid them by moving quietly. Without an artillery preparation, we moved towards the town at daylight.

The German defense line was completely surprised to find us looking down into their foxholes with fixed bayonets. Not a shot was fired. Records indicate that about 225 prisoners were taken. I understood at the time that we captured over 400. While mopping up the German defense and moving prisoners to the rear, I had artillery fire placed to our front on the first row of buildings for our security. In preparation for our move into town, we tried to get as close to our artillery fire as possible. This could not be accomplished to my satisfaction because one gun was firing about 25 yards closer than the rest. The artillery FO tried to identify and adjust that gun but, after a couple of unsuccessful attempts, I decided to shift the artillery fire to the next row of buildings and get moving. We still had to fight to get into Herrlisheim. My artillery FO was wounded in the process but his sergeant took over the adjustment of fires. About two hours later, the sergeant was hit and his radio damaged, leaving Company A without a direct link to the artillery fire direction center.

As we entered the town, I could hear tanks firing to the east. I assumed this to be the 43rd Tank Bn which had been ordered to move by a separate route to a firing position on the east flank. From that position, the 43rd would support the 17th by fire until a pyrotechnic signal was fired by the infantry. I personally fired the prescribed signal but the tanks never joined. Apparently, they ran into the same AT guns and tanks that thinned their ranks the day before. This time, I understand that the remainder of the battalion was decimated. I heard that a few tanks arrived in the edge of town before their destruction but I did not see them. Now, we found ourselves without any tank support. (Customarily, an infantry battalion had a tank company attached for operations like this. Similarly, a tank battalion customarily had an infantry company attached for security and joint operations. For this operation, our Company C was attached to a tank battalion, the 23rd, I believe, but the 43rd had only a platoon of combat engineers to perform the infantry function.)

Major Logan and his command group arrived soon after we entered the town. By noon, we had taken about one third of Herrlisheim. Then, we ran into a much stronger German defense with tanks, apparently manned by reinforcements moved in from adjacent areas. Our advance was stopped.

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*The lead scout was Charles J. Wallman of Watertown, WI. Chuck spoke German fluently and served as company interpreter. He had no difficulty moving in close to enemy troops to determine their location, strength, composition, and what they were talking about.

As I recall, it was early afternoon when Company A received a replacement artillery FO. Once he arrived, he was sent, in turn, to the platoon which had the highest priority for artillery support. Until he arrived, platoon leaders called fire missions by radio to me at the company CP. I or my first sergeant, Jesse Rhine, would relay the request over the command radio net to the artillery liaison officer at the battalion CP who then called the fire direction center on his radio or wire line. Adjustments were called in using the same procedure. It was an awkward system but we made it work. One principle was always followed by calling for artillery fire. It was called only when a responsible leader was in position to adjust the fire. Except for our entry into Herrlisheim, I was never in position to originate fire requests. Reliance on my platoon leaders was necessary. They never let me down.

During the afternoon, we received German counterattacks four different times. About 1230 an infantry attack was launched from the direction of Offendorf. This was repulsed solely by artillery fire. About 1400, a combined tank-infantry attack came from the Steinwald. By this time, I believe the entire division artillery was responding to our fire requests. The attack was broken up in short order. Again at about 1550 another counterattack from Steinwald was stopped with artillery fire. Our worst threat of the day developed shortly after 1600 when simultaneous counterattacks by tanks and infantry with artillery support were thrown at us from three different directions, north, south, and east. As I recall all division and corps artillery units, in addition to organic company weapons, were required to defeat them.

Major Logan spent much of his time on the radio reporting our critical situation. He repeatedly stated that without reinforcements he would not be able to accomplish his mission. If reinforcements were not possible, he asked permission to fight our way out of town. All he received was reiteration of previous orders to continue the attack and seize the town at daylight. Throughout the early part of the night, harassing artillery fire was placed on German positions and the same type of fire was received in our areas. Some close-in small arms fire was exchanged where our troops were in contact with the enemy. At one time, a panther tank made a foray down the main street firing at various targets, then returned to German lines.

