

# Two Days of Hell at Heilbronn

by Rufus Dalton, 397-H

*Dateline—March 1945. The Seventh Army was in its Spring Offensive.*

Refreshed by a four-day period in VI Corps reserve, the 100th Division crossed the Rhine on March 31, on pontoon bridges, between Ludwigshafen and Mannheim, courtesy of the 63rd Division. Relieving the 63rd Division, the 100th moved forward with all possible speed to prevent the reorganization of the defeated German forces. With the 10th Armored Division out front, the 100th Division moved forward as rapidly as thirty-three kilometers on a single day. By April 3, however, things had begun to stiffen up. On that day, after fighting a stiff rearguard action at Neckargartach on the west bank of the Neckar River, the Germans withdrew across the river into Heilbronn, blowing the bridges behind them.

The vital city of Heilbronn, on the east bank of the Neckar, was our major objective since crossing the Rhine. Some enemy resistance was expected, but indications were that no determined stand was planned by the Germans. As *The Story of the Century* (SOC, p. 136), reads,

For the enemy, however, Heilbronn was an ideal spot for a last ditch stand. The deep, swift-flowing Neckar made a formidable defense barrier. With the three road bridges and one railroad bridge leading into the city blown up, crossing the Neckar would be a major operation. [Also] Forming a semicircle behind the city was a group of easily defended hills, bare almost to their summit, with thick woods at the crests which afforded excellent concealment for German artillery and gave the enemy unbroken observation of every inch of the river.

In fact, we know now that Heilbronn was a part of a new defensive line planned by German General Foertsch's First Army. (*The Last Offensive*, by John B. McDonald.) When we reached the city, there were several thousand enemy troops in Heilbronn in addition to numerous local Volksturm organizations, and there was a defensive plan drawn up for defending the city block by block in a series of zones. (SOC, 137)

Then, this from *The Story of the Century*,

At 1700 hours on 3 April, while our division was still about 24 kilometers from Neckargartach, General Burress was ordered by the VI Corps CG to detach one battalion of infantry to rush forward with all possible speed to join the 10th Armored in the vicinity of Heilbronn. The 10th Armored had reached the Neckar ahead of us—and the battalion of Century men was to assist the 10th in establishing a bridgehead to cover the crossing of the 100th and other troops to follow.

Accordingly, the 3rd Battalion of the 398th Infantry was chosen and they, in fact, at 0300 hours of April 4, without artillery preparation that might alert the enemy, crawled into assault boats and were ferried across the Neckar by engineers of the 55th Engineer Battalion.

“Within one hour the entire 3rd Battalion had navigated the river and assembled in an area around a power plant.” (SOC) This power plant was on the bank of the Neckar some 400 yards from the first factory buildings on the northern edge of Heilbronn. At the first streaks of dawn, Companies I, K, and L moved out to attack assigned objectives. Company K was to take Tower Hill, the high point on a ridge that ran behind Heilbronn and parallel to the Neckar. Company L was to take a group of lumberyards running along the railroad north from Heilbronn. Company K was to attack directly into the factory area of Heilbronn.

The companies had some initial success in reaching their objectives, but it was like stumbling into a beehive. The Germans counterattacked with a force of an estimated 500 to 1000 men and drove our men back out onto the flat, open space, except those they surrounded on Tower Hill or contained in the factory area.

This was the situation when the rest of the Division arrived in Neckargartach on that morning across from Heilbronn. To make matters worse, General Burress received word that the 10th Armored Division had been relieved of its mission to support the capture of Heilbronn and was being shifted to the north flank of VI Corps. (SOC, 141.) This left our Division without any tank support. General Burress was faced with the decision to pull back the remnants of the 3rd Battalion or go to their rescue and take Heilbronn on our own. He chose the latter.

This is where my story begins, April 4, 1945. My recollection of that first day is unclear. I do remember being asked to accompany a small party across the Neckar. The point that we crossed, in assault boats, was behind the power plant where the 3rd Battalion had set up its headquarters. I must have been with a party from our 2nd Battalion to reconnoiter the area and see where our Battalion should cross. There was some German artillery coming in our area, but we made it across O.K. and checked out the area on the other side of the power plant. We found that beyond the power plant, there was just wide open flat land for about a mile leading to the base of Tower Hill and about a quarter mile to the first industrial buildings of Heilbronn to our right. Out on that flat land, the remnants of Companies K and L were pinned down and could not move. The decision was made to cross at a point closer to the industrial section, about half-way between the power plant and the factories.

