

Combat, April 1945

by Ken Bonte, 397-C

That night we stayed in the town of Ittlingen in houses. I do not remember being hit by enemy fire when I lost my rifle, but according to Art Byrnes, my hand was bleeding; I guess it was the excitement of the incident, at any rate it was only a scratch. We departed from Ittlingen and moved about two miles until the supporting tanks of the 781st picked us up and our platoon moved about twelve miles on tanks until we reached the town of Frankenbach where we were billeted that evening of April 4.

The next day we proceeded on foot out of Frankenbach through Bad Wimpfen to the town of Neckarsulm on the North shore of the Neckar River across from the city of Heilbronn. A city of about 100,000 people before the war, it had taken heavy damage from air strikes. Today it is the home of a soup company known as Knorr's in the US. To hide the company from enemy fire and to protect us from possible flying shrapnel we were assembled in a long building near the river. It turned out to be a slaughterhouse. The hooks hung from the ceiling and there was dry blood on the floors. It was rather ominous of what lay ahead of our company that evening. We did manage to get our weapons ready and to get some rest. We were assembled around four o'clock, given rations for three days, fed a meal by the company mess and briefed on the mission ahead of us. We were told that the 10th Armored Division was unable to cross the river as the enemy had knocked down the bridge over the Neckar to Heilbronn, and any attempts to build a bridge had been thwarted by enemy fire from directly above the hills in the city.

We were finally able to get assault boats from the engineers and were directed to the river putting the boats in the water. We then loaded twelve men into each of them and paddled across the river as the night began to darken the skies. Under shelling and small arms fire from the far side we moved out. We paddled our assault boat to the far side of the river with no casualties in our boat and light casualties for the Company. We landed at the location used by a brewery. We immediately entered the building and moved to the other side to set up a defense from the enemy whom we had driven from the building as we landed. We repelled about three counterattacks by the Germans that night, including a threat by armor. That armored attack was stymied by an NCO of the Third Platoon. We saw the barrel of an enemy tank come through the window of the room we were in. The NCO placed a bazooka to the muzzle of the tank gun and fired dropping down away from the barrel. His shell hit the live round the tank gunner had loaded in the chamber of the tank gun, and blew the tank apart. A remarkable life saver for those of us who were there.

The next morning, after artillery fire subsided around us, we moved out into the city of Heilbronn. Keeping contact with the units on our left and right flank, we moved towards Killim Kirche on the street ahead. We proceeded without opposition and presumed that our flanks were moving with us. As we progressed, smoking and talking we began to hear gunfire to our rear. Looking back we saw bursts of smoke on our left flank and further back more bursts on our right. The platoon came to a stop realizing our position was way ahead of the rest of the Company. We made an abrupt about face and headed back to the melee of the fire fight. As we approached the block, fire erupted on our flanks and we quickly doubled back to where we made contact with our own troops. We then realized that we were in danger of being cut off. The Company regrouped and set up defense perimeters for the rest of the day. Our platoon found a house on the edge of our assigned sector on a perimeter that had not been hit by previous bombings of the city. It was completely intact, including toilets and wash basins. The only trouble was there was no water. The front faced a street with a street on the right side as well. On our left was a yard that opened out to another building.

While we were arranging our defensive positions, John Shanto from Pennsylvania, my stateside buddy, found a drawer full of gold teeth fillings. He put these in a container and said that when he was able, he would sell them in France or wherever.

The next day the Krauts began attacking from our front and sides. Artillery was being fired at the front of the house and down the street on our right. I was assigned a window on our right and had a good view of the intersection ahead. The enemy made a thrust at us from the front and were trying to hit us from our

left. Between the artillery and small arms fire we were pinned down in the house. During the shelling I felt a small slap on my arm and saw a torn sleeve. I rolled up my sleeve, saw some blood and wrapped my arm after applying sulfur powder. After I had pulled down my sleeve one of the fellows asked to borrow my rifle as it was the only one with the special cap to take a grenade launcher. When he took the rifle, he asked me if I was trying to get us all killed and handed the rifle back. It was then that I saw the rifle barrel split from shrapnel. It was the work of God that I didn't attempt to pull the trigger again.

We stayed in the house for two days and had taken a few prisoners including a couple of kids who couldn't be older than sixteen. They were part of the *Hitlerjungen* (Hitler Youth) who had been fighting with the Wehrmacht.

On or about 9 April, we moved out two blocks and set up positions along a wall which gave us good cover. That night we stood guard on a one-on-two off shift. While I was on guard I heard carts moving on the street ahead of us and called Battalion for mortar fire. I directed it up and down the street as I heard the noise.

The next morning we advanced to the street ahead and found nothing but rubble. We later found out that the Krauts used carts to pick up their dead and wounded and that was why we found no bodies on the street. The day was 13 April 1945 and the news came down about the death of President Roosevelt.

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