I received work to report* to the battalion CP about 0130 or 0200. I was expecting to receive orders of some type but Major Logan was on the radio trying to convince higher headquarters to believe

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*I'm quite certain that I was notified to report to Major Logan by William "Bill" Funke of Ft. Collins, CO., who was the company runner to the battalion commander. Initially, Bill served as a scout then was selected for the important runner function. When the enemy artillery barrage began, Major Logan decided to withdraw certain outposts placed by front-line units in view of enemy pressure which indicated an attack was imminent. He dispatched Bill with his orders to those units. Bill traveled through that blacked-out town, dodging artillery fire, and wondering if he would come face-to-face with enemy soldiers with each step. He located the units, delivered Major Logan's orders, then retraced his steps to the battalion CP.

his reports. About 0230, the entire battalion area was subjected to a very heavy artillery barrage which was followed by a counterattack from the north in overwhelming strength by units of the German 10th SS Panzer Division. They fought in tank-infantry teams with personnel in white to blend with the snow. I received reports from each of my platoons that they had been surrounded by attacking forces. After their tanks fired into occupied buildings, grenades were thrown inside. Survivors, usually wounded, were taken prisoner.

CAPTIVITY. Meanwhile, the battalion CP had been surrounded and all upstairs guards killed. Major Logan and two company commanders (Helton and Muska), with other command and communications personnel, were in the basement. Suddenly, the basement door was blown open and a grenade thrown inside wounding a number of personnel. At that point, Major Logan decided to surrender the CP since the obvious alternative was death for all personnel present. As we came out of the CP under the flashlights and guns of enemy soldiers, I fully expected to be shot. Instead, we were treated with the respect due professionals who had fought with dignity and honor. With fighting still going on around us, we were moved out of town to the north then to the Rhine River which we crossed by a motorized barge of some sort.

For those of us being marched away by German soldiers, our fighting days as American soldiers appeared to be over, at least for a while. No longer did we have control over our destinies. I asked myself many times, how could this happen? How could a fine, well trained, highly disciplined military organization be decimated when seemingly it did everything right? At the time it happened, as a 23 year-old captain, I could identify obvious wrongs such as the CCA order to bypass Steinwald, while it was still in enemy hands, and capture Offendorf. Similarly, CCA orders to remain in Herrlisheim disregarding reports of the commander on the scene who correctly predicted grave consequences. What was happen to my company and other 12th Armored units which suffered such heavy casualties? Would they be deactivated? Instead of deactivation, the pipeline may have hiccupped once or twice before pouring out replacement personnel, machines and equipment for 12th Armored Division units. Before we reached our “permanent” prison camp, the 12th may have been ready to roll again, which it did with great distinction. The magnificent combat power of the United States of America, when fully mobilized, is awesome to behold.

(During subsequent years of my military career, I occasionally pondered about the Steinwald-Herrlisheim-Offendorf area of operations and what transpired there. After a variety of command and staff assignments and advanced military schooling, I had a unique vantage point from which to reflect on what could have happened if this or that had been done. Regardless of my considerations, I kept returning to one conclusion. Our attacks on 16 and 17 January 1945 were destined to fail because Steinwald, which controlled our avenues of approach, remained in enemy hands. The importance of that wooded area, as seen by me then as a young captain, is the same now as a seasoned, retired colonel of infantry. If the 17th had been joined by the 43rd as planned, an entirely different chapter in history could have been written. As it was, two under-strength rifle companies were unable to withstand the overwhelming combat power thrown against them by the 10th SS Panzer Division.)

After crossing the Rhine River, we prisoners were marched to a temporary holding facility in the town of Baden-Baden. Our temporary home was a reasonably comfortable troop housing barracks. And the food was much better than what we would find later on. Here, we were held by combat troops who believed in better treatment than we would receive in rear areas. A German major general inspected the camp one day and asked questions of the prisoners. He asked me if my father was a rich man since he thought I was young to be a captain. He seemed surprised when I told him that my father was actually poor. My memory is shaky but I believe we stayed about a week in Baden-Baden while waiting for a train to take us to our permanent prison camp. The train ride was quite an experience. We were crammed into box cars like cattle. A couple of large buckets per car served as a latrine. Although some details are elusive, I was reminded recently that there was essentially standing room only. I vaguely recall that it was an overnight trip during which we were sidetracked several times to allow higher priority traffic to pass. Without question, it was a miserable journey.

PRISON CAMP. Oflag XIII B, near Hammelburg, Germany, was not a comfortable place to live. Most of the camp was occupied by Serbian officers who had better accommodations than Americans did in our abutting compound. The two compounds were separated by barbed wire which was covered by spotlights and machine guns in towers. Since work was not prohibited by the Geneva Convention for Serbian officers, they worked on nearby farms and had access to adequate food.

