AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

59. BEILSTEIN HILL

Twas the 18th of April in '45,
Hardly a man is now alive...

(With apologies to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

Spring in Germany is a marvel of new life. By April 17, the grass is green; trees are leafed out and apple blossoms adorn the hillsides. Farmers are digging, plowing, planting and spreading fertilizer from the barns. There is no fuel for the few tractors, and the horses have gone to pull cannons and caissons in a shrinking circle defended by the dying Wehrmacht. While horses and men struggle and die, old people, children, and women use dairy cows to pull plows and fertilizer carts.

A weapons carrier carries me quickly from the train station to the Company M Headquarters; a row house "somewhere in Germany." The Mail Clerk hands me a pile of letters; several from my parents, and a rare one from my prom date, Pat Borden. "I'll use the table upstairs to write letters." First Sergeant responds: "We'll call you when the truck comes to take you to your platoon." I reply: "Thanks, just call up the stairs; I'll be there."

An hour later the rattle of mess kits calls me to the evening meal where I meet the Company Clerk; "When is the truck coming?" "My God, I forgot you were up there. No matter, a jeep is going up after dinner."

Sure enough, I join several men in the jeep. We leave town, heading East. An MP stops us at a check point on the hillside. "Back-up and turn around! This road is being shelled." We return to the HQ house where I sleep on the floor.

Ralph Reeves writes (about April 18th):

"We mortar guys are lazing in some woods and we hear a lot of mortar and artillery going on, when some dude dashed up saying 'Volunteers are needed to carry wounded.' Sgt. Winkles immediately shouted; 'Reeves!' it actually seemed funny at the time, just like the movies. I said 'Yes Sergeant?' just like I didn't know what was up. He said 'You are a volunteer.' I said 'Yes, Sergeant, of course! Just point me in the right direction. Farther along that hill top exhausted medics traded helmets with us, gave us red cross arm bands and took our weapons for we were to be clearly visible hiking way down to the bottom of this big hill after the wounded."

"It looked like a whole platoon had been shot up. (Actually it was most of a rifle company and two machine gun platoons.) With two bearers to a litter, I helped carry two guys up that hill. I don't know who I carried, but one guy had his right arm damn near severed from the arm pit. I could not imaging it being saved, but I hope it was."

"At the top I came across Captain Derryberry in a litter on the ground, and propped on one elbow. He appeared to be in great pain, but was directing all kinds of activity around him. The captain told us to go find the radio man and pointed the direction. We found him with a bullet hole centered on his forehead which left his face all purple. We put him in a decent position and stuck his carbine in the ground with a helmet on it to mark his location."

Ralph Reeves

In the early morning I'm ready to go, but the mess jeep is full of cooks and the big insulated containers of food and coffee. No room for me. After breakfast I hitch a ride in another jeep carrying an officer and some ammo.

We drive quickly, nervously, past the abandoned check point and skirt the shell holes from last night's artillery barrage. We follow a wagon trail up into a wooded hill; the cool shade is welcome.

The trail ends in the middle of a big clearing occupied by another jeep and an ambulance. Ahead we hear familiar sounds; the low coughs of M-1 rifles and BARs, dueling with higher pitched roar of German "burp" guns and the "crack" of German rifles.

A mortar platoon lieutenant asks; "We need a little help, would you mind joining this litter team?" He takes my pistol and holster; and tells me to tie a handkerchief around my left arm. I wonder at being asked, rather than told to do something, and follow three other men as they dash from the woods down a bare cultivated hillside and over a series of little terraces.

Firing continues from the next hill, marked by little puffs of smoke, but I see no other signs of life. A bullet kicks the dirt near us and we scramble and skitter down the steep slope. Breathless, we land in the bottom of a cart path cut into the hillside by centuries of farm traffic. The draw is 6 to 10 feet deep; only 8 to 12 feet wide, and no more than 50 yards long. In this small area are several dozen men; perhaps half are lying, wounded, on the ground while medics and others are tending them. A litter team leaves, carrying a man up the hill. I see a piece of shrapnel embedded in Sgt. Hogan's upper lip. Sgt. Fitzgerald lies nearby.

A little bird sings in a tree overhead as a medic calls to us. The medics slide Danny Doyle onto our litter. The four of us lift his 170 pounds easily and we start briskly up the hill. A few yards from the draw we hear firing from the next hill; and again bullets plow into the ground on "our" hillside. We race for the top of the hill, trying to avoid hurting Danny. Suddenly he is a lot heavier.