Captain William J. Law's Company E was given the job of crossing first to be followed by Company F and then Company G. Smoke was to be laid over the crossing by the 163rd Chemical Smoke Generator Company. (SOC, 142) Captain Law wrote an excellent article on the action of his company that appeared in the Association newsletter (Holiday Issue, 1996). In this article I will only attempt to outline material from his article to provide the background for personal stories by individual soldiers involved in the battle. Please note that the industrial buildings they were attacking were called the Glass Factory and there was a six-foot wall bordering the factory.

The sequence of events after crossing the Neckar is taken from Captain Law's article:

1. After crossing the Neckar, the 1st Platoon attacked across open ground towards a house; probably occupied by the Plant Superintendent. It was located outside the compound of the power plant. They reached the house, but could not move beyond it because of artillery and small arms fire.
2. The 2nd Platoon turned right and headed for the Glass Factory compound, but was pinned down by automatic fire from three directions.
3. Captain Law sent the 3rd Platoon to attack to the right of the 2nd Platoon to provide more firepower; both moved forward to a supply shed of the Glass Factory.
4. Captain Law ordered the 1st Platoon to pull back from the Superintendent's House, reassemble at a large coal pile and follow the 2nd and 3rd Platoons in their attack. Apparently all three platoons made it to the Glass Factory by late afternoon, but Captain Law lost contact with the 2nd and 3rd Platoons. The 4th Platoon was told to dig in and hold the beachhead.
5. Captain Law, with his radioman, went forward to where the 1st Platoon was located in a multistory building, apparently the Administration Building of the Glass Factory. The building was under attack by the Germans; "Walls were crumbled by the grenades." There he found Lieutenant Pete Petracco (battlefield commission) lying mortally wounded, and he died in Captain Law's arms.
6. Captain Law returned to his CP and sent Tech Sergeant Tom Convery to take charge of the 1st Platoon.
7. At about 0300, the Germans counterattacked the Administration Building, setting it on fire and it soon became a firetrap. T/Sgt. Convery told his men to abandon the building. There was still no contact with the 2nd and 3rd Platoons. When Captain Law later questioned them, the platoon leaders told him they had been in a vulnerable position and did not want to risk detection by using their radios.
8. Company F arrived at the Glass Factory between 2200 and midnight. They took a position in the first shelter of the Glass Factory yard. There they planned for an early morning attack.

When the Germans counterattacked Company E's position and burned down the Administration Building on top of them, T/Sgt. Convery told his men to flee the building. Some of them made it back to Company F, but seventeen of them escaped to a four-story stone-and-concrete building, with the Germans soon surrounding it. As the Germans came in the first floor our men moved up to the second and prepared to defend the entrances. Soon they heard Germans up on the roof. At this time, some heavy artillery began coming down on top of the building. This was heavy stuff, from 8-inch guns (SOC, 143). Company F's commander, 1st Lieutenant Carl Bradshaw, had called for it, believing all of Company E's men were out of those buildings and hoping to break off the German counterattack, which it did. Although those Company E men took a pounding as the building was literally blown to pieces, it saved them from the Germans. Most, if not all, of these men had ruptured eardrums. These were the missing men noted in the division history (SOC, 143), which reports that Company E suffered fifty-four casualties that night.

Company G, which had been in reserve, crossed the Neckar some time during the night so they were ready to join the battle at daybreak, April 5.

Companies F and G jumped off into the attack before dawn. Company F, surging out of the factory building in which it spent the night, took over the factory between it and the building that Company E had taken the previous day. While reconnoitering for a suitable way out of the first factory building, Lieutenant Bradshaw was killed by a sniper. (SOC, 144).

The Glass Factory had a rather extensive loading yard whose shacks and loading platforms were excellent cover for the enemy in the yard. It was difficult to fire on them, because their German comrades covered them from two neighboring buildings from which Company E had been forced to retreat the night before.

Companies F and G were both involved in an intense firefight throughout the loading yard area during the morning of April 5. In his sector, after six of his men had been killed, Lieutenant John Slade, Company G's 2nd Platoon leader, called for mortar fire from his weapons platoon and from the 81 mm mortars, firing from the other side of the Neckar.