Within the American compound, we were organized generally along military lines. The senior American officer (SAO), Colonel Goode, selected officers for his staff and designated officers, according to rank, in charge of barracks. Although military discipline could not be strictly enforced, all prisoners were still subject to military law and violators could face court martial after the war.

The American compound consisted of seven antiquated stone barracks. Approximately 200 prisoners were crowded into each five-room building. Each room had one or two drop lights of 15 watt bulbs. During extremely cold weather, which we were experiencing, we tried to stay warm by huddling around the one small stove furnished each room. An inadequate ration of coal briquettes was issued resulting in an average temperature of about 30 degrees. During huddling, we also toasted slices of black bread from our meager ration. The latrine was detached in a separate, very cold building.

Inadequate food was a serious problem. The daily menu consisted of one-tenth loaf of black bread (one of the ingredients was sawdust, we believed), one cup of ersatz coffee and one bowl of thin potato soup. Occasionally, a small piece of margarine was issued. Once a week, if one looked carefully, a slight trace of meat might be detected in the soup. Downward adjustments of the ration resulted in a paper value of 1070 calories per day according to one report. Our consensus was that the actual value was closer to 800 calories. A report by Military Intelligence Service, War Department, stated that officers were allowed to purchase supplemental rations from a canteen. Not so! There was no canteen. American Red Cross parcels, worth more than their weight in gold, were available infrequently through the Serbian component. They contained canned meats, chocolate bars, coffee, cigarettes, etc. I recall getting one such parcel while in that camp. Weight practically dropped off prisoners as a result of the diet. I lost about 30 pounds. Becoming friendly with the adjutant of the Serbian Camp, I visited him (through a break in the fence) at night occasionally when searchlights were concentrating on other sectors. He was interested in learning about the United States where he wanted to immigrate after the

war. I gave him knowledge and he gave me some food. Otherwise, I would have lost more weight than I did. The Serbians seemed to have plenty of food and appeared healthy. The small amount of black bread issued to each prisoner was precious. Most of us tried to save a small amount for each meal. One night, a thief was caught stealing bread from another person in our barrack. When the lights came on, we discovered that he was a chaplain. His punishment was ostracism. I was healthy when captured and required no medical attention. Those arriving with wounds after walking long distances in bitterly cold weather often had serious problems. We had a small dispensary, however equipment and supplies were limited. The Serbians had a much larger and better equipped dispensary where our very ill personnel could get treatment.

During air raids, prisoners were required to get into barracks immediately. When raids lasted for extended periods, the inability to get to the latrine was a problem. We did have a large bucket inside our barracks but that wasn't very satisfactory. Negotiations with the German commandant reversed this rule but guards, on two occasions, "did not get the word" and killed an American prisoner.

Because of extreme cold and lack of adequate fuel, shortage of clothing for some, and lack of adequate medical attention for others, life in the POW Camp was reduced to staying warm and getting enough food to stay alive. Worst of all, however, was confinement behind barbed wire under the watchful eyes of armed guards and the constant threat of machine guns in the towers. I never really appreciated my freedom—until I lost it. With respect to food, I vowed that, once I regained my freedom, I would never go hungry again.

ESCAPE – A TOUCH OF FREEDOM. The happiest day of my life was 28 March 1945 when a small task force (TF) from the 4th Armored Division arrived during the afternoon with the mission of releasing us from the POW camp. At that time, there were about 1,500 American officers in Oflag XIII B, including Lt. Colonel John Waters who was the son-in-law of General George S. Patton, Jr. Patton later said that the only mistake he made during the war was sending too small a unit (1 med. Tank co., 1 infantry co., 1 light tank platoon) to do a job that required a combat command. He denied initially that he sent the TF to release Waters. I understand that much later, in his memoirs, he admitted that Waters was the primary purpose.

The TF was commanded by Captain Baum who was accompanied by Major Stiller, Patton's aide-de-camp. Stiller said that he came along for the ride. They broke out of our lines at Aschaffenburg for the 60-mile dash behind enemy lines which took two days and cost them nearly half of their vehicles en route. There were no reinforcing units to follow. Third Army was pointed north whereas Hammelburg was to the east. We knew they were on the way from a clandestine radio in our camp.

