

XVIII. BREAKOUT AND MOVEMENT

On March 15, 1945 suddenly movement became the order of the day, fast, confusing, but always forward. We were quite obviously on our way to end the war, as deep inside Germany as we had to go to do it. Near us was the small city of Bitche, a formidable fortress in the Maginot Line that the Germans had not moved out of. We had talked with trepidation all Winter of our probable eventual attack on it, knowing that its reduction could be a difficult, bloody task. When it came, though, our push was so massive and rapid Bitche was almost literally overrun; resistance was token at most. And so it was to continue in the next few weeks. The German defense of their Western Front was reduced to pockets, although, as we were to learn, some of those pockets had enemy in them fiercely determined to defend what they had left.

There was so much rapid movement and milling around in the next few weeks that I have retained only flashes of memory, often with no clear sense of chronology. Many replacements had come in, so that we were more nearly up to full strength than we had been since landing in Marseilles what seemed like a very long time ago. We moved on foot, riding on the outside of tanks, and in trucks, but we moved, and seldom stayed anywhere for more than a few hours to snatch a little sleep. The first sharp interval of memory that I retain from this time came during the first days of the push. I remember feeling that it was a poor way to celebrate my 20th birthday, the 21st of March.

It was perhaps an appropriate welcome to Germany, however. I'm not sure I realized it then, but we were over the border for the first time, in hilly, rural country, near a place called Dietrichingen. Incongruously, a memory that survives is that we'd just traded in our shoe pacs for a new kind of leather combat boots with the smooth side in and leather leggings sewn to the tops of them. We were pleased with the change-over; it seemed a harbinger of Spring. (Anything to do with the care and comfort of feet is of prime interest to infantrymen.) I was enjoying my boots, when quite unexpectedly I found myself momentarily isolated from the Squad, in a large, flat open area like a shallow bowl, surrounded by low wooded hills. And I was under mortar fire. At first, I had no idea from what direction the fire was coming, or even if I was the primary target. Several bursts following the first confirmed that I was, though, and I could see that it was coming from a concealed position in some underbrush atop one of the little hills. Apparently the soil was too thin for real foxholes, for nearby were several small rings of large boulders that had obviously been used as makeshift holes. I flattened myself inside one of the rings, and so began an ordeal I don't think I'll ever forget.

It seemed possible that I was relatively safe, barring a direct hit inside my stone ring, but it was also obvious that I was under direct and precise observation by people who wanted very badly to kill me, and who had the means to do so. All they needed was time. I have no idea how much time elapsed. It seemed like days, but must have been only a few minutes. I hugged the ground and clearly heard the little “plock” sounds as the shells were fired, and each explosion seemed closer than the last. The feeling of helpless vulnerability rendered me almost paralyzed with fear. But I was not harmed, and soon enough, though I don’t really recall how soon, I guess now that someone else noticed the mortar position and cleared it out. For a second time, then, I owed my life to someone—only that time, in all the confusion of movement and battle, I had no idea who it was. Or maybe the Germans just decided to stop wasting time and ammunition on such an insignificant target.

It was at about this time when I became fast friends with one of the replacements who had a remarkable military history. He was assigned to our Platoon as a medic, and he had been a medic, in and out of combat, in Africa and Europe for over three years. He had participated, as a combat medic, in the First Division landings in North Africa and Sicily. Just before he came to us he had been assigned to an Army hospital in Marseilles. When he learned that his twin brother was the company commander of one of the companies in our regiment, he requested a transfer, for yet another combat assignment, to the 100th Division so he could be near his brother. He was sent to our Company because it was against Army policy to have brothers in the same line unit. We hit it off immediately and were more or less constant companions during the very few weeks we were together.

Thinking back now, it seems almost incredible that the events I’m recalling here all took place in almost exactly four weeks—from about March 15, to April 12, 1945. So much activity was crammed into that time, and so many vivid—disconnected for the most part—flashes of memory remain with me that it seems as though many months must have passed. It was only four weeks, though.

