

HERRLISHEIM STORY

January 15, 1945

FEAR
Schweighausen

January 16, 1945

NIGHTRIDE
Movement to Geudertheim

THE SUN CAME OUT
Weyersheim

STEEL ON STEEL
Alongside the Steinwald

January 17, 1945

DAY OF PASSION
Herrlisheim

Night of January 17-18, 1945

FALLBACK!
10th SS Panzer Division Attack

VIOLENT SALVATION
Separated from the Company

RETURN FROM THE NETHERWORLD
Back toward Zorn River

THE GENERAL'S TANKS
Weyersheim

January 18-19, 1945

BIG GUN RHETORIC
Weyersheim

January 19-20, 1945

THE RAVISHED UNIT RETURNS
Return to Schweighausen,

HERRLISHEIM STORY
By F. George Hatt, Jr.
Co.A, 17th Armored Infantry Battalion
United States 12th Armored Division

Introductory Comment:

The first part of this story was written in early 1946, shortly after I returned home from Europe following World War II. This is a story of four bloody days of my life in World War II as seen through the eyes of a 21-year-old armored infantry soldier. The initial part is much as I wrote it then. The episode was extremely clear in my mind in 1946, and seems to be so, even today. Yet as I pick up now where I left off in 1946 the details are a little more difficult to recall. Thus this account is only as factual as memory allows. Some things that have helped are reviews of old documents, history of that time, three trips back to Herrlisheim in 1985, 1990, and 1995, plus discussion and correspondence with some of our World War II enemies and also with old wartime comrades.

With the U.S. 12th Armored Division
17th Armored Infantry Battalion
Company A, 3rd Platoon

Herrlisheim, Gambsheim, Weyersheim area north of Strasbourg, Alsace, France.
January 15-20, 1945

FEAR

Schweighausen (January 15, 1945)

Though the weather was very cold and clear on this Alsatian winter night of January 15, 1945 we of Company A of the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion were warm because we were billeted in the houses of French Alsatian families. We had been in this particular town, Schweighausen, for eight days, so our squad, the 3rd Platoon 60-mm mortar squad, had begun to feel "at home" as we grew acquainted with our un-inviting hosts. When on duty our job was to man roadside posts, sometimes with the support of a Sherman tank in a populated location, sometimes at night with just a bazooka anti-tank rocket launcher in a foxhole on a dark lonely road running through farmland. We were told that German tanks may come down the road out of a forest that we could see vaguely several hundred yards away. Our job would be to stop the first tank with a bazooka round then find a way to escape return gunfire. Later I learned that we formed a second line of resistance should the Germans break through with their new *Operation Nordwind* offensive. The German's Ardennes offensive ("Battle of the Bulge") had stalled in Belgium and the Nazi government needed some new successes for home front politics. Although we'd heard reports of infiltrating and parachuting Germans behind our lines our company did not come into contact with the enemy. Sometimes when we weren't on outposts we practiced the employment of our weapons -- mortars, machine guns, etc. A layer of soft snow over hard, icy ground made this practice difficult. When we weren't on duty we spent times playing cards and drinking warmed-up red Alsatian wine that we had discovered in the basements of some of the homes. That stuff caused bad headaches and also some rather clumsy practice sessions when we were called unexpectedly to practice drills.

It had been comfortable to be in this backup position. However, this evening of 15 January was different. The time was around 10 pm and ordinarily we could fall asleep in a wink. But this night I was tormented by tension brought on by what we felt was to be a dangerous change in our duties. I tried to sleep but I just lay with a mind full of contemplative, terrifying thoughts magnified even more behind closed eyelids. The agitation of my fellow squad members told me that they, too, had a similar problem.

Very new to his job, Sergeant Harold Capretta of Columbus, Ohio, had taken over leadership of our squad after our regular squad leader, Staff Sergeant Charlie Ruma, from St. Louis, was wounded by a German *potato masher* hand grenade on December 8th in Bining, France. Sergeant Capretta had left an hour before to get the "dope" that had been brought from Capt. Carl Helton's Company A command post by Lieutenant Owen. (Capt. Helton hailed from Harlan County, Kentucky.) Lieutenant Owen replaced Lieutenant Harold Yarbrough (from Goldthwaite, Texas) after he was wounded in Bining along with Staff Sergeant Ruma. I, and I'm sure the other fellows, waited and hoped what we knew was probably going to be futile. No normal soldier who has had time on the battlefield wants to return there. Sergeant Capretta finally came in and the seven other members of the squad gathered around the nervous young three-striper. We were a motley assembly of young men from all over the U.S.A. Besides the sergeant and me the others were: Private First Class Richard Burdette of Cincinnati, Ohio; Private First Class Adrian Mariluch of Nevada; Private First Class Richard Coney of Jackson, Mississippi; Private First Class Edward Ostrach of New York; replacement Private First Class Floyd Stoffa of Ottumwa, Iowa; and Technician 5th Grade Arlo Ward of Rexburg, Idaho, our halftrack driver.

The sergeant's nervous hands unfolded a map as he sat down and began looking over it. Then his finger pointed at some black dots called *Weyersheim*. It looked like a common sized Alsatian town but was close to the Rhine River -- maybe ten kilometers. Between Weyersheim and the river were three insignificant looking villages, one named Offendorf, one Gambsheim, and the other, Herrlisheim. Southwest of Offendorf and west of Gambsheim stood a wooded area named *Steinwald*. [The French called it Stainwald.]

Then came the plan that Sergeant Capretta had just received. Our battalion, the 17th Armored Infantry, would mount up in our armored halftracks at 2:00 am and be ready to move to Geudertheim, about 15 kilometers to the south. There the troops would dismount and move on foot through Geudertheim and Bietlenheim, to Weyersheim. At daylight the battalion would walk out of Weyersheim, cross the Zorn River and attack to the east through four kilometers of open plain past the north side of the Stainwald. The battalion would then enter and secure Offendorf. At first daylight our sister Armored Infantry Battalion, the 66th, was to launch an attack from the southwest and clean the Germans out of the Stainwald before the 17th started toward its first objective, Offendorf. The final mopping up operations would come when the 17th moved on through the town to clear the Germans out of a one-square-mile area between the Offendorf and the Rhine. We were told that this was a German bridgehead over the Rhine into France and had a total of about 800 German troops. The 17th was attacking with roughly that many men. [We were to learn later that the Germans actually had a vastly superior force, the 10th SS Panzer Division, 553rd Volksturm Division, and elements of two or three other divisions in the bridgehead. We were going to find out what that superiority meant during the next three or four days and nights.]

With what we were told it looked simple. Resistance was to be light and we should complete our mission in two days, at the most. Sergeant Capretta told the squad members to get as much rest as possible for the next four hours.

We did lie down, but no sleep. The tension was even greater.

NIGHTRIDE

Movement to Geudertheim (16 January 1945)

"Two o'clock!" came quickly. "Mount up!" was the command; it was time to move. Each man in the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion hurried, gathered his arms and equipment, and climbed into his squad's halftrack or other armored vehicle. The battalion slipped out of Schweighausen without the civilian population's knowing it. The night air temperature was around 0°F so it was a cold

ride, and a dark one inasmuch as the vehicles used only "cat eyes" blackout lights. The heavy *tracks* of our company along with the other vehicles in the battalion rolled on and on slowly past several dark communities. Then they stopped. All was quiet. Everyone waited. The word came down from the head of this *armored reptile*, "Dismount! Get your equipment ready for you to move out on foot."

The long line of armored doughboys no longer with the benefit of their armor hesitatingly moved forward to congregate at the front of the column of vehicles. There were words of "Good luck!" from the drivers who remained behind to tend to the halftracks and jeeps and, in return, "See you, guys" from those moving out on foot. The drivers looked lonely in the darkness standing singly by their vehicles. (Later the drivers told us that they had indeed felt lonely seeing their comrades walking off toward harms way. The drivers then re-entered their empty mounts to drive into a nearby town to await their next order.)

