## AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

### 53. SONS OF BITCHE

The first light of dawn filters through the trees, casts shadows in the fog, and reveals the Third Battalion, advancing through the woods far to the right of the Freudenberg Farms. I carry the tripod of a light machine gun and watch the riflemen ahead of us, as they carefully walk around little wooden boxes; "schuh-mines," no longer hidden by snow. We follow just as carefully. Explosions from mines, artillery fire, and small arms roar and rattle through the woods to our left. The First and Second Battalions attacked there, and ran into 4,000 mines and a strong infantry defense. Three of our tanks are knocked out in this fight.

Far to our left front we hear screeching rockets, the "Nebelwerfers." We call them "Screaming Meemies." From a hilltop I see, perhaps a mile away, a battery of these rockets being launched: exhausts flaming and billowing smoke, a sound like the iron wheels of a streetcar turning a curve, and then scattered explosions in our lines to our left. These rockets are not accurate, but they lay down an intense barrage with a nerve-racking sound. We are relieved to find none in our area.

Riflemen see distant troops to our left front, and call a brief alarm. Just as we are about to open fire, the strangers are identified as our own.

We stop, regroup, start and stop again, and continue through the woods most of the day. As dark approaches, we dig slit trenches to form a rude defensive line for the night. At dawn we are off again; a brief jeep ride, and then we carry our guns up into a new range of hills. Our "light" machine guns seem heavier than ever (and the mountains are actually steeper here) - after the months of relative inactivity in the defensive positions - and before that, in the hospital.

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I have no hint of where we are, and expect to see the Citadel of Bitche any minute. But after all the talk of a town, I only see woods and hills.

From the edge of a woods we look down on the bare fields of a pleasant valley. Perhaps 200 yards away, three Germans in field gray uniforms are walking away from us. I hear a few rifle shots as I set up the light machine gun, take a hasty look down the barrel, and fire a few rounds.

The Germans take off their tunics and wave a white undershirt; we cease firing and they come back up the hill to be escorted to our rear by a couple of happy riflemen. (They get to go back too!)

The Germans are laughing; they had been left behind to blow up a bridge, but our firing interrupted them. One of the Germans points at my gun, and a riflemen translates; "The Americans do not shoot very well!" Nearby riflemen seem happy with the results; "We should be so lucky!" I join in their laughter; no doubt they are happy to be alive after such a close call.

These three Germans really were lucky. If I had been firing a water cooled gun, the line of sight along the barrel would have been quite accurate; but the barrel of the air-cooled gun sits well below the receiver, and I had, fortunately, fired over their heads, with no tracers to show the error.

We dig in on a bare hill top, and learn that we are on the German border. On a distant hill we see the Dragon's Teeth of the Siegfried Line.

An 88 mm shell whistles over our heads in a flat trajectory and bursts well behind us. We see the smoke and flash of a second round which again seems to pass a few feet over our heads. The Germans are shooting at trucks bringing artillery from the woods behind us. With binoculars, I see the long barrel of an 88 mm gun, pointed directly at me. It is mounted on a 4 wheel trailer.

This is the famous all purpose German 88, the same type of gun that hit me with its shrapnel last November. The 88 is used, with different types of shells, against infantry, tanks, or aircraft. I do not think my machine gun will reach that far; and we do not care to attract their attention, so we stay low in the hole.

Horses are brought up behind the gun as the firing stops. The Germans hitch up the horses, load their rigs and tow the gun out of sight, all in just a few moments. Our artillery rounds seek their range, but fall well behind them.

We have penetrated the Maginot Line and left behind us a fortress that was built by Louis the Fourteenth in 1661 to guard this fertile valley. This fortress stopped the Prussians in 1870, the Kaiser's troops in 1914, the Wehrmacht in 1941, and the 100th Division in December of 1944. Now, in March of 1945, we have captured this same fortress, the famous Citadel of Bitche.

And we earn a new nickname;

"The 100th Division Centurymen, Sons of Bitche."

## 54. DRIVE TO THE RHINE

Not far behind us there are flashes and thunders from batteries of the big 155 and 240 mm cannon; the "Long Toms." The noise is deafening and continuous; one shell after another, sometimes in volleys. Each blast is followed quickly by a whispering shell, slipping through the air over our heads, and then a distant explosion to our front. The Dragon's Teeth, tiny in the distance, are hidden by clouds of dust and smoke.

The shelling goes on - and on. It is uncomfortable for us; what can it be like for the Germans in those Siegfried forts? We dig and dig. Foxholes are enlarged into dugouts. We watch and listen for patrols and counterattacks. All night our rest is interrupted every few moments by explosions from big guns, shaking the ground and lighting the sky, not far behind us. Sometimes we hear shells whispering through the air overhead. A few moments later, the sky blazes over the Siegfried Line, miles to our front, followed by thundering roars, rolling back to us.