I recall very clearly our first stop after we got into Germany to stay, though I don’t recall the actual border crossing. We were billeted, very temporarily it turned out, in a house in a village just inside the border. As they had not been in France, the occupants of the houses had been turned out, to stay away until we finished our use of their homes. All except one young girl who had stayed behind. She was about 16 years old, plump, very blonde, and very pretty. She spoke to us in German, and it was some minutes before we could find anyone who understood what she was trying to say to us. She had been told that we would be raping her and she wanted us to know that she was ready and wouldn’t resist, hoping we wouldn’t hurt her too much. To our credit, we instinctively, I think (and hope), sent her away unharmed—*before* word came down that we were not to stay there after all and would move on.

Now began what could fairly be described as an orgy, however. We were moving fast through fairly thickly populated country and meeting no resistance. Somehow we got the idea, which no one attempted to disabuse us of at first, that as conquerors we had the right to take whatever pleased us—that we could carry. We called it by its right name—“looting”—and we went at it with a will. Much of what we found to loot turned out

to be brandy. There seemed to be a great deal of it about, apparently there were a number of small distilleries in the region, and many of us soon got quite drunk. After a day or so we were ordered to stop drinking it—I still recall the rueful regret of pouring a bottle or two down a street sewer drain—but a prodigious amount was consumed, and it's a wonder to me now to realize that no ill effects I ever saw or heard of resulted from this over-indulgence.

There is, however, one near miss that I am aware of. My good pal the medic and I each came into possession of a liter bottle of B & B liqueur, from the cellar of a residence said to be the property of a *Wehrmacht* officer who had been in France. Being “cultured” and “understanding” such things, we assured one another that this class of booze had to be sipped and savored for full appreciation. We then proceeded to sip and savor, each his own bottle, until—I guess—the B & B was gone. The memory of the next few hours has always been fuzzy to me, and many of them are total blanks. The next clear memory I have is waking up, or at least returning to more or less normal consciousness, the following day, in another town to which the unit had moved, dragging us with them. We were about to start fighting a duel. He had a little .25 caliber nickel-plated automatic pistol, for which he probably had no ammunition, and I had a pair of scissors. We weren't angry with one another; apparently the duel just seemed like the thing to do at that point. It didn't come off, but I still have the scissors, beside me on the desk as I write this.

Once again, Bud Smith was able to report on our action—rather than his own inaction—to his family at home:

March 19, 1945. “... When I first got back it took me 2 1/2 hours to read my accumulated mail... While back at the hospital I kept up fairly well on my correspondence, but out here I probably will have to slack up. We are having some nice spring days and I hope we don't get too much rain. There are several new people here but most of them I already know. All the boys I knew well are still around... All the mail that comes through the directory bureau is reaching me in large quantities now. It took me almost two weeks to get here after I left the hospital. While at division headquarters the dentist filled four teeth. He used one of those hand or foot powered drills and I think he did a good job. They had a theater in that town and I saw “Devotion”... it is the story of the Brontë sisters with Ida Lupino and Olivia DeHaviland. I think my show going days are over for a while. I even bought a dish of French ice cream and it sure tasted good for a change. The people over here are just as healthy looking as back home. You remember how the magazines depicted them a few years ago? However, some of their buildings are damaged and they sometimes lose their livestock by shell fire... I have put on some weight only I know I am not fat...”

March 21, 1945. “...Today is the beginning of spring and the weather is sure cooperating today... The grass is green now and the pussy willows are budding ... the past few days have been nice. Well mother I can beat most of our families travelling record. I have been in three countries now and they all look about the same... It is too bad that the mail doesn't arrive in the proper sequence. You had better send a little stationery now whenever you write. Disregard that request I made to send my old work sox. They have a fairly

efficient system of supplying us now with clean clothes. Today we got clean drawers, sox, and uniforms. We sleep warm in our bedding rolls and the chow isn't too bad. Nothing like home but better than last fall. Lately we have been sleeping in buildings only they aren't too impressive looking. Just a shell but better than nothing. Over here the house and barn are one and the same building with a manure pile in front... I am still receiving Christmas cards and get well cards... Be sure and send me the stationery..."

"The next letter is datelined Germany and forms a new chapter in this series."