After several minutes of this firing, the Jerries lost interest in continuing to fight. Leaving their holes they ran toward Lieutenant Slade's men with their hands in the air. Thirty-seven young Germans poured through the railroad gate into the hands of the 2nd Platoon. (SOC, 145).

These were Hitler Youth, fourteen-to-seventeen-year-olds, who fought like demons until subjected to the intense fire of the mortars.

Having cleared the loading yard, Company F and G moved side by side through the factory buildings, having to overcome strong points of German resistance. At one point, four men of Company G's 2nd Platoon were killed by intense fire.

By the afternoon of April 5, the attack had carried our units to the edge of the factory area next to a large open space of approximately 200 yards. On the other side was a railroad and road junction with a large stone building that would present good fields of fire if occupied by the Germans. Waiting until dusk, two squads from Company F approached the building. "Suddenly, a machine gun opened up from a window of the house, killing all five men in the leading squad." (SOC, 147). It was then decided to put off the advance into the city until the next day.

So ended the two days of hell for the 2nd Battalion of the 397th Infantry, with all companies involved, but especially Company E, which experienced first blood. This was the first experience our men had with urban fighting where the defenders were at a terrific advantage, and the only way to advance was to expose themselves to a possible sniper or hidden machine gun. They stood the test!

The above is the historical record as best I could tell from the documents available. But, the purpose of this article is to hear the personal stories of the men involved.

Corporal Clarence Rincker, a radioman from Company H's 81 mm mortar platoon, accompanied Company E's Lieutenant Pete Petracco and his 1st Platoon as they moved from the beachhead to attack the Glass Factory buildings. He wrote,

The factory buildings were surrounded by a stone wall, about five feet high, that gave our men both shelter and trouble trying to scale it in the face of fire. As we approached the stone wall, we came under less artillery, but more small arms fire. There was very little cover in the open space as we approached the wall. I had been stopped perhaps a minute when a sniper's bullet snapped past my head with such a loud crack that I just about jerked my head off in reflex. I took off immediately and had no trouble clearing the stone wall in one big jump. When I landed inside the factory yard, it was still some distance to a building where I could take shelter. I had become temporarily separated from Lieutenant Petracco, but rejoined him when I sprinted across the factory yard to the same building he was already in. There was quite a bit of small arms fire just beyond the building we were in. As soon as the Lieutenant analyzed the situation that his men faced, we moved to a larger warehouse-type building.

While in this building Rincker assisted Lieutenant Petracco in silencing a German machine gun with mortar fire he called in. Rincker continues,

It was getting fairly late in the afternoon by the time we got the pesky machine gun knocked out so the company commander (Captain Law) decided they should discontinue the attack and begin organizing into a defensive position for the night. I had been left with some Company E riflemen while the Lieutenant was setting up the defense for the night. He never came back.

Later, apparently Rincker moved to one of the other buildings.

The Company E men and I were in one of several buildings we had captured during the afternoon. It was more like an office building than a factory building.

I believe this was the Administration Building for the Glass Factory complex and most, if not all, of Company E's entire 1st Platoon had moved into it.

At this point we pick up 1st Platoon's Sergeant Bill Ditto's story.

We advanced into the area where a fairly large factory office building [the Administration Building] was situated. We found it occupied with a few German soldiers. We managed to get in with just a few casualties. Throughout the rest of the day, and into the night, we were exchanging fire with Germans in the factory building right next to the one we were in. My squad remained on the main floor as we were under sporadic attack, now under the command of T/Sgt. Tom Convery [Lt. Petracco had been killed]. I did as usual under these situations: swapped weapons with my BAR man. I set up a spot at the top of a stairway to the basement of the building. The stairway went down to a landing at a rather large window, then on down into the basement. We were getting sporadic fire through that window and a grenade or two tossed in. I returned fire with a few rounds from the BAR. This continued well into the night.

