

The Last Battle, Maybe

by Lee Reese, 398-A

Lee Reese sent two items for our Newsletter which have not yet appeared in the Newsletter. This is his penultimate offering and it sparkles with his irreverent wit.

The previous weeks of relative quiet and inactivity had most of us thinking of winding this thing up and getting home. This feeling was increased as we moved from little town to little town on trucks. We crossed the Neckar River by footbridge without incident and moved to Obergriesheim, the Battalion objective, which we captured on April 3:

The tanks went down the main drag, with infantrymen on both sides, guns at the ready. The two machine gunners of the Fourth Platoon were behind one of the tanks, ready to cover the flanks if resistance was met. Remembering the movies I had seen about capturing towns, and wanting to put on a show for any cameras that might be clicking for Metronome News back in the States, I attached the shoulder piece to the machine gun, loaded the belt and draped it (the belt, not the gun) around my neck. I wanted to present the picture of the brave liberator when the beautiful girls came out to drape us with flowers, as they always did in the newsreels. It didn't work out that way, of course. The whole thing weighed about as much as I did, and I probably couldn't have lifted the gun to shoot the guy next to me, much less someone in a house on the street. Also, if I had managed to fire it, the string of sharp-nosed bullets in the belt around my neck would probably have cut my head off.

After a few hundred yards of this, I was happy when the sergeant yelled for us to cover the flank. Action at last! I jumped in a ditch, swung the gun into position, reloaded the belt and began to deliver short bursts of withering fire toward a building on the hill above us. There was no response from the enemy, so I concluded that I had either killed every German in town or there were never any there to begin with.

One incident that day illustrates our state of mind under those conditions. The short battle for the town had left some fires, and the local fire department had stretched hoses to fight them. The other gunner in our platoon took out his .45 and without expression or comment blew several holes in the hose. No one objected. We didn't like the Germans very much, and we still hadn't learned about Buchenwald or Auschwitz.

After we had secured the town, we took up positions on the side of a hill overlooking a road, presumably to cover the flanks of advancing armor. We didn't bother to dig in because the natural terrain gave plenty of horizontal protection. So we didn't count on the two German jet planes. We may have been the first and maybe the last Americans to see jets, because they were still more or less experimental. There were only a very few, and they could stay in the air only about ten minutes, but that was plenty. They flew just over the road and whizzed past us like nothing we had ever seen. An anti-aircraft flak wagon—a half track with four 40mm cannon—started firing on the jets when they came into sight. But their shells kept bursting about a mile behind the jets because their sights weren't calibrated for such speed. Even though there was little chance that we could be hit by anything, we got the feeling that we were in the center of a giant bullseye. There is absolutely no defense against strafing—you can't dig deep enough—but we tried anyway.

The next day, we watched P-47's dive bombing a German convoy—we saw a full size locomotive on its side at least a dozen yards from the track—and literally miles of dead horses and mules and supply wagons and trucks destroyed by strafing from our planes. All of the German activity was moving Southeast, toward Bavaria, rumored to be Hitler's impregnable fortress that would hold us off for the rest of the Third Reich's 1,000 years Hitler had promised. None of this equipment or supplies made it there, and neither did Hitler.

We were beginning to feel better. We were beating the Krauts. The only Germans we had seen for days were either old men or very young boys. One boy of maybe twelve was captured manning a machine gun

to protect a bridge and apparently didn't know how to work the thing. So we began to regain our optimism. We could see the end in sight.

On April 8, 1945 our hopes of a quick victory were dashed. We had moved across the Jagst River through Untergriesheim, trying to go around the West side of what we later found to be Hill No. 215.8, when without warning the Company was pinned down on the forward slope of that hill by murderous small arms, mortar and artillery fire. The German lines appeared to be over 200 yards away in a line of trees so there weren't any targets for my gun. We imagined that we were in their full view, and I remember trying to dig a foxhole while on my stomach, and cursing my big buttons that kept me from getting lower. Even those on the other side of the crest of the hill weren't safe from the mortars and artillery.

We thought we were saved when the TD's (tank destroyers, tracked, lightly armored vehicles about the size of a tank, carrying an anti-tank cannon) appeared over the crest of the hill behind us. They fired a few rounds at some gun emplacements and proceeded to scoot. A TD could scoot at 60 mph in reverse, and one did so directly over the foxhole of one of the GI's, who survived and threatened to take them out himself if they came back. Our only effective offensive weapons were our 105mm Battalion artillery, our 60mm mortars and the company sniper, whose Springfield "03" rifle accounted for several Germans at maybe 300 yards. Our planes were busy elsewhere, helping Companies B and C in their fight for Odheim.

This five-day battle had gained 200 yards, and cost our side 38 killed, 42 wounded, five light tanks, one medium tank, and one tank destroyer and one of our planes. We lost some good friends in that battle, including T/Sgt. Frank Bujnowski, who had just received a field commission. Later, we learned that we had been pinned down by an entire SS regiment!

By April 11, the Germans had resumed their retreat, presumably heading toward Bavaria. But this turned out to be Company A's last battle, and the last of organized German resistance in the area.

The next nine days proved that disorganized resistance can be pretty dangerous. We were subjected to "screaming meemies," (a device that looked something like an overblown Gatling gun, with rocket tubes instead of barrels. For some reason it made a screaming sound when they started firing the rockets) and some sniper fire, but no more fire fights. We captured a turkey who could very well have been an SS man in disguise, so to be on the safe side we shot and ate him. We also liberated some eggs, and someone found a pan and some grease and fried them. I seem to remember I ate eight eggs that day, right out of the frying pan, and it was the most delicious meal I had in Europe, maybe because of no real eggs for six months and maybe because it was about as good as European food got in those days.

On the 23rd, we were in a relaxed enough position for me to be aware of feeling kindly of poorly. When it didn't get better the next day, and they told me my eyes were yellow, I reported to the aid station. There, the orderly took a urine sample, looked at it and said "you lucky bastard, you're going ZI."

(I found out later that a lot of our guys got hepatitis because of some tainted needles they used for the yellow fever shots we got back in the States. It was officially classified as a serious disease warranting transfer to the "Zone of the Interior," a euphemism for home. I wondered also if the guys who had been captured had gotten it. If so, their ordeal would have been a lot worse.)

I went back and got my stuff, which included my war souvenirs, said goodbye to my new buddies, gave away my beautiful Remington-Rand .45, rode a jeep to a pasture they were using for an airfield and watched a DC-3 land with a load of gasoline for Patton's tanks.

We boarded the plane after they had finished unloading the 5-gallon jerricans. It had benches down the sides that would hold maybe forty or fifty people, and reeked of raw gasoline. When we had all boarded, the pilot got aboard smoking a cigarette and not being too careful where the ashes or sparks fell. Although everyone smoked and had cigarettes, none of us lit up on the trip. I remember thinking that this would be one HELL of a way to die, but they started the engines and flew us to England without incident.