Walking was a tricky job on that icy road because of the burden of equipment each of us was required to carry. Private First Class Mariluch, a 21-year-old from a Basque sheep-herding family in Nevada, and I were the mortar squad ammunition bearers. We each felt the additional twenty-four pounds of 60-mm mortar ammunition. I thought, "Twenty-four pounds is better than thirty six, as in the old twelve-round bagful." In addition, I wore a 3-lb steel helmet, carried a 20-lb anti-tank rocket launcher (*bazooka*), three rounds of bazooka ammunition (12 lb), a 10-lb M1 rifle, a rifle bayonet, a full rifle ammunition belt and two bandoliers of rifle ammunition, a gas mask, two fragmentation hand grenades, a white phosphorous incendiary hand grenade, wire cutters, a Swiss watch with a second hand, a first-aid kit, and a pack of morphine syrettes. My clothing consisted of woolen long underwear, cotton undershirt and shorts, a wool shirt and pants, a wool sweater, wool cap and scarf, a pile-lined inner jacket and wool-lined outer jacket, wool gloves, and a pair of shoe packs with two pair of wool socks and felt inner soles. To top it off each of us had three boxes (three meals) of K rations stuffed inside his jacket. Excluding clothing, the weight carried was about ninety pounds.

We marched through one ghostly town (Geudtertheim) and back onto the icy road. Finally, after two hard, dark kilometers, we passed through a tiny village, Bietlenheim. It seemed deserted, and as the line moved in, each of us caught the cold scent of *death*. Was this sickening odor an animal or some man? Dead men and dead animals emit the same smell. Both *bad*. No one knew what it was but everyone was troubled by the thought because the effects of the two on infantry soldiers are worlds apart.

THE SUN CAME OUT

Weyersheim (January 16, 1945)

After about an hour or so of marching on the slippery road the column stopped in the third town to which we had come, Weyersheim. The predawn hour was very dark. Our platoon leader told us to rest. Sergeant Capretta reiterated this order to our squad. Everyone moved to the side of the snowy street, leaned against a building wall and fell on his pack. The men in our company had become quite tired having had little or no sleep since the night before. Many slept the entire hour the unit was halted.

With the suddenness of the commands to which we had become so accustomed we heard, "Hey, wake up! Let's go!" The shouts seemed to echo through the empty streets. So, just as the first signs of dawn appeared, our weary company moved east out of Weyersheim. The daylight revealed fields as flat as the north Texas plains, with a frozen canal parallel on the left of the road. Everything was white with hard, melted and re-frozen snow. Patches of woods with leafless trees were to the left of the road and the trees continued to line the road's left side as far as we could see.

After a kilometer of quiet hiking the Captain Helton halted the company. Command was given to *spread out* and *dig in*. Designated buddies got together and started the task of hacking two-man foxholes in the hard frozen ground. Visions of mortar shells coming into the company's position made us all dig vigorously. About the time the excavation was becoming a lot easier for some (because they had dug more energetically and managed to penetrate the 18 inches of hard icy ground that covered the soft earth which lay below the frost line) the word *move out* passed back along the line. We again put on our loads and made our way slowly to the road.

Now the morning sun was glistening on the white ground. Shortly we sensed something new. In the direction in which we were marching (to the east) we could hear the unquestionable sound of a German *burp gun* which seemed to be answered by what sounded like the slower sound of an American light machine gun. Intermingled were explosions -- bazookas? Maybe tanks. Or mortar shells? It was here that each man caught the cold *sound* of death. Were these terrifying sounds made by our troops? Or were they the enemy's? Both our and enemy fire sound the same. (The sounds were some distance away.) As in the *smells of death* we experienced earlier, before sunrise, the cold *sound* of death, too, is *bad*. Again no one knew what it was but everyone was troubled by the thought because the effect of the two (our sounds or theirs) on infantry soldiers are likewise worlds apart. We thought of the 66th Battalion and its assignment to clear the Steinwald.

Our column then turned left off the road, toward the north, and one at a time each soldier double-timed it across the Zorn River. The river, not much more than a stream, had been running along the left side of the road ever since we left Weyersheim. We crossed on an old foot bridge probably put up for the local farmers so they could get to their fields. Each soldier anticipated that the first shell would inevitably come in when he was in the middle of the bridge. However, the river was quite narrow and the bridge was only about a hundred feet long. So each man crossed quickly. All was quiet when our last man in the company stepped onto solid ground on the far bank. Then moving in a northerly direction we broke out of the riverside trees into an open field.

STEEL ON STEEL

Alongside the Steinwald (January 16, 1945)

Across the flat field the 17th started snaking to the north. Captain Helton passed orders back: *Keep fifty yards distance!* That's how much margin was kept by each man from those about him. (The word from our leaders was that *one shell should not hit more than one man*.) After a short time we wheeled to the right to move eastwardly, the direction of the Rhine River. The sun was well up with some overcast forming when we came upon a second bridge at a level a few feet below the general terrain and amongst heavy brush and trees. This bridge, a treadway, was not quite ready. It was being built by our Division's 119th Armored Engineer Battalion to allow us and vehicles which would come later to go back cross the Zorn River.

The entire company stopped and bunched up causing Captain Hilton concern for his troops security. After some strong words, the Engineers said it was OK for Company A to crossover. This time we crossed to the east because the Zorn had made a sharp turn from flowing east, near the place where we first crossed it, to flowing north. We got to the other side of the Zorn (still no more than a canal) without incident and our force climbed up onto a very flat, open plain. A bit of scrub and brush was growing here and there. The steeple of a church could be seen ahead. We thought, is that our objective, Offendorf? It looked quite a distance away.

Soon we in the third platoon heard a few scattered small-arms shots at the head of the company and everyone became more cautious of everything around us. Every bush was observed carefully; every mound of dirt was expected to be a parapet. Strange looking men began to straggle back, in different uniforms -- the enemy!-- Germans with hands clasped overhead. They looked frightened and pale. On the left flank white-painted American light (Stuart) and medium (Sherman) tanks

began moving parallel with us toward the enemy lines. One tank could be seen stopped where it had broken through the ice into a marsh. Another was trying to pull it out.

A canal that ran east to west (later identified as the Landgraben Canal) was on our right flank; shells were falling regularly on the other side of that canal, in an open field west of the Stainwald. I wondered, is it *our* artillery? Or is it German? A few men amongst us fell singly -- not many. One of our staff sergeants (James M. Caplinger) was knocked down when a bullet or shrapnel struck him in the hand and swung him around violently. (Sergeant Caplinger was evacuated, recovered, and returned to be killed in action later in the Rhineland)

We in the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion walked with the 43rd Tank Battalion tanks two hundred yards to our left. All of us moved to the east over the plain. After a few minutes we saw in the distance other buildings in addition to the church steeple. It was Offendorf! Now something new was harassing those of us both in the infantry and the tanks. It was enemy projectiles that came with a deep, loud crack as they struck the snowy ground and went off with whining flutter. Each whacked as fast as a lightning bolt and was gone. Everyone realized that this was the sound of high velocity armor-piercing shells. One came every fifteen to thirty seconds and skipped down the white, frozen field kicking up snow dust every hundred yards so fast that all the dust clouds appeared to rise at once. No one bothered to duck when he heard the shattering sound. Each knew that if he heard it, it was gone; if it hit him he wouldn't hear it. So the infantry troops all marched forward in an upright position.

[Raymond O. Collier, Jr. of El Paso, Texas, who was then a 60-mm mortar gunner in the second platoon, and others of my comrades have told me in recent years that U.S. fighter-bombers came from the west and dropped bombs in the vicinity of Offendorf. Even though I, personally don't recall the bombing in the morning I'm sure it happened.]

A few mortar shells stole in and burst with sudden shock. A 43rd Tank Battalion light tank a hundred yards to our left moved to the rear with someone lying on back red with blood. Stretcher bearer, Private First Class Marvin Tishcoff of South Bend, Indiana, passed the word to me after sundown that the wounded man was my very close buddy, Private First Class Collier, who later was to suffer amputation of his right arm. During the next several days I wasn't able to learn anything about the extent of the injury and it troubled me terribly.

As our troops moved on toward Offendorf, more and more Germans soldiers came across the field to surrender. With hands high and white cloths (flags) some came several hundred yards through the open field before reaching the forwardmost elements of our company. Our mortar squad's gunner, Private First Class Edward Ostrach, was grinning and remarking, "The Krauts are giving in without our platoon firing a shot!" These Germans were all wearing long overcoats and looked like fresh troops. Everything became rather easy and all was quiet in the Steinwald, which now was about 600 yards to the right front of 43rd Tank Battalion force.

The path to the east of the 17th's Company A, lay between Steinwald and the 43rd Tank force. I was feeling pretty good about how we were *winning* this battle. Orders had been given not to fire into the woods because "the 66th was there". Yet some of us looked at the winter-stripped forest with apprehension. Pfc Fuchs and Schumaker, one of Company A's first-platoon machine gun sections, shot into it but were ordered to cease firing. They shouted they saw German soldiers in the woods but ceased firing as commanded.