A fresh litter team dashes out from the woods and takes Danny off towards the waiting medics and ambulance. We stagger into the woods just far enough to be out of sight, and collapse onto the ground, unable to move; exhausted and winded.

A few minutes later I rejoin the Mortar Platoon. Wounded men are waiting for another ambulance. PFC MacLeroy, Lt. Scott Witt and our Captain, now Major Derryberry, all have leg wounds. Derryberry wants to be evacuated at once.

Sgts. Fitzgerald and Waller are on litters; I cannot sort out all the casualties; and some are already evacuated.

The Mortar Platoon Lieutenant returns my pistol. He asks me to help retrieve weapons abandoned by our casualties. "Look for Twomey, along the edge of the woods up here; and check the others down in the draw. The Krauts are supposed to be cleared out, but keep your eyes open."

I follow the tree line along the hilltop to the South; our right. Within a hundred yards I find Cpl. Twomey sitting in the bushes; a bullet went through his head and through the radio, still strapped to his back. No need to recover this radio now. I pick up Twomey's carbine and pistol belt.

Down the hill and in the draw again, I find three dead friends; Ashkin, Ingle, and Bowman. One has a massive head wound, another is missing a foot. A couple of carbines and a pistol are added to my collection. As I climb back up the hill I recall the moonlit night only a week ago when we sang "Peg O' My Heart." As long as I live that song will summon a memory of these men - and this day.

Back at the hilltop, I load a 3rd platoon jeep with the weapons abandoned by the dead and wounded; rifles, carbines, pistols; belts, bayonets, trench knives; clips of ammo, grenades, canteens, and aid packets. "Wait here." the driver tells me, "A 2nd platoon jeep will pick you up." Sure enough, a few moments later Lt. Witt's jeep arrives, driven by PFC George Thomasson. Birds sing incongruously as the sun sets and we piece together the day's events.

The 1st and 2nd machine gun platoons had passed through this area, following rifle Company L. When most of these men were on the bare hillside, the Germans opened fire with rifles and machine guns. Our riflemen and some of our machine gunners had passed the draw, and they attacked the Germans on the next hill top. The rest took cover in the draw; only to be greeted with a barrage of

shells from “Screaming meemies” (or Nebelwerfer rockets), - 88 mm cannon, and both 50 and 120 mm mortar shells; all "zeroed in."

The sheltering draw was a trap. Lindsey and Beckett were among the first to pass it; their hazardous position saved them as they were well past the draw when the barrage hit. Not knowing about them, Thomasson and I think we are the only survivors. We nibble at our "C rations" and bed down for the night by the trail. I weep silently, and then sleep, exhausted. (Due to lack of GI insurance, Bowman was offered a transfer that very morning. He said; "You'll be needing me." and stayed.)

PFC Leonard Dembeck writes:

"April 18, 1945 was a day which will live in our memories for the rest of our lives. I was a jeep driver, and early that morning was on the crest of the hill of death, Beilstein. Everything was quiet then as off to my left, stretcher bearers approached carrying a wounded soldier. I heard a call: "Hey, Len!" and went over to find that it was Lt. Scott Witt who had been wounded in the leg." (Witt had both knees broken, one kneecap lost, a broken wrist and shrapnel in his neck)

"We spoke for a minute and he was taken away. I moved forward in the direction of the attack and a few yards below the crest of the hill saw a radio antenna protruding from a clump of bushes. Inside the concealment was a GI, slumped forward in a sitting position, on his back was a 300 radio with a bullet hole in its center. As I moved around the front, I saw that it was our Sgt. Twomey. At the bottom of the hill, in a drainage ditch were bodies of some American soldiers. I picked my way down the steep hill to the first body which was lying on its back with an OD sweater over its face. The right foot was severed cleanly above the ankle and the leather cuff from the combat boot was still in place. I lowered the sweater and was shocked to see my good friend, Milton Ashkin. A feeling of overwhelming sadness passed over me as I knelt beside his body. God rest his soul."

"I was pleased to meet Scott Witt a few years later in Chicago. ... I would have been pleased to do him one last favor, but alas, I could not. As he was carried out at Beilstein, Scott asked me to keep his 45 pistol for him. I carried it at my side until transferred out of the 100th in October. Before I left I unknowingly turned it in to the supply sergeant in the hope that Scott would be able to retrieve it. Of course that was not possible, and I'm sure that we both are unhappy that it was not possible."