Ken Siebe, in the same building, remembers,

Quite a few of us were on the second floor where there were windows about four feet wide by six feet high facing the town. At about dark, we began receiving fire through those windows and I could hear the Germans talking and screaming outside. They were shooting something that looked like tracers—at night you could see the path of the bullets as they came through the windows. The Germans started shooting *panzerfaust* at the building and knocked the concrete to

the inside, creating some missiles almost as deadly as the bullets they were shooting. Lieutenant Petracco took a position a little bit behind and to the right of me, and I remember when he took a bullet to the neck or to the head—Captain Law held him in his lap on the floor (as he died). [Captain Law had come up from Co. CP in the power station; see his article.]

Sometime after midnight, the Germans counterattacked and all hell broke loose on the defenders in that Administration Building. Joe Cosby, a medic for the platoon remembers,

The Germans were firing against the windows and walls of this building. One of my buddies [Victor Nash] was in horrible shell shock after our building had been hit. This buddy, he was screaming and I had to hush him up. It really was the only chance of saving him because he couldn't just run from the building screaming. I put my hand pretty forcibly over his mouth and ushered him down to a coal cellar where he stayed for three days. [More later on Victor Nash.]

Rincker recalls,

It seemed like I had just dozed off when all at once a fierce firefight began all around the building. There was lots of rifle and burp-gun fire; but worse yet, the Germans were firing panzerfausts into our building, producing terrific concussions. Before long, I noticed the building was on fire and some of the GIs were trying to get away from the fire. In time, there were more fires burning in the building, but the return fire by the riflemen had tapered off. In the light of the fires, I could see Germans all around the building, so escape seemed impossible. It seemed like all the GIs around me were either dead or knocked out by the terrible concussion. At this point, I decided I would rather die in a hail of bullets than be burned up, so I started making my way toward a doorway. When I got out the door, I started running with no particular destination in mind. I could see Germans in the light of the fire, but so far, I hadn't felt any bullets, so I kept running as hard as I could. In a short while, I came to a factory building and still hadn't felt any bullets. I stepped inside a doorway and paused to get my breath and to try to figure out if the building was full of Germans or what. I didn't have any password for the night so just called out to see if a German or a GI might respond. I was really relieved when a GI spoke to me. It turned out that there were eight or nine Company E men in this building and in the next thirty minutes or so stragglers came in just as I had.

Bill Ditto doesn't remember how he got out of that burning building. He wrote,

The last thing I remember was a big flash of light, and, very dimly in my memory, an explosion. I remembered nothing else until I woke up a few days later, in the hospital, where the doctors had removed some shrapnel from my arm. Between then and the explosion, I was told that I did function; however, from what I was told, I didn't make sense.

Ken Siebe remembers getting out of the building that night and joining another group [the one that Rincker found], but can't recall anything else. He wrote, "Not a thing about Heilbronn after that. Where I was and who I was with, I just don't know; it was just a matter of trying to survive."

Bill Wagner, a mortar man from the 4th Platoon of Company E, who had been sent up from the beachhead as reinforcement and was in the burning building, writes this about his escape,

The Jerries burnt the house down with forty or so of our wounded in it. [Records show this figure is somewhat exaggerated.] The screams that came from the building that night still haunt me. A guy from Boston and I found a back stairwell with a landing and a window. We both jumped out of the window and into an alley, without breaking our legs, and began running to get away from the screams. We had no idea where we were or where we were going. We almost ran into a rear

column of German soldiers walking through the alley, when we recognized the shape of the helmets from the blaze of the burning building.

Now back to the building that Rincker and his buddies were in—the Germans weren't finished with them yet. As soon as the Germans realized the GIs were there they came after them. Rincker continues his account,

The building that was on fire was making quite a bit of light over the whole area. We started getting organized. There was no one really in charge of our little group; we each did what we knew had to be done. There were so many Germans. We decided just to try to keep them out of the building instead of driving them off, but, there were several doors, and, before we knew what happened there were some Germans in the building with us. We retreated up some stairs to the next floor and tried to guard the stairs so none of the Germans could get up there. This seemed to be working, but pretty soon, someone thought there were some Germans on the roof.