The third platoon drifted to the right into the Landgraben Canal dikes and was walking in as low a bent-over posture as they could. Sergeant Capretta told me to stay beside him. His squad was strung out behind us and we moved in this crouched walk in our approach of the Stainwald. Pfc Mariluch and I still stayed close together as we slowly raised our heads and looked over the far bank of the canal and saw that we came within a few hundred yards of Steinwald. The platoon stopped a

few minutes then we were ordered to move back along the canal one or two hundred yards and turn north away from Landgraben Canal into the field.

Next, within the edge of the dark Steinwald woods on the right, was a flash followed by a swish across our front and the dull clang of an 88mm shell smashing into one of the 43rd tanks on our left. My heart pounded! "Hey, Mariluch! Did you see that? The Krauts are still in the woods, and they are shooting our tanks from there!" Then came another flash, swish, and sighing "bong". And another. The tanks backed away with their guns still pointing toward the enemy and then moved forward to new positions. Our Shermans fired in return. Their shells explode on a long road bank running north from behind the woods. This exchange of shells seemed to go on for half an hour. Each time after a tank was struck the crew would egress, jump to the ground, run a few feet, then lie down for protection. Crewmen came out of the turret and out of the driver's hatches. Some were trying to help others get out who must have been injured. When firing ceased between the two opponents, eight 43rd Tank Battalion tanks lay crippled or burning. Presently, following the time when a tank was struck, a little smoke began to rise from the turret hatches. The smoke became heavier and some flames appeared. Munitions inside started exploding blowing smoke straight up out of the turret hatch. This occurred numerous times with several burning tanks. It was curious to see a huge smoke ring blown hundreds of feet into the air during each of two of the explosions.

[In 1995 a 10th SS Panzer Division grenadier (armored infantryman), Wilhelm Balbach, gave me a story he had written where he said he had witnessed the 43rd tanks being knocked out by the German 88mm gun emplacements located behind the road embankment. He was stunned and said that never before nor afterward did he ever see so many tanks destroyed so quickly. Frankly, he said, it was like shooting fish in a barrel.]

Everything and everyone stopped, and defense positions were formed. Company A started hacking the frozen ground for the second time that day when an 88 shell came slamming into two Company A men (Privates First Class John E. Fuchs and George L. Schumaker) and their Browning 30-caliber light machine gun. It left two torn corpses and a destroyed gun. This machine gun section was perhaps the nearest of our troops to Stainwald.

Digging got harder with each swing of the shovel. The day was getting long and we were beginning to get exhausted. After penetrating the hard frozen topsoil we found that the ground was mostly gravel, probably the result of the meanderings of the Rhine River over the millenia. Adrian Mariluch and I finished a hole four feet deep. Looking around we could see that a large proportion of our men dug a little bit then stopped. Others decided not to dig at all. My thinking at the time was that they weren't dealing with reality. They just did not believe that anything was going to hit us and they were just too tired (or lazy) to dig. However, German artillery shells began to hit in our area. We descended into "Mother Earth". Down deep in our hole Adrian and I pulled our heads as low as we could and prayed there wouldn't be a "direct hit" on us. A shell would detonate when it struck the earth outside and then there was the sound of spinning shrapnel pieces buzzing and whining until we heard them thump into the ground all around our hole. I don't remember if any of our other troops were struck by those artillery shells. Nevertheless Adrian and I felt relatively safe in our foxhole. He said as he squeezed closer to the bottom to get an inch lower, "Hatt, this was one hard job to dig. But, man, it was worth it!"

Battalion Commander James Logan of Cinbar, Washington, sent a request to the Army Air Corps to help with the large guns in the Stainwald. Promptly, four beautiful bomb-laden P-47's circled overhead while an artillery shell pointed one finger of red smoke, then one of white, at the accurate enemy weapons. The P-47's dived in. One at a time the bombs were released and sped downward. These were large bombs, 500 pounders. Each explosion blew a dozen huge, whole trees in Stainwald toward the sky. Craters large enough to put a house in were left in the wet Rhine plain. The bombs hit close to the American lines. Company A men in advanced positions were only a few

hundred yards from the impact of the bombs and the ground seemed to them to "jump with joy". One bomb hit in the field fifty yards north of the woods. Also a white phosphorous bomb hit at the edge of the woods and made a great white cloud. When the P-47's finished, they went back to their warm airdrome. The daylight faded with them.

Artillery shells were coming into the company's position one and two at a time when non-coms yelled orders to fall back. Everyone hurried, a few were carried, and time-burst shells exploded harassingly overhead. [As this was going on another Company A soldier asked me to help carry a man whose foot had been wounded and who could not walk. His squad comrades asked me to carry one end of a rifle on which the wounded man sat. (They picked me because I was big and looked like I might be able to carry a heavy load.) I said ok if someone would carry my stuff. They agreed, so I and one or two on the other end of the rifle carried this wounded man several hundred yards in the direction in which our company was retreating. We fell behind our unit because we moved slowly. The wounded man and his comrades were very grateful.] The time-burst shells were frightening but not effective because they were detonating several hundred feet above the ground level.

Company A Commander, Captain Helton, ordered us to take up new positions along the frozen canal about 1200 yards to the rear of our forwardmost advance that day. Once again our almost exhausted men began the toil of making holes in which to hide. There seemed to be dikes nearby, running north and south. Daylight had all but disappeared, however it was easy to see in the dark because of the white, snow-covered ground. Also the moon provided light from above the cloud layer.

All had become quiet after dusk. Down the line to the north from the 3rd platoon was the sound of a shot; two men rushed by and a call for medics went up. One of our men in the company had shot himself in the foot. Someone asked, "Do you think he did it on purpose?" There was no answer. It had been a miserable day and it looked like it was going to be a wretched and cold night. Thank God the wind was not blowing!

Orders passed down from Captain Helton through Sergeant Capretta that we stop digging. We thought, "What are we going to do? Attack again?" No, the force was moved again, this time transversely to the left and rear about 200 yards and everyone was told to dig in after a half-hour of confusing shift of squad's positions by our platoon leader.

Sergeant Capretta said Captain Helton ordered Co. A halftracks to bring overcoats and blankets forward to a point four- or five-hundred yards to our rear. I along with others from each squad were dispatched to walk to the vehicles and carry the coats and blankets back to our troops. It was toilsome but it kept our front-line men from freezing. As I went toward the pickup point in the dark I was impressed to see an officer personally digging his own foxhole. It was Captain Helton.

On the flat, icy wilderness we huddled in small groups taking turns digging and trying to sleep. Even though the wind was not blowing and we had the extra clothing, the extremely low temperature (10°F) made bivouacking very grim. A few of our guys were nervous and wandered about in a half-fashioned guard, lonely, stopping to speak to others in their foxholes. Time dragged by quietly and the very cold sleeping was cramped and only in moments at a time. Groups of three or four would lie down side by side on the ice. They would take turns lying in the middle, between two others, because that was the warmest place.

DAY OF PASSION

Herrlisheim (January 17, 1945)

At about 3:00 in the morning on January 17 squad leaders left their men in the cold darkness and gathered about their platoon sergeants for new orders. Sergeant Capretta came back and told us

to get ready to attack again before sunup toward a town that had been on our left the day before. In an hour we in the company once again shouldered our burdens and were in the eversame column of movement. As our line turned left and stretched forward toward the Zorn River cold weariness groaned in my body and mind as I know it must have for everyone else. At this place the Zorn ran to the northeast and was bordered by tall, dark, ghostly trees.

After travelling a mile along the evenly spaced trees we turned right (toward the southeast) away from the river. Immediately I was surprised to find that our path crossed that of clattering, grey Sherman tanks moving directly from our right to our left. History told us later that this was the 23rd Tank Battalion driving into southwestern Herrlisheim. We did not see the 43rd whose tanks were badly hit the day before in the field by the Stainwald woods. The infantry column moved quietly almost another mile and turned confusingly to march into the area that lay between the two towns held by the Germans, Herrlisheim and Offendorf. Everything seemed easy.... just as during the early part of the preceding day, it was too easy. No resistance had been met as the individual men slipped quietly over a raised highway that ran north and south linking Herrlisheim with Gambsheim. As we crossed the narrow two-lane highway Sergeant Capretta said, "Hatt! You stay close to me. You are my body guard." I thought at the time, how can I protect his body if German machine guns opened up on us? Or a mortar shell fell? Anyway I was with him at the head of the squad.