Shelling stops at midmorning, and a little airplane scouts the enemy positions. The olive drab single engine plane, about the size of a Piper Cub, is suddenly bracketed by shell bursts; flashes of fire and puffs of black smoke. The plane turns abruptly towards us, dives away from the enemy fire and zooms over our heads to safety behind our lines.

A few hours later the little plane returns to those same hostile positions. I wonder at the pilot's foolhardiness as he again dives away from antiaircraft shells and scampers back behind our lines at tree top level, rocking his wings at us.

Suddenly we hear the roar of fighter bombers and a P-47 dives out of the sun behind us and disappears behind the trees into the enemy positions; then pulls back up into sight, followed by a huge cloud of smoke and, seconds later, a distant blast. The leader is followed by another and another; each fighter bomber drops a bomb. We stand by our holes and watch - and cheer. Thunder from the P-47 Thunderbolts.

We still expect the worst. We know that the Maginot Line survived fearsome bombardments and the Siegfried Line is better built. The Germans have learned from six years of combat experience. They poured in slave labor and resources from half a dozen countries. When the call to move out comes, we mount the jeeps and trucks reluctantly; we expect to dismount and attack those forts somewhere nearby.

The convoy rolls through the woods on a good paved road and suddenly breaks out onto a plain of rubble and dust. The fields are covered with giant pieces of concrete. A thick layer of dust blankets everything. We see only dust and debris for a hundred yards on each side of us.

Our vehicles tilt and dip through the shell and bomb holes as we look in awe at pieces of concrete as big as houses, torn up and thrown about. To the right and left we see the dreaded Dragon's Teeth parading, untouched, into the distance, but we drive through a gap marked by total desolation and inches deep in tan- gray dust. We smell the fumes from explosives; our faces are plastered with the acrid dust.

As quickly as we enter this incredible scene, we leave it, riding into another woods and on to a German village that appears to be deserted. Each house has a white flag of some sort; bed sheet, towel, or a scrap of cloth hanging from a second story window or from a pole or doorway. We are being watched from behind curtained windows.

Our faces are coated with gray dust except where goggles leave a hint of white skin. Weapons are everywhere; we are dirty from living in foxholes; we must look menacing to an unarmed civilian population.

Walking a little way from my jeep, I feel a chill. I am only slightly reassured by the weight of the loaded pistol pressing the holster against my leg.

## 55. WATCH ON THE RHINE

Our C-ration lunch is interrupted by an order: "MOVE OUT! - ON THE DOUBLE! - HURRY!" We scramble into the vehicles and the convoy races through German villages and woods, past well tended fields. We drop away from the Vosges Mountains into the fertile Rhine Valley; race at dangerous speeds into the City of Ludwigshafen and stop abruptly at the edge of the Rhine River. Our objective, a large ferry boat, sits at the dock with only the superstructure and smokestacks sticking out of the water.

We wander to the water's edge, sit on the docks and study the opposite shore through binoculars. A few shells are fired from the opposite bank and we retire out of sight of the river, into the city.

For several days we move from one town to another. We sleep one night in a German Army barracks; the bunks are rough board frames with straw filled ticking for mattresses. A big red cross is painted on the roof. There are hot showers and clean clothes, some of which fit. And DDT.

Easter Sunday: I sit on the spare tire behind our jeep; feet braced on the back seat, and my hands clutch the twin handles of a loaded 50 caliber machine gun. We look for an air attack, and if it comes, I think I will not be free to seek cover. Almost swashbuckling, we tool through picture postcard villages and fertile fields.

The convoy slows. Ahead, the endless line of vehicles vanishes into a giant cloud of smoke. Four wheels driving and sliding, our jeep mounts the steel ramp leading up to a floating bridge; - wooden planks on floating pontoons.

The bridge sways under the weight of the vehicles; the Rhine River reflects the gray of the smoke and the river's current drags the pontoons from our right to left.

Disregarding the clawing stream and the flimsy bridge, we look for danger from an aircraft that we can hear, but not see above the smoke screen. A few tense minutes and then we roll down off the bridge ramp and climb up the East bank of the Rhine.

I whisper an Easter prayer of gratitude: "God help these poor people. And Thank You for protecting us on that flimsy bridge! - And would it be too much to ask for a little continued protection?"

For the moment, my prayer is answered; we spend a quiet day and a night guarding Corps Headquarters near Mannheim.

The quiet is uneasy; Hitler promises to fight to the last man.