"Fifty one years later I remember my most arduous fatigue detail in the U.S. Army. While at the Sarrebourg replacement depot in a French army barracks I was assigned to the taking the tents out of the basement storeroom detail. The huge squad tents were frozen lumps of canvas and the stairway was very narrow. Four soldiers to a tent got each tent to the courtyard with very great effort. It was like moving huge blocks of ice without icepicks."

As this letter transcription process went on, Bud gradually added more and more latter-day comments to his actual letter excerpts, until his narrative became a dominant feature of these writings. Possibly this is because there was suddenly much less time for writing letters. We were on the move, and fast, and for several weeks we seldom spent more than one night in the same place.

THROUGH THE SIEGFRIED LINE TO THE RHINE RIVER

"After four months of hospitalization and rehabilitation I rejoined Co. G March 17, 1945 and bunked with them in a barracks building in the fortress city of Bitche on the Maginot Line. The *Story of the Century* ... says, 'The 398th and 399th Inf. went into assembly areas around Bousseviller. Briedenbach, and other towns to the north of Bitche ... from 18 to 22 March.' The 399th *In Action* book ... says, 'The White (2nd) Battalion moved into a sandwich of the 397th Infantry and the 3rd CMH Division who were busy bursting a hole in the Siegfried. Easy, Fox and George waited for a counterattack and sweated under terrific direct fire from the underground fortresses. The rest of the 399th moved back into reserve wooded areas and spent the days shooting deer, pulling lanyards on nearby artillery, and training in smashing Siegfrieds ... a mere three miles to the front.' On the nights of March 18, March 19, and March 20 we slept in sheltered valleys. Each morning we found large pieces of shrapnel nearby. The explanation at the time was that our artillery was firing short rounds because of damp powder. Now I think it might have been 1st and 3rd battalion infantrymen pulling unfamiliar artillery lanyards. We had no casualties other than some loss of confidence in our artillery support. The large piece of shrapnel found between sleeping Clarence Manganaro's outstretched legs caused some comments about his future fatherhood.

"My March 21 letter home commented on the beginning of spring weather and the greening grass and the budding pussy willows. The ground was firm and

dry and our armored support vehicles and artillery pieces were able to move freely. The company was near full strength with new replacements and discharged hospital patients. Our cooks were serving hot meals two or three times a day brought forward in insulated containers [*mermite cans, they were called*]. The spring war was a vast improvement over the fall fighting in the snowy and muddy Vosges forests. So far it was more like a Boy Scout campout than World War II. My biggest scare at this time was on a very dark night time move forward when we passed 4.2 mortars of a chemical warfare unit. They were just off the road when our platoon felt the blasts from four large mortar rounds. It has been said that the infantry advances rapidly so as to keep out of the way of our artillery.

"My March 21 letter to my mother was the seventh written on that day while I was sitting in a rocking chair in the German village just south of the Siegfried Line. I never learned the name of the village situated in a valley, but I remember many details. Our 2nd platoon stayed inside of the two story building closest to the Siegfried Line and built against a steep hillside on the back side. A large, flat field across the road was a possible artillery firing position. I remember sitting in my rocking chair in an upstairs bedroom and watching German 88 mm. Shells fall methodically and sporadically on an empty field. I did lots of letter writing on my guard shift. We knew that the 3rd Infantry Division was successfully knocking out the Siegfried pillboxes with bazooka rockets aimed at the rear facing doors. The Siegfried pillboxes were not as thick and deep as the Maginot Line Forts, but the German mobile artillery was still active. An open country crossroads about a half mile northwest of my rocking chair guard post was zeroed in on a ten minute or so firing plan. I observed dozens of 3rd Division vehicles wait at a distance for their turn to proceed after the shell had landed. None of the 88 mm. rounds that day scored a hit. Our building housed the burgomaster's office and I remember military government or CIC officers searching quickly through the village's records. Enterprising soldiers from another platoon [*3rd, I'm sure I recall—though it was a bigger car, maybe a Daimler*] found a Volkswagen automobile hidden under a hay pile and got it to run with a little white gasoline borrowed from our cooks' stove fuel supply. The automobile was of pre-Beetle design. Others found bicycles and motorbikes to ride in this one street village.