I saw Captain Helton in the pre-dawn gloom walking back and forth rapidly, waving his arms and pointing as he directed Company A platoon leaders to turn to attack to the left (to the north). Our platoon, the third, was placed on the left side of Company A to move forward on the right-hand side of the highway. I could see men stretched forward fifty or sixty yards. Others were spread on our right flank. Later I was to learn that it was the second platoon that went to the right, away from the highway, to take the right flank. First platoon under Lieutenant Marvin R. Drum of Garland, Texas, was positioned to follow in reserve position in the middle and behind the second and third platoons. What our squad could begin to make out through the darkness was a town about 200 yards away -- our objective! We were to find out later that this was the town of Herrlisheim which had been unsuccessfully fought for earlier in January by Combat Command B of the 12th Armored.

In our Division history, the German soldiers in this town were going to be the single greatest nemesis during our time in combat. As our attacking group stood there, potentially, dawn began to lighten the horizon, silouetting the church steeple, treetops, and house rooves blackly against the sky. Sergeant Capretta and I were near Captain Helton and could hear him giving orders to an artillery observer assigned to Company A. The observer called loudly and persistently on his radio for pre-attack artillery barrages. Seconds later, 105mm shells came crashing relentlessly into the quiet, sleeping little town again and again. (At the time we did not know that the German army had ordered all Alsatian civilians from the town.)

Then the shelling stopped! The Captain Helton shouted, "Move out!" There was a brilliant flash on the edge of town burning through the dimness as one of our rifle squad members tossed a white phosphorous incendiary grenade into a trench of groggy, frightened German soldiers, members of the 553rd Volks Grenadier Division. A lot of these Germans came out with hands up. We counted one-hundred twenty-nine of them. They were freshly shaven and clean soldiers (clean compared with us, their American foe) and moved quickly into American territory, eager to leave the fighting lines for prisoner cages.

Captain Helton's Company A attacked toward Herrlisheim on the right-hand side of the highway coming from Gambsheim. This highway coincided with the main street after it entered town. A platoon of GIs appeared on the other side of the highway. They were carrying a 30-caliber heavy (water-cooled) machine gun into town. I hollered across the road, "Who are you guys?" One called back, "We are headquarters company!" I had already perceived these to be 17th Armored Infantry Battalion Headquarters Company personnel because they were carrying the heavy machine

gun. In addition our company leaders informed us that Company B of the 17th, too, was on the left side of the road.

Morning light appeared as Company A's third platoon led by Lieutenant Owen entered town on the main street. The second platoon continued forward through the field to the right, and the first platoon followed in its reserve position.

[I learned later that the enemy attacked the first and second platoons right flanks. Lt. Marvin Drum's platoon had fought off German infantry and tanks throughout the day. As a result, both platoons were able only to enter the first line of Herrlisheim houses and were finally overwhelmed. Survivors were eventually taken prisoner by the 10th SS Panzer units.]

We in the third platoon, as we entered town, saw that Herrlisheim was made up primarily of homes. There were no commercial buildings. [Later we were to find that the town church and city administration building were at town's center and that a few merchant buildings were near the administration building.] Side-by-side houses lined each street. Between the houses were small yards, some of which had concrete manure pits. In many cases in back of the yard was a barn. The town appeared to be dedicated to agriculture. No civilians were anywhere. Our company was walking past the houses without taking the time to be sure they were cleared of enemy troops. This made me quite fearful. I thought perhaps we should toss grenades into each building as we went by. However, that was not practical. So I was tossing stones the size of hand grenades into each house I approached thinking that it might scare any hiding German soldier into exiting the building. However, it appeared that none was in any house since none came out.

Soon I heard small arms fire at the head of our platoon, the third. Then Private Tom Smith of Idaho hobbled by us to the rear using his rifle as a support. He said, " They shot me in the leg!" A bullet had gone through his calf. [He healed in the hospital and returned to fight another day.]

When we were a hundred yards or so from Herrlisheim's center, we saw a German M42 burp-gun squad ahead run across the street from left to right. Then some heavy weapons explosions began farther down the street. We had met strong resistance and the leading elements were stalled. At this point, Private First Class Irving Worden ran up to me and asked if I would help him with Staff Sergeant Bill Ramsay of New York state, who was injured. He couldn't get anyone else to assist. I agreed and followed him forward and to the right off the main street along which we were advancing. [I do not recall asking my squad leader, Sergeant Capretta, for permission to go with Pfc Worden. I don't remember seeing the Sergeant at that time.] The two of us went in between two closely built houses and came to a hedge where one of the other members of his squad was positioned with his rifle, observing through the hedge. Pfc Worden led me by means of a gate in the hedge into a barnyard alongside a two-story barn. As we started in, a German tank fired into the upper loft of the barn. The concussion was disconcerting, to say the least.

Pfc Worden had told me that Sergeant Ramsay was wounded. So we rushed to Sergeant Ramsay who was lying on his back in the middle of the small barnyard. The German tank crew could not see us because the tank was on the opposite side of a high fence. Nevertheless, every few seconds the tank would fire into the upper part of the barn with a high-explosive shell, and shrapnel would fly everywhere. Pfc Worden said that he and Sergeant Ramsay had entered the barnyard and shrapnel from one of the shells hit the sergeant and knocked him down. When Worden had asked him if he were hurt badly, the sergeant said he was. So Worden went back to get some help but could find no one to help until he came to me.

When we got to Sergeant Ramsay, we found him unresponsive and discovered a wound the size of a dime in his neck just above his collarbone. Blood was running from it slowly. I attempted to stop the bleeding with my fingers in the wound. But the sergeant did not seem to be breathing. I turned the sergeant's head and saw that the piece of shrapnel exited his neck at the base of his skull.

I held to the wound in his neck to keep it from bleeding and asked Private First Class Worden to put his ear to the sergeant's chest to see if his heart were beating. All this time the German tank kept firing into the barn and shrapnel was tearing all about us.

Pfc Worden said he could not hear the sergeant's heart beating. His breathing had stopped. We decided that Sergeant Ramsay must be dead. We took his rifle and placed his bayonet on it and stuck the bayonet end into the ground. We placed Sergeant Ramsay's helmet on the rifle butt. And, concluding that he was dead, we abandoned his body and returned through the gate in the hedge as the tank continued to fire into the barn. (Sergeant Ramsay's body was found by a regiment of the 36th Infantry Division some weeks later when they cleared Herrlisheim of remaining German troops.)

[A few weeks after the war someone in the squad originally led by Sergeant Ramsay found a letter in a gas mask inside their halftrack. The letter had been written by Sergeant Ramsay and was addressed: "In case of my death, this letter should be mailed to (his parents in New York)". I mailed the letter with my APO return address on the envelope. Later a letter came to me from Sergeant Ramsay's mother asking about what happened. My having been there I was able to write back to her and inform her that her son had been struck in the neck by a small piece of shrapnel and died instantly. (I have never forgotten writing this letter and it is very difficult for me to think about it, even 45 years later.) One more letter came in 1945 inviting me to come see them if I ever could. That was the end of the communications. I never did.

In recent years I have had difficulty accepting the fact that we took it on ourselves to declare Sergeant Ramsay dead. My action today would be to haul him out of that dangerous place and let the medics make the pronouncement. I could have picked him up and carried him back with no major problem but in the heat of battle I did not think of it as necessary. I have not talked to Irving Worden about this aspect of our experience.]

I then went to a shed that was directly alongside the tank that was firing into the loft of the two-story barn. I don't know what prompted me to go to the shed. [I don't recall having had any order or permission from my squad leader in this instance either, or even seeing him. I don't know how I lost contact with the squad.] I believe someone had told me that one of our riflemen in the platoon had been hit there and the rifle squad needed some help. They said they had fired a bazooka into the tank (a German JagdPanther tank destroyer) and it had no effect on the tank. A small hole was visible where the bazooka shell hit. The tank, only thirty feet from the shed, was continuing to fire its big gun into the loft of the two-story barn.

The problem was that one of the riflemen was hit in a knee and suffering a great deal of pain. I was under the impression that fragments from the bazooka shell explosion had struck him. He was afraid that the rest of us would leave him there. He could not walk. So, first I pulled out a morphine syrette and injected the contents into his thigh just above his knee. (I had been selected as the person in the third platoon to bear morphine syrettes for painful wounds.) Then I found an old wooden ladder in the shed and we loaded our disabled soldier on it. All the while he was complaining that we were hurting his leg. Four of us grabbed the ladder and we hauled him back to the main street where medics took charge and evacuated him. By that time he seemed to be feeling little pain and expressed appreciation for our getting him the hell out of there.