That same day, April the 18th, a few hours earlier, the infantry lost an old friend. War correspondent and author Ernie Pyle was killed by a Japanese sniper on the island of Ie Shima, not far from the coast of Japan.

60. ANOTHER AMBUSH

The rural villages are picturesque; stucco and half-timbered buildings, hundreds of years old and mostly undamaged by the war. Townspeople watch cautiously from a distance, as we regroup and move on.

Again, Ralph Reeves writes:

"I was wounded on April 20 in the middle of the road in a village called Backnang. Sounds like some place in the Orient. I was shot up pretty good and spent the next five months in hospitals. I had three holes in my chest, a shallow broad chunk of left calf missing which was later covered by skin graft, a chunk of shrapnel deep in my right thigh, - and the humdinger was shrapnel through the right calf that tore up muscle and scratched a nerve. My right foot has pained me ever since."

"In Backnang. we were in one of those fast moving armored columns that must have covered 20 or 30 miles already. It was the first decent weather in all of combat. We stopped at a roadblock and were instantly bombarded with both mortar and 75 mm cannon fire (according to Sgt. Winkles who wrote to me in the hospital). The shelling was right on target. I was standing on the trailer tongue behind our squad jeep when we stopped, and I was hit just as my feet hit the ground. I think five guys got hit. Lucky there were medics all over the place and care was instant. I grinned up at Sgt. Roman from my litter, and said 'So long Sergeant, I've got my million dollar wound!' Let's face it, after all that time in combat, we all live on borrowed time ever since; a wound seems like an improvement."

"On April 21 I woke up on a cot in a tent field hospital to discover Lt. Flaum was only a couple of cots away. He said he was not wounded, but had yellow jaundice. That is the last I have heard of him."

(After the war, Ralph Reeves worked on a boat that did the first seismic surveys of the Gulf of Mexico oil fields. He worked as a construction contractor and operated a bar in Hawaii. We heard from Ralph Reeves in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, before he retired.. He wrote: "I would be happy to take a long dreamed hike from Mexico to Canada, the inland route, or maybe the Appalachian Trail, - or go see the wilderness in Baja." Now he dodges hurricanes on Longboat Key, FL)

61. THE LAST SHOT

Each of the 8 machine gun squads in Company M now has two guns; one light (air cooled) and one heavy (water cooled). But there are men enough for only a few shorthanded gun crews. Another gunner and I climb onto a tank with a light machine gun and ammo. Two riflemen join us on the crowded deck. The turret offers a little protection from small arms fire and it sure beats walking.

Our tank is third in a column that rumbles down a winding country road to the edge of Esslingin; a few miles north of Stuttgart. A canopy of trees embraces the road, and turns the evening dusk to dark. A brilliant flash bursts from a black hole under the trees, and a tremendous explosion lights up the lead tank.

Riflemen hide in the trees on each side of the road as we hug the tank turret and look in vain for our tormentor. Men are shouting, then all is quiet except for the sound of labored, gurgling breathing.

A rifleman returns to our tank; "What happened?" "A Panzerfaust hit one of our guys. His buddy slit the Kraut's throat."

The tank and infantry commanders confer in the road by "our" tank. "Get a patrol down there and clean out these traps!" "Hell, you guys are in the armor, just roll on through!"

Sure enough, the riflemen take the lead for a short distance. They find no more resistance; and climb back on the tanks. We roll through the dark town and bivouac nearby.

Next day, we continue, unopposed, into Stuttgart. We occupy several beautiful big hillside homes from where we can see much of the ruined city lying

in a big bowl of a valley below us. Rows and rows of buildings with no roofs and gutted interiors. Most of the houses are - or were - 3 to 6 stories high. Row houses and apartments are now empty shells. Again, each house is marked by a list of names; and the smell of death lies heavy in the streets.

Our little area was prosperous, and remains almost undamaged. Houses are large, and some include apartments. Many of us even get to sleep in beds.

We do not even know that for us, the war has ended.

62. A JOURNEY DELAYED

French Moroccan troops arrive in Stuttgart, from the West by way of Strasbourg. I think of the price we paid for opening the road to Strasbourg, already 5 months ago at Raon L'Etape.

The Big Three Agreement is that we, and not the French are to occupy Stuttgart. But the Moroccans stay, and we see that they are looting and raping. Women sleep in the churches and we send armed patrols in jeeps to check each church and scare off the Moroccans.