"A day or two before this village we were in a reserve position in another border town village where the company was issued clean underwear and wool uniforms. I remember the clay tiles falling in a clatter when the ball was thrown on the barn roof for my one man game of catch. Was my arm that strong or had artillery fire weakened the roof? The German red tile roofs were not like the wood shingled roofs in northern Illinois.

"On March 22 the race to the Rhine River at Ludwigshafen-Mannheim began led by the 1st battalion of the 399th. The 2nd battalion was second in line. Our squad rode on a Sherman tank in a mechanized array through the hole in the Siegfried Line made by the 3rd Division. We had struggled one hill or ridge at a time and suddenly we went through 92 miles of Germany in two days on dry roads. Our regimental history said our front was '60 miles long and one Sherman

wide' and that the Blue (3rd) Battalion liberated a liquor warehouse in urban Neustadt and 'shared it reluctantly with the rest of the 7th Army.' This was on the second day of our drive and several of my platoon comrades imbibed deeply and were unable to safely ride on the outside of a Sherman tank. Our officers ordered them to walk to our next objective while sobering up. I was one of the few teetotalers and was invited by the tankers to ride inside of their Sherman turret. Many soldiers learned about French cognac that day and I learned how confining a tank was. The view of the German countryside was better on the outside.

"Our motorized 399th Infantry regiment led the U.S. 7th Army and met the men of the 94th Division of the U.S. 3rd Army outside of Ludwigshafen. Two armies had joined and the Saar pincer had closed west of the Rhine Bridges. German Soldiers by the thousands marched in long columns four abreast to surrender and throw their weapons on huge piles in a village square with only two or three American soldiers present. The 399th reached the Rhine on March 24th. I remember that it was a wide river and a swift flowing river with armed Germans on the east bank. I finally realized that rivers could flow northward. All the rivers in northern Illinois flowed southward and westward and I knew that water couldn't flow uphill. We slept on the roadside close to our Sherman tanks on the two nights of our drive to the Rhine. The weather was delightful and no shots were fired at us. We saw lots of white flags flying as we passed through each town.

"On Sunday March 25, 1945 we were billeted in a complete, two story house near the west bank city of Speyer between Mannheim and Karlsruhe. Between patrols I wrote letters back home. We were billeted in the village of Mutterstadt."

March 25, 1945 Germany "...We have had a beautiful spring over here and we deserve it after that miserable fall we had. The grain has sprouted and some of the early spring flowers and fruit trees are in blossom... Anyhow I am back in the farming element. The river valley here is full of prosperous farming villages. I was led to believe that the Germans were being starved, but they all seem to have robust appearances... The people don't seem to resent us, but we can't trust any of them. I have yet to find one that claims to be a Nazi. All the soldiers say they are Poles, Russians, Austrians, etc. We live in houses now and move the people to the other part of town. Most of the villages are untouched by war compared to some in Alsace. All the GI's are going crazy riding Jerry motorbikes, bicycles, and autos. These people have as good or better living than most of our people. I don't understand why they always want to expand and start wars. Right now we have a phonograph only nobody understands what the singing is all about. The tunes are pretty nifty. I always sort of like the German music and the brass bands... Don't worry, I had what is known in the trade as a 'million dollar wound'..."

In the midst of all Bud's letter writing, looking at my letters saved by my father, I find for this time period one lone V-Mail:

March 30 (V-Mail, from Germany). "Just a line to let you know I'm around and able to sit up and take nourishment still. These are exciting times and big doings

over here, and I guess I'm right in the thick of it. I don't see how it can take too long now, but there's no telling. Another box of candy arrived the other day and was much appreciated by all. Unfortunately, in the general melee of the past couple of weeks I managed to lose the books you sent without so much as opening some of them. Maybe you could send some more, send 'em one or two at a time, though, and maybe then I'll be able to carry them. The weather has turned on us a little lately, cooler & a little rain, but not 1-2-3 with last fall & winter."