At this point, Rincker tried to call in fire from Company H's mortars onto the top of the building, but his radio could not reach his guns. He continues,

I couldn't get a response from any source, but I began picking up a transmission that was someone definitely adjusting some type of fire. Pretty soon the observer making the radio transmission [later determined to be 1st Lieutenant Bradshaw of Company F] called for a barrage, and, in a minute or two, artillery shells started bursting all around us and hitting our building, too. The barrage did the same thing as I had anticipated my mortar fire would have done except it was literally blowing our building apart. The noise was deafening. By now I was convinced that we were under an American artillery barrage, but we didn't know how to stop it. I was on the second floor in a central hallway when a brilliant flash and deafening blast took place right over my head. I was knocked down and stunned and maybe knocked out momentarily. I remember getting up from the floor and being covered with whitish dust from the pulverized stone. There was a small hole in the floor above me. My head hurt and I felt dizzy. About this time, the artillery fire ceased and it was rather quiet from then to daylight. [Both of Corporal Rincker's eardrums were ruptured.]

Rincker continues,

As it got light enough to see, we took a nose count and found that there were only seventeen of us still alive in the building. There were several dead at the windows. The building was literally destroyed with the two top floors just a mass of rubble. Not too long after daybreak someone spotted some GIs coming toward us. Someone got their attention to let them know we were in the building; they were all Company F men. Among them was 1st Lieutenant Bradshaw. The Company F men moved on and had gone only about 100 feet beyond our building when they encountered Germans firing small arms. In about fifteen minutes word came back to us that 1st Lieutenant Bradshaw had been killed by a burst of machine-gun fire. Our liberator was dead.

Regarding Victor Nash who had been taken to the cellar of the building that burned completely down, his survival is considered a miracle. When I joined Company G on the afternoon of April 5 as a forward observer for Company H's mortars, that building was pointed out to me. It was just a pile of smoking ruin. But Victor Nash was alive beneath the ruins. Here is part of his story, paraphrased:

I was trapped in the basement after the burning stairway collapsed, cutting off my escape. Fortunately, my gas mask enabled me to breathe despite the dense smoke, but the heat threatened to roast me alive. It occurred to me that this was how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego must

have felt after being thrown into King Nebuchadnezzar's burning fiery furnace! "Dear Lord please let me get out of this mess somehow," I prayed. Miraculously, all panic left me as I sensed another Presence calming and reassuring me, like the Fourth Man who appeared in that inferno of long ago to protect those three gallant men. I quickly became dehydrated from the heat, but, when my canteen ran dry, I was astonished to find that the Lord had provided a slowly dripping faucet near the water heater in a corner of the building. Four days later I was rescued through a coal chute by our medic, whom I was at once convinced the Lord had guided to my location. Whenever this traumatic experience flashes across my mind, I give thanks for the mighty protective power of our great and benevolent God.

The medic who rescued Nash from the basement was Joe Cosby, the same man who had put him there to save his life. Sergeant Joe Cosby received the Bronze Star medal for his actions.

That completes the story of Company E's 1st Platoon. I was intrigued by Captain Law's comment that he had lost contact with his 2nd and 3rd Platoons and have tried to find out what happened to them. After following up many leads supplied by my friend, Jim Nance, making phone calls and writing letters, I was able to find only one Company E man who could tell us the story of the 2nd Platoon; no one from the 3rd Platoon.

Here is Philip C. Ellsworth's story,

I was the squad leader of the 2nd Squad, 2nd Platoon, having been elevated to that position by the attrition at Rimling while I was in the hospital. It is my recollection that our platoon was the first to cross opposite the factory district. I know there was no one in front of us where we landed. Our squad managed to get across without casualties. On landing, we went through a breach in a wall, which I suppose might have been a wall to hold back the river during floods. Immediately beyond the wall was a bottle factory which was either burning or had been burning, and the exploding bottles sounded like gunfire, adding to the confusion. I believe that, after finding no one in the first buildings, we made our way to the right along the river and found Company E Headquarters. [I believe this was the Administration Building occupied by the 1st Platoon. Company E's HQ was actually back at the Power Plant.] There we found several comrades dead or dying and learned of Lieutenant Petracco's death. Chester Merrill, a good friend, and young Garo Yazujian were among the casualties.

We were then ordered to proceed into the factory buildings. [Philip sent me a picture of two buildings connected by a catwalk.] It shows the buildings as I remember them. There were two large buildings separated by a catwalk. We proceeded through the left hand building and crossed a catwalk to the second floor of the building on the right. This building had a row of windows that overlooked a courtyard separating the two buildings. It was probably late afternoon by this time. We had been there some time, stationed at the windows, when we heard German voices on the floor below. We kept quiet, but they apparently knew we were there because they threw a potato masher grenade up a stairwell. It landed right next to those at the top of the stairwell, but didn't explode. I have read of those who, in similar circumstances, have fallen on the grenade. I think we were all just paralyzed by it—nobody moved. After a few minutes one of us kicked it back down the stairwell and it still didn't explode.