Mike Muska and I met the first tank to nose through the wire near our mess hall, obtained weapons from the crew and went hunting for guards. Some confusion followed during which Col. Waters was shot and seriously wounded by a guard. We found the German captain in charge of our camp talking to two guards who were outside the main entrance. I threw a bayonet at his throat but missed and it stuck quivering in the fence post. Although I was out of practice, I got his attention and relieved him of his personal pistol.

When the TF moved out that night for the return trip, all vehicles were loaded to the maximum with POWs. I replaced an assistant driver of a light tank who had been killed. Our vehicle was third in the column. After traveling about ten miles (my estimate), the column ran into a road block; the lead tank was knocked out by a bazooka and the front of the column strafed by 20mm machine guns. Capt. Baum, who had been slightly wounded on the way in, turned the column around and reversed his route about half the distance. He pulled into an assembly area on the lower slope of a big hill with most of his vehicles exposed on the edge of the woods. He decided to make the breakout attempt at daylight and to abandon some vehicles, transferring gasoline from them to the others. Deciding that the TF had no chance to get out, the SAO, Col. Goode, marched the POWs back to the POW camp.

Determined to take our chances with the TF, Mike Muska, Marvin Drum and I, plus a few others, remained to fight with that unit. We were told before daylight that there was no room for us on the vehicles. During the night, the Germans had moved AT guns, tanks and infantry in position to counter the TF. Muska, Drum and I were at an abandoned halfback getting rations for the return trip to our lines on foot. We had a map and compass, and we stuffed German Marks into our pockets that we found on the floor of the vehicle which was covered with the German money. At that moment, daylight, German troops opened fire with their tank and AT guns. In short order, every TF vehicle was destroyed and tree bursts had wounded many of the personnel. The three of us made our way with difficulty, due to our weakness, to the top of the hill, under fire I should add. Staying in the woods, we started moving toward American lines. Our plan was to travel at night and hide out during the day. Eventually, we ran out of woods, concealed ourselves, and waited for darkness.

RECAPTURE. A narrow, unimproved road ran parallel to and about 75 yards inside the woods then through open space to a town in the distance. From our hiding place near the northwest corner, between the road and open ground, we could hear small arms fire from the south. Then, we observed a German combat patrol walking north on the road firing rifle grenades into the strip of woods to their left. Since the patrol would arrive shortly in our position, I pondered what we should do. Suddenly there was shouting and a few shots fired from the east then one of the POWs, a lieutenant, ran rapidly through the woods, followed by German troops, directly into our position. He was so excited and terrified that I had difficulty getting him to conceal himself. There was still a slight chance that he had not compromised our position. When he stated his intention to surrender, I threatened to shoot him if he did. Nevertheless, as the German soldiers converged on our position, he jumped up with his hands held high and yelled, "Comrade." An instant decision was necessary. Convinced that any resistance would cost us our lives, I don't remember my words but I initiated the surrender. As I stood up so did the others. We were recaptured and returned to the POW camp where we joined a column of prisoners marching under guard to other parts of Germany. I was fortunate that the German captain, whose pistol I had taken, had already departed with another column. I did not see him again. One additional thought, when we were recaptured, German soldiers were delighted to find the German money we had stuffed into our pockets and they were in a good frame of mind. Soon thereafter, we came across a German flag which had been mutilated and ground into the dirt. We think that the German money saved us since there was no retaliation.

During the next 30 days or so, we marched every day, sleeping in barns at night, and encountering some interesting experiences. Occasionally, it seemed that we were on the bull's eye of a

target. On 21 April, at Nurnberg, we had moved into trees lining the side of the road for a break when our B-17s bombed a munitions factory about 400 yards away. Each flight came in at a different angle and the last one overlapped our position. We cheered until, suddenly, we were knocked to the ground from concussion. Reacting instinctively, I was in the nearest crater within a few seconds. Many in our group were killed including German guards. A nice thing about the Army Air Corps, one of its P-51s kept track of our column, checked us almost daily, and then departed wagging its wings.

At every opportunity, during our trek, we traded cigarettes, coffee, or chocolate (if we had any) to German civilians for bread or other food. Our guards tried to prevent this and keep the prisoners under strict control during the long marches. On the other hand, they knew that the war was coming to an end and, in the near future, our roles would be reversed. They didn't care much for their predicament. We took advantage of this and created opportunities for trading. For example, each time a prisoner dropped out to answer a call of nature, a guard had to drop out of the column with him. Some calls were imaginary to draw guards away from the column. This ruse often enabled one of more prisoners to stop at a farm house and trade. Civilians were cordial and I never saw one being rude to an American prisoner. This may seem strange since there were many new crosses in German cemeteries, large and small, and Americans caused many of them to be there.