Back to Bud:

March 31, 1945. "... We have been taking it easy the past few days and live almost like we did back at garrison. The past few days we have had movies. Last night it was 'The Thin Man Goes Home' and the night before was 2 reels of 'Strike Up the Band' before the projector went on the blink. Yesterday we had Bobby Breen and some musicians in the rain. Tomorrow I am one of the lucky ones who goes to see Marlene Dietrich. *[I do NOT recall any movies, but I do remember hearing about the USO shows. Only some could go, and I was certainly not in their number.]* We pull road guard once in a while and house guard. A few days we had a training schedule complete with hikes. You should of heard us complain about that! I suppose we will be on the move again soon and anyone's guess is good. We read in the papers how they celebrated a false armistice back home. I'm afraid there is a lot of fighting to be done as yet. Patton is going so fast that even our headquarters can't keep track of him..."

April 3, 1945 Germany. "... There is no need of you worrying in case I haven't been writing. I have a case of good old fashioned spring fever Then again we have done a little moving... This rat race is exciting in a way. Every night a different house. Last night I slept under these old fashioned feather beds and they sure are warm... (We) are having an early spring ... and once in a while we get a cool, rainy day. Since hitting this country I have spent only 2 nights outside and the rest under shelter. It hasn't been all gravy and some of the days have been tough ones. Our company hasn't had a casualty so far in Germany. I hope the record stays that way. This country is full of displaced slave workers, old people, and kids. Nothing doing here only these people are great church people and have some splendid cathedrals. I wish they would practice their religion and not going around stomping down the neighboring countries. Some of their cities are really blasted and it should keep them busy rebuilding for a few years at least. Most of the rural villages haven't been hit bad, but all have a few scars... I didn't see Marlene Dietrich..."

"I still remember being road guard near Speyer where we followed our orders and held up an artillery battalion headed for the Rhine pontoon bridge with our BAR and rifles. Squad mates convinced me to allow the Lt. Colonel's convoy through after we told him what the current password was. Part of our patrol duty was riding on light tanks southward to a large villa near the Rhine River occupied by another platoon sized unit. Nothing happened on several day and night patrols. On our last patrol we decided to hunt the small deer in the state forest

halfway to the villa with the tank's .30 caliber machine gun and our BAR and rifles. This commotion alerted the German self propelled 88 mm. gunners across the river to a suitable target. The Stuart light tank was very maneuverable in making a change of direction. We retreated safely with no game. The searchlights reflecting from the low clouds to light the Rhine River and forestall any enemy crossings will always be remembered.

"Fifty one years later I still remember our 7 kilometer walk westward in the rain to see Marlene Dietrich entertain the troops in her GI long johns. Dick La Fleur was on that hike. Who was the other one? It rained lightly all the way. When we arrived we found Bobby Breen, the boy soprano, singing while standing on a jeep. Marlene didn't come out in such weather and there were many disappointed soldiers. We were carrying live ammunition, but didn't use any.

"I wasn't aware of the cathedral in Speyer during our late March 1945 stay. Late in 1947 I learned in my Medieval history course that the Diet of Speyer in 1529 was the first recorded use of the word Protestant. I let the Beloit College professor and Congregational preacher know that I was a Methodist soldier that helped liberate Speyer two years earlier. I pulled an A in that course. The regiment left Speyer on March 31st and crossed the pontoon bridge at Mannheim. I rode on the back of a kitchen truck across the Rhine and began another chapter in my Company G days."

We saw Bud and Melpomene at the 100th Division Association reunion in Charlotte NC in September 1997, in apparent good health. Two short months later, just before Thanksgiving, Bud suffered an aneurysm in his brain and quite suddenly died. There were more letters to be transcribed, and he had fully intended to do it for us. I have asked Mel if there was any way she could do the job. She has never said no, but so far she hasn't gotten to it.

Eventually we reached the Rhine, which we crossed—in trucks over a temporary bridge—at Ludwigshafen to Mannheim. Here, in fair-sized cities, we saw for the first time what real devastation looked like. We were still moving fast, so the impressions were only fleeting, but they were of total destruction. It was about then that I began to formulate a resolve never to complicate my life by attachments to material things, especially non-movable ones. Without attachments, I thought I should be free from the anguish of losses if they came. It's a resolve I have not kept, but I'm still not sure it wasn't wise. The physical ruins I was to live in and near for the next year made a deep and lasting impression on me that time has to this day failed to eradicate completely.