We remained there on the second floor through the afternoon and evening, more or less trapped because we suspected they were still below us. At one point a German company assembled in the courtyard. They must have not been the ones who had thrown the grenade at us, or they wouldn't have congregated there. We fired on them and they dispersed but didn't come after us. At about midnight we had heard nothing for several hours and had had no communication with the rest of the platoon since we left that afternoon, so we decided to try to get back to Company Headquarters. The catwalk had been burning but was still passable and we made it back over it and retraced our route to Company Headquarters. I then found I had left Frank Roske behind. Fortunately, he made his way back on his own.

I believe it was the next day that I was going somewhere by myself. I may have been going between my squad and the platoon command post, but it seems strange in retrospect to have been alone. I was walking along the side of a building and came to a corner when I met face to face with a German soldier who had been walking along another side of the building. We had to be only three feet apart. We were so surprised we both turned and retraced our steps, he along his wall and I along mine. I have very few vivid memories, but that is one of them.

Philip sent me two poems that he had written about his memories of Heilbronn on those first two days:

### **Heilbronn**

I remember the river.  
The small boats, and the far shore  
And, beyond the broken wall,  
The buildings torn by war  
And fallen comrades  
I remember the catwalk and the factory,  
The voices down below,  
The grenade that fell among us silent,  
As if warning us to go  
I remember midnight  
And vivid in my mind  
Retreat, the burning catwalk, safety  
But a comrade left behind  
Somewhere in the dark  
And I remember morning  
And Roske coming back unharmed

### **The Meeting**

Once, in a contested place,  
I met a soldier face to face.  
We stopped and turned and walked away,  
Both to live another day.  
I often wonder who he was  
And where he is and whom he loves,  
And if he ever sees, like me  
A soldier in his memory.  
Or if before the end he fell,  
Leaving only me to tell  
Of our meeting, face to face,  
Once in a contested place.

I recently found another man who was with the 2nd Platoon. *The Regiment of the Century* (page 225) says, "At 1400, (April 4) Company E, with one section of heavy machine guns from Company H attached, began crossing the river in assault boats." 2nd Lieutenant Erle Theimer (battlefield commission) was leader of this section. He recalls,

Getting down to the pontoon boats and getting in them with all that gear was nerve-wracking. I do not recall whether we were actually under fire. We paddled across, racing as fast as we could. From the boats to the wall described on other Company E accounts, seemed like a distance of a couple of football fields. Going over the wall seemed to take forever. Then the race to the warehouses was exhausting.



Company E was the principal player in the first day and night of the Heilbronn “adventure,” and because I had been in contact with them from my research for my articles on Rimling, so most of this article is about their personal experiences. I have been fortunate, however, to obtain an eyewitness account from a man with Company F. This was Corporal Henry McCorkle, radioman from Company H, who gives this graphic report,