As a new sergeant, I command a jeep patrol. We follow our mapped course and check a list of churches in the middle of the night. I ride behind a light machine gun mounted on the jeep, we look for an ambush, but the streets are quiet and dark, perhaps because of our patrols.

We move East and the Moroccans pull back to the West, leaving Stuttgart quietly occupied by a small number of Americans.

We search for by-passed German troops and find none. Advancing "as skirmishers" through the forest, I scare up a buck deer with a tremendous antler spread. His rack towers over me for a second, then he turns and trots off into the brush. He is far bigger than an American white tail deer. I resist the urge to shoot him. He will be a real prize for some hungry Germans.

We reorganize again. As squad leader, I help to train replacements in gun drills and machine gun maintenance.

Company M lives in a row of houses linked by speakers from a common radio in the Company HQ. Armed Forces Radio reports that Admiral Doenitz has surrendered. We take down the blackout curtains, turn on the house lights and admire the effect from the road. After six months of blackout, the lights mean

peace.

The 100th Division occupies an area of about 2,400 square miles, following the Neckar River from Heilbronn to Ulm. In this 80 by 50 mile area, the companies are scattered throughout the towns and villages. We search the woods and provide guards for power plants, radio towers, dams, ammunition and supply dumps. In spite of the "fight to the death" propaganda of the Nazis, we find no resistance.

Reports of attacks on Americans are more in the order of random crimes of opportunity which occur anywhere an Army is stationed.

We round up "Displaced Persons," (DP's) and send them off to the new DP camps. They make it clear that they will not go back to Russian occupied territory.

At the end of May, men with 85 points or more are sent home. I have 65.

By early July the area has been purged of weapons and there remains no overt signs of resistance. Late in July, the Division moves back to the west and settles into a long term occupation of the area from Stuttgart to Ulm with Division HQ at Stuttgart.

Another search dragnet called "Operation Tallyho" is reported to find weapons, black market goods, and a few Germans who are wanted for war crimes, but I see none of these.

Near Stuttgart we find the smaller city of Pforzheim in ruins. Survivors tell of horror, when the city was hit one night by a massive fire bomb attack. The resulting fires gutted every building in this city of 100,000 people. Half the population died or disappeared that night. Some survived by submerging in the water of Neckar River but the smoke killed many, even in the river.

Training intensifies as we expect to be part of the invasion of Japan. The 100th Division is on alert for shipment back to Marseilles; and then back to "the States." Rumor has it that we will get a 30 day leave, and then new weapons before proceeding to invade Japan. We do not think beyond the promised 30 day leave. Unknown to us, the commanders in Washington set a date for our invasion of Japan: November 1, 1945.

We relax while the radio plays an old hit tune: "Gonna make a Sentimental Journey." Then a new one: "Dream - when you're feeling blue - Dream, that's the thing to do. Just watch the smoke rings rise in the air, you'll find your share of memories there." I don't smoke - yet. But I watch smoke rings, and dream of

home. We are scheduled to move out on 27 August and sail from Marseilles on 10 September.

Second week of August: The radio reports that Japan was hit by two "atomic bombs;" and later, Japan surrenders! Our alert is canceled and we settle down to occupation duty.

63. THE OCCUPATION

Traveling in Germany is no trouble for us. We ride the trains free. Every city has a US Army transient billet, or some kind of Army HQ; - maybe a Quartermaster Depot where a traveling soldier can draw rations and find a bed.
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A 3-day pass to Paris falls my way; and I tour the Palace of Versailles, the Eiffel Tower, and the Folies Bergere. The Hall of Mirrors seems smaller than expected. But the Eiffel Tower is taller, and the girls are prettier. Oh those magnificent girls! Wow!

A train brings me back to Karlsruhe and a GI truck drops me at a transient billet next to a welcome GI kitchen.

After supper, I walk around the block and find a small portable merry-go-round, set up in a clearing surrounded by rubble from bombed out buildings. The wooden horses bob and circle, the organ plays a lilting Strauss Waltz, kids laugh, and mothers and grandmothers stand back and watch.

Across the street I see the sky through the empty windows of burned out apartments. The merry music and laughing children contrast starkly with the ruins of Karlsruhe, and the dazed, hungry expressions on the faces of the adults. I wonder "Where are these mothers and children living, in these ruins? What are they eating? Will their missing husbands, sons, and fathers ever get back from Russia?"

