

Two Incidents in the Battle for Heilbronn

by H. Foster Mitchem, 397-C

1. I found myself assisting a couple of riflemen from my squad in the search of a factory building. Glancing to my left, I noticed a German Soldier lying on his back. His bed consisted of a few planks supported about four feet off the ground. With my rifle at the ready, I worked my way over for a closer look. Here was a pale looking blonde lad about nineteen years of age. The same age as I was, at the time. His eyes were wide open staring up at the ceiling. Dust had settled onto them. His pallor was obviously from loss of blood. His tunic was open revealing a bandage over a severe shoulder wound. His head was supported by an improvised pillow made from a gray German Army blanket which had been wrapped around a "Potato Masher". The Potato Masher was the German hand grenade. At one end there was a can of explosive affixed to a handle about a foot long. Held by the handle, it could be accurately thrown a great distance. Thinking the body might be booby trapped, I moved away to continue the search.

2. Movement was noted in a residential building within the edge of the city. I was selected to serve as first scout of my squad and was sent forward to gain entry into the building. Enemy snipers were active in the area, firing from high points within the city such as a church steeple. I felt quite wary and I kept zig-zagging using evasive movements and ducking behind every pile of rubble possible. Arriving at the entrance, I found the door locked. I quickly raised the butt of my rifle to smash the window. Glass scattered all over.

Reaching in, I managed to unlock and to gain entrance. I motioned to the rest of the squad to join me in searching the home. Suddenly two old Germans came up out of the cellar. Seeing the broken glass, the old lady got a broom and dust pan to clean it up. I felt a little guilty as I watched her.

Fifty years later I was with a group of WW2 veterans from the 100th division. We were retracing the battle fields where we had fought. We were now in Stuttgart where the division headquarters had been during the Army of Occupation. The mayor or Bürgermeister greeted us. He gave each of us two books and a bottle of wine. One book told of the characteristics of the German people. A cartoon in the book showed an old lady sweeping up debris from her bombed out house. The house had just been bombed.

Above, thru the open roof that had been blown off, you could see the departing planes. The caption read "Imposing Order Out Of Chaos." As I looked at the cartoon I thought immediately about a poor old German House Frau sweeping up the mess of glass I had created in Heilbronn.

An aside to the story: The mayor or Bürgermeister turned out to be the son of Field Marshal Rommel the great German General who was also known as the Desert Fox. The Bürgermeister, Manfred Rommel, was most gracious and introduced us to his friend, General George Patton's grandson who was attending college in Europe. It gave one a strange feeling to see two people, one whose father, and one whose grandfather were War time enemies, enjoying each other's company.