

Recollections

by Gene Herr, 397-D

Combat Times

Ever wonder what the moving rabbit in a shooting gallery must feel like, assuming it has feelings? Perhaps I can describe how I felt as the moving target in a situation that occurred near the end of the war.

The battle for Heilbronn was past and the advance was being made on the smaller towns to the east and south of Heilbronn. Little fighting was being done—it was mostly a case of surrounding a town and having the mayor surrender. Our approach on the town of Spiegelberg presented a different situation. One must understand the territory. The town itself was located in a valley and our approach was by a road which came over and around the top of a hill. The road then descended in a gradual slope, parallel to the direction of the valley.

As our column of men came around the hill and started down the slope, we began to get enemy fire from the opposite side of the valley. The lead soldiers took cover in the ditch wherever they could, and we called for the tanks to get to the front of the column. The several tanks placed themselves at about 200 or maybe a little more feet from each other down the sloping part of the road. They used their machine guns to spray the opposite side of the valley. We, in turn, used the tanks as shields by running down the road from tank to tank, catching our breath by stopping behind each one for a minute or two. I can recall hearing the bullets hitting the bank of the road as I ran from tank to tank. I knew that I was the target, but fortunately for me, it only made an impression on my mind and not in my body. I have to assume that the enemy was not trying to just scare me, but to try to hit me.

We did take the town and stayed in houses there overnight. Staying in houses was a luxury in those days.

Carbine Rifle Improvement

The carbine I carried in combat was a standard issue one. All it took to disassemble it was a coin to unscrew one main screw. This allowed the stock and the barrel assembly to separate which then permitted the trigger mechanism to be exposed for cleaning and oiling. The sling by which the weapon was carried while slung over the shoulder had a small loop in the end, which fit through a slot in the stock. A small can about one-half inch in diameter and two and a half to three inches long was slipped through the loop in the sling on the reverse side of the stock, thus preventing the sling from being pulled out of the slot. A groove in the stock slightly bigger in size than the small can permitted the can to be held in securely as well. The can was, in fact, an oil can and held a small amount of oil for lubricating the trigger assembly.

My improvement to this oil can was to have Dad make me such a container for oil but on the bottom end to braze a short piece of metal, crosswise. The ends were sharpened to a screwdriver edge thus making it into a device that could always be present for the unscrewing of that one main screw. It did require that I carve out a place for the screwdriver end to fit below the surface of the stock. I suppose that this could be classed as destruction of government property, but then lots of government property had been destroyed during the war.

I continued to carry the carbine until I was transferred from the Infantry to the Finance Department. I sometimes wondered if anyone noticed the modification that I had made on that piece and what would have been their impression of the change.

The Battle for Heilbronn

Upon my return to my unit after a three-day pass to Paris, France, I found the Company in the battle for the city of Heilbronn, Germany. During the time that I was traveling to Paris, having the three-day pass, and traveling back to the unit, the Division had resumed the attack after crossing the Rhine River at Mannheim. Our Company had been engaged in the battle several days before I arrived back on the scene.

Heilbronn was a rail center as well as being located on the East bank of the Neckar River. We had approached the city from the west, which meant that we had to cross the river. Of course crossing the river in a boat being paddled by the Engineers just meant that you were the target for snipers, and depending on how good or how bad the snipers were at hitting the bobbing targets, you might have been the recipient of the Purple Heart after your little ride. Our boat made it across but there were some shots that came close. I don't think that I was as much concerned about the shots as I was about the water because I couldn't swim. We did make it across and I caught up with the members of my platoon where they were holed up in the basement of a building.

It was the next day that I fired a German Panzerfaust. This device is a form of anti-tank weapon much like the bazooka of our Army. We found several cases in the basement of the building and from the graphic instructions shown on the weapon, I felt I could fire it. So I went outside with one of the weapons and after removing the safety wire I put it on my shoulder and pointed it at the side of the building. I pressed down on the trigger and WHOOOM! the building wall had a big hole in it.

The lieutenant was in the basement of the building and he thought that we were under direct attack. When he found out what had occurred, he asked us not to do things like discharging Panzerfausts at the building he was in, only he said it in more explicit terms. Eventually we were able to capture the city after another week of fighting and I had one more encounter with a Panzerfaust as we continued our advance into southern Germany.

I did recover a Panzerfaust with a string attached, which had been set up by a road to enable it to be remotely fired. I reinserted a safety pin and took the weapon along to see if I would get another chance to fire it. I did not get such a chance.

Cannon Fire

During the occupation period in Germany after the fighting had ceased, some of the fellows had acquired a small salute cannon. I don't know it's exact origin.

We decided to see if it could be fired. In the railway yards in the village were some cars with powder bags normally used for artillery firings. We took one such bag and split it open to obtain some of the powder as we certainly weren't going to jam the whole bag down the cannon. Besides it wouldn't fit. As I recall we used a shotgun shell minus the shot to ignite the powder.

All was ready and action was about to begin. We got more action than we could have ever thought about. The cannon was fired. The flash and sound more than met our expectations. We didn't know if it would even fire, but it certainly did.

I must explain that our platoon was living in a string of houses on the same street, a number of men to each house. The company commander was living in the house next door to the one where we had prepared the cannon for firing. We were told that the company commander dived under a desk as the cannon went off, presumably thinking that we were under attack.

Under these circumstances I think you can see that we only got to fire the cannon one time. It was an adventure to remember.

There are some pictures of the cannon surrounded by those of us who joined the artillery for one final shot of the war.