

# An Unforgettable Tank Ride

by H. Foster Mitchem, 397-C

We had captured a barn and I gave some cigarettes to three wounded German soldiers sitting inside. About then we were told our platoon, with tank support, was going to move out and advance on a small town farther up the road. The third squad would ride the tank and the first and second squads would walk in the dried-out drainage ditches on each side of the tank. Now I was seated comfortably with the others from my squad as the tank moved forward on the country road.

Suddenly artillery fire came in. We quickly jumped off and the tank went into reverse and we made our way back to the barn.

At the barn (now a command post), they discovered that our 397th Regiment had gotten ahead of the other regiments and the 398th Regiment had been firing on us as they thought we were Germans. Once this was straightened out via radio, we were ordered to remount the tank. I spoke to the platoon leader to request that I walk since I had recently come from the hospital after a leg operation and jumping off the tank bothered me. He told me to fall in behind the first squad.

Moving forward, the lead rifleman swung his rifle to the left. He yelled, "They're behind the woodpile."

Almost immediately there was a tremendous explosion. The German soldier had hit the tank with a rocket using his *panzerfaust*. The big gun at the front of the tank fell toward the ground. There was a lot of confusion. I thought I wouldn't see any tankers but glancing to my left I saw a tanker without a helmet or a side arm crawling toward me as fast as he could. Somehow he got out through the escape hatch. We made it back to the barn. One of our fellows was missing.

The next day, we moved forward again and came to the tank. Herbie Coe, who was riding where I had been sitting, was lying dead beside the tank. I thought he had been killed by the concussion (we all had ringing ears and I now wear two hearing aids). Later, I discovered that he had received a Silver Star for his actions that day. He had helped a tanker get out of the burning tank and was carrying him back when he was hit by an enemy machine gun. We moved around his body and continued on. Fifty years later I was privileged to go on a trip sponsored by our divisional association that retraced our steps during WWII. My wife took a picture of me saluting at Herb's graveside in France.

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