One of the men in our platoon said, "Hey, there's a Kraut tank back here and some guys are trying to hit it with a bazooka!". Two of us walked south along the back side of the houses that faced the main street until we entered an open field. (We must have been in the vicinity of the second platoon. Again I believe I was moving without directions from my squad leader.) Four or five GIs were loading a bazooka. I do not believe these were men from my platoon. To the east of them about a hundred yards away was a small German tank. These men were standing up in the open in plain sight. I felt they were very careless, although quite "gutsy" to be shooting at that tank. One man told us they had already fired one rocket and missed the tank. As a bazooka man myself I said that

striking the tank at that range was unlikely. We watched as the group fired another round at the tank. The rocket arched high in the air but skipped off the ground before reaching the target. It did not detonate. During all of this activity the tank never gave any indication that it would turn and fire at the Americans. My feeling was that there were some German infantry somewhere near the tank. That would be reason enough for the bazooka team not to approach the tank to reduce the distance to a practical range. On the other hand, there was no small arms fire toward any of us even though we all were clearly visible. By then I felt that I needed to return to my squad. I think I had been gone for about fifteen minutes.

Our squad was well into town and assigned to a house on the main street. We were told to get some rest. The house was neat; there were beds with sheets on them. Also, in the basement we found a large supply of preserved purple plums in jars. Having had only three K rations for a couple of days I ate my fill of the plums. (Several days later I had an extremely bad case of diarrhea, maybe dysentery. It took three weeks of doses of large sulfa pills to get rid of it!) Though exhausted, I could not sleep, even on the bed. Soon the members of our squad were told by Sergeant Capretta to get on alert because it looked like the Germans were beginning a counter attack. We began to hear very heavy firing to the northeast of our position in town. It was a mystery to me what the shooting was all about. It sounded like it was less than a quarter mile away.

[In 1990 while in Nassig, Germany, I met a German ex-Waffen SS officer who said he was in Herrlisheim on 17 January 1945. His name is Erwin Bachmann. He told an incredible story but seemed to have the credentials that it was factual. He was an adjutant in the 10th SS Panzer Division. He was the equivalent of a 1st lieutenant. He said he was riding on a motorcycle from Offendorf toward Herrlisheim around midday when he heard that enemy tanks were in Herrlisheim. He went in on foot to see for himself and having taken a panzerfaust with him he fired at a Sherman tank and "killed it". He went back out of town and commandeered two German tanks and placed them at two intersections where they were able to shoot at other Sherman tanks that were in the town. Soon an American officer came to him under truce and said the Americans wanted to surrender. Bachmann demanded that the officer bring all the American's weapons to him. The officer did. In the surrender process a number of Germans that had been taken captive by the Americans were released. Bachmann said that twelve American tanks were still operational and he had American drivers drive them back to Offendorf under guard of the Germans that had just been released. The 10th SS Panzer Division used these tanks against the Soviet army until the end of the war.

For this feat Erwin Bachmann received Germany's highest award, the Knight's Cross from the hand of Adolph Hitler.

Bachmann's story sounds like the 43rd Tank Battalion's demise, with which all 12th Armored Division veterans are familiar. The 43rd was never heard from after about the middle of the day on 17 January until the war's end when many of its members were liberated from German prison camps. It was learned that the battalion commander was very seriously wounded by a mortar shell. He and all crewmen were taken captive by the Germans along with a platoon of the 119th Armored Engineer Battalion.]

Our squad and others from the third platoon took positions in a house to observe through windows and a doorway. A stairway led to a second floor where one or two others of the squad members were located at a window. We saw two things from our positions in the early afternoon. First were counter-attacking German soldiers. By observing to the south between the next house and buildings behind it we could see several hundred feet into an area east of the main street on which we entered town early that morning. Periodically we saw a German soldier run from left to right, which was toward the main street. That is, the Germans were trying to come around behind us. We kept our M1's aimed between the buildings and fired rapidly whenever a German appeared. This must have been very disturbing to them. After a while they stopped dashing through, at least not where we could see them.

Second, a German "burp gun" team moved in next door to us. Ordinarily we stood back in the

shadows in a building, away from doors and windows so that we could not be seen. However, in the yard between ours and the house next door was a manure pile with a concrete wall. I had run outside and was on one knee between our house and the manure pile when I saw the muzzle flash of burp-gun fire in the window of the house to the south. It was only twenty feet away! All of us fired our M1 rifles into that window. The Germans didn't shoot any more after that. In fact we could hear moans from the house all afternoon and into the evening following that event. I think we got them. Nevertheless, we still could not expose ourselves to that window because of the possibility that it was a trick.

At dusk, Sergeant George Drost an old cavalryman from Arizona had voluntarily taken up a position at the back of the yard where he could see through a barn which had doors open on each end. He was a member of one of the third platoon rifle squads, members of which shared the house that our squad occupied. Sergeant Drost's station provided a view into an open area or street which came from the east and teed into a street that ran along behind our houses on the main street. When it was dusk Sergeant Drost called, "Hey, I've been here on watch all afternoon. I need a rest!" He walked back to me from his observation post where he had been standing, peering through the open barn toward the east. "Will you give me a break and take my place for a while?" With some trepidation I said ok and ran to the barn from the yard.

While I was on Sergeant Drost's post our 495th Armored Field Artillery was sending harassing 105mm high-explosive shells into the German occupied part of town. About once every minute or so a shell would fly over and hit half a block away from our place. The shells were obviously hitting buildings because a lot of roof tile and other material was blown high into the air and came raining down on our yard. So my procedure was to lie in the yard looking down the street until I heard one of our shell zipping through the air. I'd get up and go under cover inside so the stuff coming down couldn't hit me. I bet I went in and came back outside more than thirty or forty times. Finally, I was relieved by George Drost at his post beside the open barn doors.

I don't remember too much detail about what the rest of our squad members and Sergeant Capretta were doing during all that action in Herrlisheim. I believe it was Sergeant Capretta who later told me I was to be placed on a post at another house. By then it must have been 9:00 or 10:00 pm. Someone led me past a couple of houses down the main street toward town center. Then we walked through the yard into a small house that fronted on the next street. There was a window that faced directly down a street leading from the east. From there one could see just a block away the road that came from Offendorf. But it was dark. I was told to keep a watch out that window. (I wasn't told what to do if I saw something. Shoot, I guess.) Also one of our platoon's machine gun sections moved into this house. The section contained three men with a .30-caliber Browning light machine gun. The three were in another room lying on the floor in a doorway leading into the side yard. I can't remember the names of those men because that was the last time I ever saw them. There we were. Just the four of us. I don't remember if I relieved someone else or was simply put there. Nevertheless, I believe we were the farthest outpost the 12th Armored Division had into Herrlisheim. It was only about two-hundred feet from the town administrative building.

To this day I do not know why I was chosen for that task. It appeared to me that it was a job that should have been assigned to a rifle squad member. Maybe everyone else was reticent to do it. I

believe there was a certain amount of reluctance among platoon members to take on certain assignments. I absolutely entered this outpost with alarm.

FALLBACK!

10th SS Panzer Division Attack January 17-18, 1945

I had been terribly cold ever since we had left our halftrack at Geudertheim 48 hours before.

Not even the house with the preserved plums dispelled the cold feeling. But in this outpost house I felt around in the darkness and found a feather comforter. Pulling a chair up to the window and sitting down, I wrapped the comforter around my legs. Well it wasn't long before I was snug and warm for the first time since we departed Geudertheim. It was all quiet and dark down the street and all I could hear were faint sounds from the whispers of the machine gunners in the next room and occasional explosions in other parts of town. The comforter felt good.....zzzzzzzzzzzz.. ..!!!!!! *What the hell was that crackling sound?* My God, the house on the corner across the narrow street was on fire! I'd fallen asleep in my warm chair! Light from the fire was shining in the window on me. What started that fire? The Germans? I was immediately wide awake and moved back into the shadows. The fire grew to an inferno, yet there was no movement to be seen in the street or anywhere.

Suddenly one of the machine gun section men called quietly, "We're pulling back west to the house behind us on the main street." I followed them through the yard we had crossed earlier and entered the main-street house through its front door. One of the platoon members said a German Tiger tank had driven by on the main street in the direction of our rear (to the south). There had been some explosions in the direction the Tiger had gone. I stuck my head out the window and looked down the street to my left (toward the south), which was the direction in which the Tiger had gone. Oh shit! There he was backing up on the street that passed within five feet of our house. I asked, "Is there a bazooka here?" One of my platoon comrades said there was one in the corner. I felt around in the dark and grabbed it. He then said, "We don't have any ammo for it!"