Lieutenant Grant and I were ordered to act as the observation party with Company F. We met with the Company F officers one street back (west) from the river for 1st Lieutenant Bradshaw’s briefing. He was CO at that time. The map of the city was laid out on the hood of a jeep. Lieutenant Bradshaw gave the officers their orders for the attack, one platoon as the point, the other following in reserve, at the outset. We were told to stay close to Lieutenant Bradshaw, who would be with the point platoon. We went down to the Neckar River and boarded the small boats for the crossing. I was told that this was the same place that Company E had crossed. I don’t recall the exact time but it must have been late afternoon. I do not remember any fire as we crossed. We left the boats to be taken back over by the engineers for another load of men and began forming a single file moving to the right (south) behind a chest-high embankment that ran parallel to the river. There was an occasional bullet going overhead, but it did not seem that the Germans were concentrating on us at the time. Lieutenant Bradshaw got ahead of us for a while as we followed what seemed a complicated route down alleys, along walls. After a short time, we caught up with him in a large building where we went upstairs to the second floor and into a room that faced out onto a rather large, open space with factory buildings on the other side. Lieutenant Bradshaw called for the heavy-machine-gun leader attached to Company F and told him to set up a gun to fire on the factory buildings across the way. I don’t remember the section leader’s name. I can picture him quite well, a big man with a black mustache, who usually had a cigar in his mouth. He had one there that day. The machine gun was mounted on a table in the middle of the room and Lieutenant Bradshaw instructed the gunner as to the target for his fire. The noise was deafening. I had the impression we were now near Company E, although exact positions were unclear. When Lieutenant Bradshaw was satisfied with the machine-gun fire, he led the platoon down another stairs, into an adjacent building and into a large room with a doorway large enough to drive a truck in. It appeared to be a room for loading or unloading trucks. It faced out on the same open space the machine gun was firing across. Lieutenant Bradshaw ordered the platoon leader to send a squad out into the open space toward the factory or the other side. The Germans let the first scout get about thirty yards out, with the second scout ten or so yards behind and then began firing at them with a machine gun. The first scout appeared to be killed instantly. The second fell and then called for a medic. The medic grabbed his bag and ran out the door, but there was such a hail of machine-gun fire that he quickly returned. Two more times he ran out and then ran back in. The last time he slumped down against a wall sobbing. I believe that he had only sympathy from the rest of us. It seemed to me a miracle that he even got back into the building. In any case, it would have done no good to try reaching the wounded man who by that time had ceased to move or call out.

Lieutenant Bradshaw began studying his map and then led us off on another route. I don’t remember the details of that at all, only that it became dark and we stopped in a building that was next to another large space with several buildings in it. I don’t believe it to be the same space we had tried to cross earlier. At this point I was told that we had made contact with Company E, although I didn’t personally witness it. We understood that the building we were looking at was occupied by Company E elements, with the rest of the company in the vicinity. Lieutenant Bradshaw decided to remain here until morning to begin the attack.

After some time a considerable firefight began, which we were unable to join in due to our position. The action seemed to be focused on the building we could see in the open space nearby. [Apparently the Administration Building of the Glass Factory.] Eventually it caught fire and we

could see people running out the backside into other buildings there. We could see clearly one BAR man coming out. He had taken off his shirt, probably due to the heat. He had hardly gotten out when a “burp gun” fired at him, almost cutting him in half.

Company E’s situation seemed more and more desperate. It was about this time that Lieutenant Bradshaw called in some very heavy artillery, almost on top of us to break up the German attack. This did break up the attack. I don’t remember anything for what remained of the night.

The next morning, Lieutenant Bradshaw led us off again with what seemed a definite plan to take certain buildings. At that time I didn’t realize that Company E had pulled back from the area. Our route took us into a basement, which connected with the next factory and then up to the second floor of that building where there was a catwalk connecting this building to the next. As we crawled across it, trying to stay below the solid waist-high wall on both sides, we began to receive fire from what sounded more like a BAR than a German weapon [perhaps friendly fire from Company G, which had now joined the attack].

In the next building, we descended to the ground floor and found a door opening onto an open space of about sixty or seventy feet, which separated us from the next building that Lieutenant Bradshaw intended us to enter. The first man to cross the open space drew fire from a German machine gun. Then each of four men ran separately across the space, each one getting fired on by that machine gunner. The fact that he had missed everyone else in our group did not reassure me when my time came.

I was the last man and thought that surely by that time he would have figured out how to use that machine gun. I was always surprised at how noisy it is to be shot at. It was clear that when the bullet was very close, its passage through the air was explosive, almost as loud as the weapon firing and then becoming more of a snapping sound as distance increased. Anyway, that was a noisy run and when I arrived safely in the next building, there was a buddy from Company H [apparently attached to Company G] greeting me with a grin and saying, “That looked like a battle scene right out of the movies, you running across there with the machine-gun bullets kicking up dust and concrete all around your feet.” That broke the tension in just the right way. I remember being very surprised to see him there.

Lieutenant Bradshaw had been looking for a way to proceed to the next building and, not long after I arrived, he decided to look down the narrow alley separating our building from another. That alley ran parallel with the path of our running from the last building, so it was at least not likely to be covered by the same machine gun. I didn’t actually see how Lieutenant Bradshaw crossed the alley into the next building, but I looked up in time to see him step back into the alley from the other building. He was immediately hit by machine-gun fire. The medic got to him very quickly and had time for a quick look before machine-gun fire drove him into the next building. In a moment he jumped back into our building and said that the machine gun had cut the Lieutenant’s abdominal aorta. Nothing could be done and he was gone in minutes. He seemed a very good man. During the night I learned that he had taught math in high school. A real loss. [I have heard from others in Company F that he was well liked by his men.]