We were two or three days march south of the Danube River on 2 May when an opportunity came to knock on the door of a farm house. When the lady of the house opened the door, I explained that I had coffee if she had hot water (Germans had no access to coffee at that time). As I entered the house, on her invitation, I was surprised to see a German full colonel there in uniform. We exchanged cordial greetings while the lady went for hot water. Noticing a map spread out on a table, I examined it then mentioned to the colonel that American troops should be across the Danube River within a few days. He replied that I was wrong because American troops were already across the Danube at two locations which he pointed out. At that moment, a knock at the door interrupted our conversation. It was a German captain from the POW column asking if a prisoner of war was there. I accompanied him back to the column – before I had my coffee. I don't remember if I had time to give the colonel and the lady of the house any.

The column stopped that evening at a village on an east-west unimproved road equidistant between two main north-south roads which led to bridge sites over the Danube which were the crossing areas American troops used if the German colonel was correct. I cannot recall the distance to the main roads but, for the purpose of this memoir, I'll say at least several miles.

FINAL ESCAPE. During the afternoon while marching, Drum, Muska and I decided to escape that night and attempt to get back with our troops. We did this by hiding out in a barn loft until the column moved out before daylight. This was a calculated risk since we had been warned that POWs trying to escape would be shot. As we figured, however, the guards were under some pressure then and would not take time for the usual, thorough check of the prisoners. Peeking out of a crack in the barn loft at daylight, I saw an enemy artillery battery in the courtyard. The guns had short barrels and looked similar to the 75mm Howitzer used by our airborne troops. They displaced all four guns soon after daylight without firing a round. A Belgian slave laborer with a wood-burning truck showed up and was willing to help us. He seemed to know where the American troops were and we asked him to tell

the troops about us and ask them to come get us. (There were several other ex-POWs with us.) He took off in his truck and within an hour or so, two American jeeps drove up. There were three in each vehicle, one in the rear behind a Cal. .50 machine gun and two in the front with their individual weapons. The jeeps were clean and the soldiers looked like they were on parade, with freshly pressed uniforms and wearing yellow scarves of the cavalry. The NCO in charge suggested that we use the Belgian's truck, go to the main road behind them, turn right and we would run into American troops. He indicated that they must continue their patrol to the next main road and contact the troops there. The Belgian, who had followed the jeeps, was ready to be of assistance. We loaded on the truck and took off to the west, found the main road, turned north then, within a few miles, met American troops who were clearing a small town. I recall vividly a master sergeant walking down the main street toward us with a Cal. .45 automatic in his right hand and scrutinizing each building. Soon, we saw a jeep with the two stars of a major general on the side of the road. We dismounted, met the general and had our noon meal with a nearby mess. We were with either the 13th or 14th Armored Division.

Since the road to Nurnberg was the main supply route for that division, we had little trouble getting a ride to that city. I don't recall the details but we managed to get transportation from Nurnberg to Camp Lucky Strike, a holding facility for ex-POWs. Tents with cots and stoves were quite a change from sleeping in barns. A bath and clean clothing were early on the agenda. The most significant change, of course, was the excellent food, which we ate in small amounts at first, and the freedom to enjoy our new life.

Our processing at Camp Lucky Strike went smoothly and, by the end of May, we were at sea aboard the U.S.A.T. Marine Angel en route to the United States of America.

Carl J. Helton

Company A, 17th AIB

12th Armored Division

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World War Experiences of Carl Lyons, Company A, 17th Armored Infantry Battalion, 12th Armored Division, United States Army

**TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH COLONEL CARL J. HELTON, USA (retired) on Thursday, 25 March 2004.
Interview conducted by John Ferguson in Abilene, Texas.**

After the maneuver in Tennessee terminated, the 12th moved to Watertown, TN, where the division prepared for reorganization. There the division turned over its vehicles to the 14th Armored Division. During the reorganization, the 56th Armored Regiment became three new battalions.

Company D, 56 Armored Regiment became Company A, 17th Armored Infantry Battalion. Company A, as part of the division in training, at Watertown on 15 November 1943, then closed on the new location in Texas on 18 November.