[Although our troops called the German tanks "Tiger", the tanks used by the 10th SS Panzer Division were "Panther" tanks, not Tigers. This information was told to me by 10th SS Panzer veterans in 1990 during a visit to Germany. Also I was the bazooka man in my squad but I did not have my bazooka and ammunition for it by this time. I probably left it on the field the day before when I was asked to help carry our wounded riflemen back from the Steinwald woods area. I can't remember. A bazooka is very cumbersome when one got into a firefight. You just cannot hold a bazooka and fire an M1 rifle at the same time! There was always a real temptation to ditch the bazooka and use something that was effective for the moment.]

Quiet as a Mercedes Benz limousine, the monstrous Tiger rolled by our window. My comrade pulled the pin on a hand grenade and threw it out the window. It was a white-phosphorous incendiary grenade and went off with a flash and smoke billowed out. A shout came from the yard for everyone to assemble there. The order was from our new 2nd Lieutenant platoon leader. (I believe his name was Lieutenant Owen. He had joined our company a few weeks before.). Everyone was gathered in the thirty-foot wide yard. The lieutenant sounded panic stricken and said, "We have to pull back to protect the battalion CP!" Then the lieutenant said, "Take off!" Everybody simply milled around the yard. He repeated, "Take off!" This time I thought, "Where in the hell is the battalion CP?" The platoon continued to mill around. No one moved toward the gate to the street. By now the lieutenant sounded terrified when he screamed, for the third time, "Take off!" I'd had enough. So I opened the gate, ducked in a low run, looked to the right (toward the north) as I turned left and "took off". I could still hear the Tiger backing down the street to the north. Although there was light from burning houses we couldn't see the Tiger tank because he was behind the WP smoke. And, thank God, he couldn't see us. His bow machine gun would have torn up everything in that street.

VIOLENT SALVATION

Separated from the Company (January 17, 1945)

With my rifle at *port arms* I ran bent-over as fast as I could down the left side of the street. Sergeant Drost came directly behind me and the rest of the platoon strung out after him. After a

hundred yards, or so, I stopped and Sergeant Drost caught up. I said, "Do you know where the battalion CP is?" He said, "No!" I answered, "It must be down here somewhere." And, feeling very insecure standing still, I started down the street again, still in the opposite direction from which we had taken that morning.

As we moved away from the burning buildings the street became dark, however the snow always seemed to provide a background light to help us see, even on a dark night. Sergeant Drost was running very close behind me. Just ahead we could see an American Sherman tank on the side of the street. There were flames inside. The firelight was visible through the 75mm gun barrel. Apparently the block was open. Also light was shining through another hole in the turret. Was that put there by the Tiger tank, I wondered. Or was it the port for the co-axial machine gun?

Suddenly, fifty or sixty feet before we came to the tank, which was parked alongside a sunken vacant lot off to the left, I caught a glimpse of several men lying side-by-side next to each other. They were right at my feet strung along the left-hand edge of the street. The men had on white uniforms, definitely not 12th Armored troops. (We had seen some of those snow camouflage uniforms the morning of the day before when some of the Germans surrendered on that open plain near the Stainwald.) I immediately froze and turned to my left toward Sergeant Drost and hit him with the back of my left hand. He saw the Germans, too. Instantaneously and simultaneously, Sergeant Drost and I started to fire our rifles from the hip toward the men on the ground. Sergeant Drost with his carbine, I with my M1. Sparks flew as some of the armor-piercing bullets struck the edge of the pavement or rocks. Then we resumed running down the street. I had fired six of the eight rounds loaded in my rifle and we both ran to the other end of the burning Sherman tank.

[I learned, more than fifty years later, that the knocked out Sherman tank was from Company C of the 23rd Tank Battalion. Its gunner was Frank (Andy) Woods. Andy told me the tank was named "Cleopatra" and was facing south on the main street. He said, "The turret was turned to the left rear (8:30 o'clock) because an enemy tank had appeared from the east on a cross street behind us." The German got the draw on Cleopatra and put a hole in the Sherman's left side setting it on fire. The crew managed to escape with some injury.]

The Germans turned the spot where we had initially stopped into a target for three hand grenades. (I believed these to be concussion grenades because neither of us was hit by shrapnel such as might come from a "potato masher".) Then I heard a pop and spewing sound next to me. Sergeant Drost had thrown a hand grenade over the back end of the Sherman into the vacant lot. I asked, "What was it?" Sergeant Drost said, "WP!" (white phosphorous) I knelt down and shaded my eyes because I knew it would make a blinding flash and I would need to see after the explosion. Hearing the muffled explosion I uncovered my eyes and saw that the trees in the lot were brightly lit. We were shaded by the tank but could see around the tank's end into the lot. Several men with German helmets crouched on the ground and were silouetted against the brightly burning phosphorous and white surging smoke. One soldier was sideways on his hands and knees. I put my rifle to my shoulder and pulled the trigger twice. There was a "clang" as the emptied clip was ejected by my M1. No time to reload! I stuck my rifle between my knees, stripped off my right glove, and reached deep into my cold-weather-pants pocket where I carried two fragmentation (*pineapple*) handgrenades. I couldn't get my glove covered hand into my pocket so that's why I stripped it off. After getting the "pineapple" out I pulled the pin and tossed it about twenty feet into the lot. The primer cap popped and the four-second fuse began a loud spew. I thought, now *that* would make those Germans keep their heads down! I said to Sergeant Drost, "Let's go!" And so we ran down the middle of the road as fast as we could. We had gone about twenty yards when my grenade exploded. We kept going. In a few seconds the Germans began firing a slow-shooting machine gun at us with tracer bullets. The tracers popped by knee high five feet to our left then five feet to our right. But none right down the middle, thank God! We came to one of the last houses in the town on the left side of the road. The Germans had stopped shooting so we stopped running. I was laughing gleefully (perhaps hysterically, but quietly!) saying to Sergeant Drost, "Nobody else

could have gotten away with what we just did!" (It was one of the most exhilarating moments of my life! A feeling of invincibility!) Sergeant Drost saw no humor in it.

I asked Sergeant Drost where the others following us were. He said he didn't know. They were no longer in sight. Did they turn around when we ran into the white-clad Germans? Probably not. It appears that someone knew where the CP was and the platoon stopped, everybody except Sergeant Drost and me. We had unknowingly run right past it. (That probably saved us from capture, injury, or death when the main force of the German attack came a couple of hours later.) The question now was, "What should we do since it looked like we had run through the German lines into German held territory?" Sergeant Drost said how about turning left (east) and moving in the direction from which the Germans were coming. Now that seemed absurd to me. Why should the two of us immerse ourselves deeper into this strong attacking force. I said that we shouldn't do that. Sergeant Drost asked, "What should we do?" I said let's turn right (toward the west) and go between the sparsely spaced buildings and in the direction of our side. Hopefully we wouldn't run into any German outposts or attacking troops. He said, "OK." (Later I asked Sergeant Drost about why he thought we should turn east. He said, "We might have been able to get in behind the Germans." I don't think we could have gotten behind any group because they were so many that they were densely packed in behind their lead elements. Sergeant Drost was exhibiting his courage as a fighter.)

We came to a high, wire-mesh fence that skirted the road's right side. The fence appeared to enclose a garden yard and we could see that beyond the yard were the open fields located on Herrlisheim's southeast side. One of my regular assignments for our platoon was to carry wire cutters. A path straight across the garden yard looked like the lowest risk way to find our way back out of German territory. So I cut the wire in the fence to let us into the garden and then again on the other side to let us out. We climbed through then moved out into the snow covered field.

RETURN FROM THE NETHERWORLD

Back toward Zorn River (night of January 17-18, 1945)

After going west about a hundred yards we were challenged with a half-whispered, "Halt!" We stopped. We heard the American password, "Fisk!", and answered with the countersign, "Debris!". Sergeant Drost said he was going to the position of the troops that had halted us. I lay down and aimed my reloaded M1 toward the dark figures. I was ready to start firing in case they turned out to be Germans. They were not. By now I felt that we had fought our way through the German's lines into their territory then sneaked back out to our side by climbing through the holes I'd cut in the wire fence.