Most fortunate of the German soldiers, are the comparatively few that we captured. Even now they are being sorted out and sent back from POW camps in the States and in Europe. Watching this little scene is overwhelming. Tears fall, as I think about what has been done to these kids - and to their parents and grandparents. I love Strauss Waltzes, but every time I hear one, I picture wounded men in the Epinal hospital, and kids on a merry-go-round in the ruins of Karlsruhe.

(Forty years later I return to Germany; a new nation, our ally, a vigorous democracy, and a flourishing economy; all run by these now grown kids.)

"Bugler" is found in my file again, and I join the newly organized 399th Regiment's Drum and Bugle Corps. We have about 6 bugles, 4 snare drums, a bass drum and a drum major's baton. The drum major is a corporal, the rest of us are Pfc.'s, sergeants and corporals. We buglers are amused that this conglomeration is referred to as "The Drum Corps." (Of course, we are just one unit, but the word "corps" has no singular form, and what happened to mention of the bugles whose calls are the main purpose of the "Corps?")

64. DRUMS AND BUGLES

Our Drum Corps' workday starts after breakfast with a few hours of practice, followed by a break that lasts until noon. Most important are the bugle calls: "Retreat" - "To the Colors" and "Ruffles and Flourishes" - all accompanied by stirring drum rolls.

Then we perfect a series of bugle marches; "Sabers and Spurs," "The Thunderer," "We're in the Army Now," "Oahu," and even the Marines' "Semper Fidelis" which is a thundering good march. After lunch we are free until 4 PM when we are carried by truck to one of the battalions for "Retreat."

The ancient "Retreat" is a ceremonial lowering of the flag at the end of the day's work. The drum and bugle corps (or just a bugler) stands on one side while the local commander, senior non-comma and any visiting brass stand on the other side or in front of the flag. We might play a march as the troops move into place facing the flag. At the order: "FALL IN!" the troops snap to attention.

After the obligatory announcements (and sometimes awards) we play the bugle call: "Retreat" - followed at once by the order: "PRESENT - ARMS!" and then the bugle call: "To the Colors" - during which the flag is slowly taken down and folded. We may play another march while we march off to our waiting truck.

Sometimes one or two buglers with, or without a drummer will do a retreat ceremony consisting of just the two calls, "Retreat" and "To the Colors." This allows simultaneous Retreats at several individual companies scattered over the Division's occupation zone.

When a General is present, he is honored with the bugle call: "Ruffles and Flourishes;" one "flourish" for each star on the General's shoulder. When a band plays a retreat (like the one I saw in Saarebourg) the flag is taken down during the

playing of the National Anthem.

We eat with the Regimental HQ Company and our only duties consist of the morning practice and evening retreat ceremonies. We spend afternoons and evenings reading, writing letters and exploring the neighborhood.

The ban on speaking with Germans is lifted to the point where we negotiate laundry and house cleaning services. Our candy and cigarette rations are worth more than our money.

All through the war the tobacco companies have been very "cooperative" in providing their products at-cost, and often free to the armed services. Tobacco products are tax free as part of our "PX Rations." At breaks, in every training facility, and even now in the Drum Corps, the non-comma in charge might say:

"Take five! - Smoke if ya' got 'em!"

I think of my Grandfather's lifelong habit and the havoc it wreaked on his heart and lungs. Here were 16 million members of the armed forces being encouraged to be slaves for life.

Summer in Germany is so cool that we wear wool OD's rather than the summer-wear khaki uniforms.

One warm afternoon we find a small private swimming pool in a neighboring lawn. A resident in the house gives permission for us to loaf around the pool and to swim, although he seems to be amused at the idea. We strip to our shorts and jump in. Since my jump carries me half way across the pool, I probably break a short-dash-swim-record to the opposite side to climb out of the frigid water.

At the end of the War, "Points" were awarded to select the first troops to go home. We get something like one point for each month in service, two for each month overseas, five for a Purple Heart or Bronze Star. Men with 85 points are sent home in May at the end of the war in Europe.

Finally, The 100th Division is alerted to go back to the States. Only men with 70 or more points are to go. I have only 65 points. Forty years later I receive the belated Bronze Star that would have sent me home with the Division. I am transferred to Military Government while the Division prepares to go home.

Reluctantly, I leave the Division on 20 October, 1945. Seven months in the Military Government turns out to be very educational. (At the same time, it takes

nearly six months to get the Division home.)