Now oddly enough I have no memory at all of what happened after that. I was given a Bronze Star which was supposed to be for action during that time, directing mortar fire that broke up a counterattack, but I have no memory at all of actually doing that. I was supposed to be directing fire because Lt. Grant was ill. I do remember him being ill, but nothing else.

How fortunate we are that McCorkle was able to remember the details of those first two days of Company F.

**Related events:** This story is related to the death of 1st Lieutenant Bradshaw and involves the fact that there were Hitler Youth as part of the defense at Heilbronn. In *The Last Offensive*, it reads, Protected from shelling by sturdy buildings, the Germans seldom surrendered except at the point of a rifle, though many of the Hitler Youth had had enough after a brief flurry of fanatic resistance. At one point, in response to intense mortar fire, a platoon of Hitler Youth soldiers ran screaming into American lines to surrender

while their officers shot at them to make them stop. Then as earlier reported in *The Story of the Century*, after Lieutenant Slade had called for 81 mm mortar fire, “thirty-seven young Germans poured through the railway gates into the hands of the 2nd Platoon, Company G.” I am convinced these are different reports of the same event and they are related to 1st Lieutenant Bradshaw in this way: On the morning of April 5, I was assigned to observe fire for our Company H 81 mm mortars from the attic of a building on the west bank of the Neckar, directly across from the factories where our rifle companies were heavily engaged. This building, which was about four stories tall, had been selected as our battalion headquarters. While I was spotting from the attic for my section of guns, Staff Sergeant Herbert Harvey was spotting for his section also in the attack. We noticed a rather large number of Germans across the Neckar in a loading yard and began calling in mortar fire onto them. Our mortar shells were falling into their ranks for just a short time when word came up to discontinue fire as it appeared the Germans were trying to surrender. We had already ordered our guns to “fire for effect” and shells were on the way. Over the years, it has occasionally come to my mind that I may have called in fire on the enemy who were trying to surrender or had perhaps already surrendered and were under American guards who could have been killed by the shells. Years later, my mind was put at ease after Captain (later Colonel) Maiale sent me his memoirs. At the time of Heilbronn, he had just been promoted to Battalion Headquarters from command of Company H. 1st Lieutenant Bradshaw had served as platoon leader of Captain Maiale’s mortar platoon before being promoted to CO of Company F. They were close friends. Here are his words, I had arrived at the 2nd Battalion command/observation post at about 6 AM. It was in an attic of a building on the riverfront. I looked through a window and could see the whole panorama of the battle going on. Company F [It could have been Company G; no way of knowing for sure] was in position in front of a patch of woods about 100 yards square, [I don’t remember woods, but so much for memory; I remember it more as a loading yard] the woods being held very strongly by about 100 Ger mans dug in with machine guns. McAlister, the Battalion Operations officer, told me about Bradshaw being killed. I was quite upset. At a window, one of our mortar sergeants, Harvey, was placing mortar fire on Company F’s front. He was firing one mortar. I said to Harvey, “Stop wasting ammunition, shoot all guns.” He quickly changed his orders to “54 rounds, traverse and search.” Outside we could hear the whump, whump of mortars. In no time at all, each of 6 guns had put 9 high explosive 81 mm shells in the air. At this time, with death in the air over their heads, many Germans in the woods decided they had had enough, and got up out of their holes waving white flags. I could hear the cries of the wounded. I felt no regrets. A measure of vengeance had been taken for a friend. I would like to think that Lieutenant Bradshaw had a hand in “taking the starch” out of the Hitler Youth. On the previous night, he had called in the heavy artillery that literally tore buildings apart. Having been softened up by that experience, I can imagine the 81 mm mortar barrage sold the Hitler Youth on giving up. That’s the story of those first two days of Heilbronn based on the records I had available and on stories by men who were there. It would be great if we could hear from other men of 2nd and 3rd Platoons, Company E, and men from Companies F and G. Maybe we could get enough for a follow-up article.

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