We talked to the challengers, who were three men alone in a shallow hole. We asked who they were. They said they were from Company B. We asked where the battalion CP was. They didn't know. We asked where Company A guys were. They didn't know that either, but they had seen some toward town earlier in the day. We concluded that the situation was very critical and decided to head in the direction of the Zorn River. Shortly we heard vehicles in the dark ahead of us.

Taking cover we soon saw that an American jeep was leading a halftrack. We went toward them and noted they were 12th Armored medics. They asked where we came from. We said from the town. "Where are you medics going?" "Up into town to set up a battalion aid station." We asked, "Do you guys know what's going on up there?" They didn't. We said the Germans were on the attack. Why would they set up a battalion aid station right on the firing line? The medics said that didn't fit their SOP (standard operating procedure). They turned around and then told us to climb on the front of the jeep's hood. We did and they took us to Weyersheim, the location of Combat Command A headquarters. We definitely agreed that we needed to get some help for the defense of the

part of Herrlisheim that we were holding. The two of us got on the hood of the jeep with our feet on the front bumper and rode on into the town which we had walked through to the front forty hours before.

THE GENERAL'S TANKS

Weyersheim (night of January 17-18, 1945)

Quite a number of trucks, jeeps and halftracks were parked in the dark frozen streets of Weyersheim. At a place where the street curved to the left (while one moves in the direction of Geudertheim) the medics pointed to a building which had a dark trailer parked on the street in front. The medics said that the building contained Combat Command A headquarters. I don't remember seeing a guard, but one or more must have been there. The building was blacked out.

Sergeant Drost and I entered the door into the headquarters and came into a large, fairly well lighted room, probably in normal times a barroom or dining room in a gasthaus (inn). It was the first warm place we had been in for two days. My God! It was heaven! A lot of clean GI's were buzzing around and busy at communications, typewriters, and doing paperwork. We looked absolutely terrible, I am sure. Three days beard, unwashed, dirty clothes, one glove missing because I dropped it when I got the hand grenade out of my pocket. The gloves had not worked very well -- didn't keep my hands warm anyway. We stopped one of the clean soldiers and told him we had just come from the town where the fighting was going on and began to describe what we had been through. He listened with a frown of concern. He took us to a sergeant and we repeated our story: who we were, our outfit, and where we had been up until the last hour, and that we needed to take some help back to Herrlisheim. After listening to what we had to say the sergeant walked away to converse with someone else. Sergeant Drost and I moved to another GI who was curious about our story. The sergeant came back and told us we could take it easy and to get some rest.

Close to the entry door were some deep wooden shelves. I crawled onto one, relishing the warmth and security of the place and immediately went to sleep. The sounds of the busy headquarters troops were like a lullaby. All too soon one of the unarmed headquarters GIs woke Sergeant Drost and me and told us to come with him. We took our rifles and followed him into the cold darkness outside. He guided us to a trailer, which had steps leading to a door on the back end.

Our guide told us to wait and he climbed the steps and went in through the door. We wondered what the hell we were going to do? In three or four minutes the GI opened the door and told us to enter the trailer. We did. The GI stood inside the doorway for a brief moment then left. The inside of the trailer was perhaps eight feet wide and twice as long. It was well lighted, had a bunk on one side and a desk and other office paraphernalia on the other side. And at the end, maybe a latrine.

One man was in the trailer. He was older than most American soldiers and dressed in a combat OD uniform. He was slender with a long, narrow nose and GI glasses. Then we saw that he had a star on his uniform designating him as a brigadier general. It was Gen. Riley Ennis, commander of Combat Command A. He asked how we were and offered us a cigarette. Sergeant Drost accepted one and I turned it down. The general said, "Don't smoke?" I said, "Yes, sir." The general told us to sit down and tell him what had happened. After a few sentences, mostly by Sergeant Drost, the general interjected. He asked, "Have you seen the 43rd tank Battalion?" I said we had early the preceding morning before daylight in a field outside the town that we attacked. He asked, "But did you see them in town?" He then took us to a map on the wall and said that the 43rd was supposed to be at a point on the east edge of the town. We repeated we did not see them but had heard a lot of heavy weapons firing in that direction when our company, Company A, stopped after it made its way well into town. The banging was around mid-to-late morning. (To us it looked like the general had lost his tank battalion and was going so far as to bring combat dogfaces into his private quarters to see if they could help him find it. It, indeed, was a sad moment for the 12th Armored Division, although the

ramifications were not apparent to Sergeant Drost and me at the time.)

General Ennis thanked us and told us to return to the headquarters room. We saw the Headquarters sergeant and he said take it easy, so we went back to the wooden shelves. That didn't last long. He woke us up and took us to a house. He told us we could lie on the floor and that we should get some rest because we were each to lead a patrol back up to Herrlisheim in the early morning. Wow! Patrols? We needed help up there. Lots of men. Not *patrols*!

Sergeant Drost and I lay down on the floor with our heads resting on our helmets as on pillows. We were nauseated that we were to return to that cold, dangerous town that was being hit by a powerful German armored unit and infantry, and we'd have nothing more than a few men with small arms. It sounded like suicide, so our sleeping was not good, with the terror rolling through our minds.

Daylight came and no one had come to get us. We continued to try to sleep when a sergeant came in from headquarters. He said that the patrols had been cancelled and that we could join other units in Weyerheim when we were ready to wake up. Well, that did it. What a wonderful relief. We both became cheerful and immediately got on our feet and looked for a way to wash up. After we had cleaned up we looked for a mess truck to get some breakfast. Company A cooks, trucks, and halftracks were nowhere to be found in Weyersheim. [I believe that they had been dispatched to Geudertheim, the next town back.] Nevertheless we were fed by a Combat Command A kitchen unit.

BIG GUN RHETORIC

Weyersheim, January 18, 1945

A fairly large number of 12th Armored troops were in town, mostly support troops and artillery. The temperature seemed to be not quite so cold. Sergeant Drost and I went to the attic of one of the houses that was on the side of town facing the Herrlisheim-Gambesheim area. Several GIs were there and were observing toward the Germans through openings in the tiled roof. These may have been artillery or reconnaissance men. Openings through the tiles were easy because a single tile could be tipped upward forming a small window about 5-inches square. The opening was not easily seen from the outside, so it would not draw fire as would a window that the enemy suspected as being an observer's post. Sergeant Drost and I opened our own "porthole" and peered toward Herrlisheim, but we saw no activity.

A tour of the town revealed one very impressive thing about the German weapons. A heavy building had been struck on the east side by a German shell. We decided that this must have been an 88mm antitank projectile because of its flat trajectory and deep penetration. One could stand in front of this heavy-walled building and look through every room and wall in the house including the exit hole at the back. All holes were in a straight line including one in the next building into which it penetrated and continued on its path. It is no wonder that the 88mm anti-tank guns had sent projectiles into the center of our medium tanks beside Stainwald on January 16th even when the trajectory was at a 45-degree angle of incidence.

[In December 1945 I returned to Herrlisheim alone and went into the field beside the Stainwald. A lot of our tanks were in that field because they had not been removed yet. I was able to see where 88s had hit at least two of our 23rd Tank Battalion tanks. The projectiles had struck the side of the tanks and penetrated their armor at an approximate 45-degree angle.]

In the early afternoon a call went out for all troops to gather at the town center. In addition there were a few tanks and assault guns, then we noticed that everybody was forming up into a combat group. Hey, maybe we were going to get our help after all! But these were not your normal fighting troops. Instead, they were cooks, KPs, mechanics, truck drivers, halftrack

drivers, jeep drivers, administrative personnel, etc., whoever was in the vicinity of Weyersheim. I found that our squad's halftrack driver, Arlo Ward, who comes from Rexburg, Idaho, had joined the ranks. He was armed with his 45-caliber "greasegun" (a cheaply made sub-machine-gun that held a .45 caliber clip of about 20 rounds).

We were told that we were going to attack to the east. The large group of men, without detailed organization and leadership, spread over the field with tanks and assault guns intermixed. It was a motley army. But we moved in a determined fashion for perhaps a kilometer or so then stopped. A few yards to my left was an assault gun with a field artillery observer standing on the back behind the turret. He was conversing on a radio in a very loud voice. I could hear everything he said.

The observer looked at a map that he had and began to read coordinates over the radio. He asked for a few rounds for indexing the range and azimuth settings of the guns for which he was the observer. He was looking toward the enemy with a very large pair of binoculars. In each transmission he spoke louder and faster. The observer then called, "Fire for effect!" Although we on the ground could not see what the artillery observer could, he had spotted a large attacking German force of tanks and infantry coming from across the Herrlisheim-Gambesheim road in the direction of Weyersheim. We heard the sound of American 105mm howitzer shells overhead whining in the direction of Offendorf and Gambesheim. We, on the ground could see black puffs of smoke over the fields on the other side of the Zorn River as these shells exploded before striking the ground. The artillery was shooting the new *proximity fuses*! The observer began screaming on the radio, "We've got them! Keep firing! Keep firing!" The artillery spoke with savage authority. Never before that, nor afterward, did I ever see such a killing artillery barrage! The puff of smoke made by each exploding shell combined with the others to form a solid, thick black cloud that was perhaps 20 feet above the ground. It had to be devastating to those German infantrymen caught in the open with no way to shield themselves.

After perhaps ten or fifteen minutes of continual punishment, the Germans stopped and began to withdraw toward Offendorf and Gambesheim. The observer reported on the radio that the guns could cease fire. The 12th Armored artillery, with probably Corps artillery, had stopped the German attack cold before the diverse 12th Armored ground force could get into a fight. [Also I've been told that the remnants of our tanks had been assembled and fought against German tanks coming from Gambesheim and a large 10th SS Panzer Division group attacking toward Weyersheim from la Breymuhl, the Waterworks area.] The withdrawal of the Germans allowed our commanders to tell troops before dusk to turn around and return to Weyersheim.

New American troops began to enter Weyersheim from the west very late that afternoon. They were the 141st(?) Regiment of the famous 36th Infantry Division of the Texas National Guard. We began to brief these men on what had been going on. I met a Mexican American squad leader from San Antonio. This was interesting to me because my father had been a sergeant major in the 36th back in the 1920s. My parents had been married near San Antonio and I was born in that city. Information was given out that the 36th was relieving us and that we would be moving back. I told the sergeant that it appeared that a lot of my company was overrun by the Germans in Herrlisheim and that wherever he took up a position in Weyersheim, he'd better have a back way out should the Germans do the same thing they had in Herrlisheim. If you are only able to exit at the front of a house whenever the Germans were attacking in mass from that direction, you could count on ending up in their prison cages (or worse) instead of being able to fall back to fight again.

That evening I stood guard with another soldier at a bridge that exited Weyersheim toward the west. I believe the bridge spanned a railroad. It was dark, and some of the 12th Armored vehicles were starting to leave town, probably toward Geudertheim. The most impressive thing I saw were two civilian black sedans rushing out of town over the bridge. They gave every impression that they were *getting the hell out of there*! In the cars, because the inside lights were on, we could see Alsatian civilians: men, women, and teenage girls. They were well dressed and apparently

important people who appeared to be afraid of the Germans who might return to Weyersheim. [I believe the Germans did come back for a while.] Later I was told that the people were the town mayor and his family. Why they feared the re-entry of the Germans I do not know. Perhaps they were simply afraid of the violence of a fight. Or maybe they had cooperated with the Americans and would have been reported by German sympathizers amongst the Alsatians. The latter could hold the potential for disaster for those civilians.

THE RAVISHED UNIT RETURNS

Return to Schweighausen, January 19-20, 1945

Reports were given to us the evening of January 19th that some of our Company A comrades had escaped Herrlisheim and had come into Weyersheim. We were not to see them until we went back to Schweighausen. Sometime on the night of January 18th or early the next morning our company's halftrack picked us up and we rode back to Geudertheim. Company A's convoy was formed up to make the trip back to where we had departed on 15 January. The largest part of the vehicles had only the driver because almost all of Company A's troops had not escaped from Herrlisheim to Weyersheim. I was the only one from my squad.

When we arrived at Schweighausen we found others who had escaped Herrlisheim and had already returned to their platoons. Besides myself, men that returned from my squad were Private First Class Dick Coney of Jackson, Mississippi; Private First Class Dick Burdett of Cincinnati, Ohio; and Pvt Floyd Stoffa of Ottumwa, Iowa. (Stoffa had been our first replacement in December after we had lost Staff Sergeant Charles Ruma to wounds from a German "potato masher" hand grenade.) Others that were in the group that were not in my squad were Sergeant James "Pappy" Childs of Pennsylvania; Private First Class Hugh Brainard; Sergeant Paul Masar of Wallington, New Jersey; Private First Class William Newton of New Warren, Pennsylvania; Private First Class Alton Ovist of Van Nuys, California; Private First Class George Pete of Fairhope, Alabama; and Private First Class Santos Ramirez of Texas. Two men that were lost while crossing the partly frozen Zorn River were Private First Class Adrian Mariluch and Private First Class John Kiselauskas of Brooklyn, New York. All of these men were awarded the bronze star medal because they held out against the Germans all day on January 18th and escaped their entrapment that night. Also Private First Class Carl Lyons of Columbus, Ohio, and Private First Class Clarence Gardner escaped Herrlisheim and were in Schweighausen.

My squad's Alsatian host in Schweighausen was very sad to learn that a disaster had struck his young "guests". In our squad of seven that entered Herrlisheim, four returned. Among the three not returning were Private First Class Ed Ostrach, who was killed by a German machine gun when the battalion commandant sent him outside the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion Command Post in Herrlisheim to stand guard. Private First Class Mariluch was reported missing in action (MIA). As explained above he left Herrlisheim with the group that escaped the night of the 18-19 January. As they crossed the frozen Zorn River, Mariluch broke through the ice. The men with him were not able to get him out so they left. [Later, Mariluch was declared dead based on *Finding of Death*.] The third squad member was our squad leader, Sergeant Capretta, who was captured by the Germans at the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion Command Post along with the battalion commander and all Company A officers.

Closing Comment:

In reading military histories of the war I had concluded that some details of the action at Herrlisheim (officially called "Gambsheim Bridgehead") was conducted inadequately by the division and combat-command commanders. However, the primary impetus, and resulting strategy, of the American action was generated by French General Charles de Gaulle who wanted to

keep the Germans out of Strasbourg. So the question arises: were we, the relatively green 12th Armored Division, deliberately sacrificed to hold the 10th SS Panzer and the 553rd Volks Grenadier Divisions from a breakout? Did the additional day that we kept the Germans tied up at Herrlisheim add anything to assure their failure to get into Strasbourg? Or were we simply acting like an infantry division, holding the enemy while a true infantry division, the 36th, was getting ready to go back into the line? On the other hand, was a U.S. armored division really needed there to take care of the 10th SS panzers? Adolph Hitler intended for the 10th SS Panzers to capture the Saverne Gap, which they failed to do. Nevertheless, Hitler was proud of some of the things his forces did in the bridgehead in spite of the fact that in the end the Allies prevailed and kept the Germans bottled up, separated from their units in the Colmar Pocket, and out of Strasbourg. This meant ultimate failure to the last big German offensive on the western front, Operation Nordwind and a weaker offensive, Operation Sonnenwind. Finally, two weeks later, a combined force of French, French Moroccans, and Americans eliminated the last foothold of the Germans on French soil. This was brought about by the annihilation of most of the German 19th Army in the Colmar Pocket, an area which was bounded on the west by a line high in the Vosges mountains and on the east by the Rhine River. The pocket stretched from near Strasbourg on the north to Mulhouse on the south.

For 12th Armored soldiers the attack on Herrlisheim, besides being cold, dangerous, and completely miserable, was a disastrous and frightening event. To me and to all of the survivors of that battle something seemed terribly wrong. Was this the way the war was going to go for us from that time forward? We feared that it could be. (Thank God, it was not !) There is a saying amongst many of the old Hellcat** veterans that goes like this: "Herrlisheim sharpened the claws of the Hellcats". From my perspective I feel that "Herrlisheim tore the claws out of the Hellcats". We lost the biggest part of those tankmen and infantrymen who had received all those months of training in the states. Herrlisheim certainly did not teach our battalion commander (17th Armored Infantry Battalion) and his staff anything they could employ against the enemy. Nor was such a useful lesson learned by the 43rd Tank Battalion commander and his staff. All of those officers were in Hammelburg Offlag (officer's PW prison) or in German prison hospitals. I suppose the division commander learned something, as possibly did the Combat Command commanders and their staffs. Those people were far enough behind the fighting lines to escape being battle casualties or capture by the enemy. In my view the Herrlisheim action seemed like a very expensive education, if it were really an education at all.

Fenwick George Hatt, Jr.
Company A, 3rd Platoon Mortar Squad
17th Armored Infantry Battalion
United States 12th Armored Division

April 6, 2006

** The 12th Armored Division nickname