## 56. SLAVES

Mannheim is the most damaged city that we have seen. Four and five stories above us, empty windows are backlit by the sky. A list of names guards each building front. The streets are empty except for piles of rubble and the smell of death. We leave Corps HQ reluctantly. Once more we are in pursuit of the German Army. Our convoy twists like a snake along the path, around the rubble and bomb craters.

Once again we dismount and search the woods, South, near the East shore of the Rhine. We stop when the Regiment links up with the French Army coming North from Strasbourg, and we spend a night in requisitioned farm houses.

A group of women visits our headquarters. Most of them are middle-aged, and they all wear "babushkas" (head scarves) and long dark skirts. Sgt. Roman of the mortar platoon translates: "They came to thank us for liberating them. These women were brought here from Romania to make uniforms for the Wehrmacht. They were prisoners in the factory and had enough food to keep them productive..." (unlike the starving concentration camp victims that we were soon to learn about).

The factory produced Wehrmacht uniforms during the war and was run by a German who maintained good productivity by making sure that his work force had enough to eat. They said they were not abused, just confined to the factory. Something like livestock, being cared for and fed by a smart farmer..

Sgt. Roman continues; "They are glad that we are Americans. They do NOT want to go home because the Russians will call them traitors and they will be killed." This seems strange, but appears plausible considering the horror stories that I heard from POW Haase, back in the hospital.

The mess sergeant gives them rations and they go back to their factory. Later in the evening, we hear the women singing melancholy Slavic melodies which bring to mind centuries of suffering by generations of serfs and slaves. I think of songs like "The Volga Boat Men."

Rejoining the drive, we scout on foot through the quiet woods and villages south of Mannheim.

## 57. THE SEARCH

We search forests, houses, barns, everywhere, looking for German troops, weapons, or armed civilians that might have been bypassed in the rapid advance. Once in a while something useful turns up. One patrol captures a Wehrmacht truck loaded with fresh eggs. They are a real treat after six months of powdered eggs. For two days, we have all the fresh eggs we can eat, cooked anyway we wanted them.

Ralph Reeves continues on the subject of "Looking for Loot:"

"I suppose, given the opportunity, it was everyone's pastime, the thing to do. In one farm house I found something good to eat, some preserves or jellies. Just as I was saying 'Boy! This is great!' this German housewife begins to cry. Damn, I couldn't take her food, so that was the end of that foray. In a swank apartment in Kaiserlautern (?), I found a lovely expensive looking pocket watch (of course we are looking for weapons and flags and copies of Mein Kampf, none of which were found). I was about to pocket the watch when the civilian said: 'I am a priest, and the watch is a gift from a relative in the United States.' And he showed me the inscription on the inside of the back. Damn, so much for another foray."

"I was a lousy looter. I did liberate a 12 gauge Browning shotgun and carried it around for a couple of weeks. It was a great comfort on guard duty at night. Finally I gave it to the mess sergeant, or the mail clerk to send home for me. Surprise, it arrived home and I got many a rabbit for the pot after the war with that shotgun. It arrived home with a bent barrel, but I got that fixed and finally sold it for a tidy sum when I was broke during college."

"In a wealthy apartment in Mannheim I found a nice box (about cigar box size) full of mint condition coins or medallions of some kind. Each was factory wrapped in tissue paper. I must have been the first to unwrap one. They were silver dollar size and gold in color, but I was too dumb to determine what they were and had them with me when I got wounded. No telling who got them or what they were."

"Somewhere in Germany my section was ensconced in a small village of farmers. We took over for several days and ran off the farmers. I don't know why we were there; there was no action of any kind, so I suppose we were to just hold the place. That was fine. I slept in a big bed. The cellar was full of hams, fresh eggs in water or some liquid, kraut, and a barrel of delicious hard cider. It was paradise."

"One day, liberated slave guys came and one of them told us about a cache of schnapps buried in a field nearby. He took several of us there; we dug and sure enough there were maybe five jugs, each about a gallon, all full of booze of some kind. It was lousy, green, ghastly tasting stuff, and we got drunk as skunks in minutes. We were sloppy, falling down, mush mouth near helpless drunk. As it turned out, this meadow of buried booze was also a landing strip for our little

artillery spotter planes and one of them landed."

"The pilot, an officer, walked to my drunken group, and said; 'I am going to fly back to the last field where I can gas up, but that field is supposed to be abandoned of people and there is no telling what may be going on there. I want one of you guys to ride shotgun with me in case something goes wrong!' I said to myself, 'Oh shit!' as he looked at me and said 'You'll do!' I couldn't believe my ears. Several guys blind drunk, all trying to look sober, and now me trying the hardest. I figured, 'Boy, if I ever get court martialled, this will be the occasion.' Somehow I managed to fight my way into a seat in that little flivver, and collapse. Off we go, and now I am not only drunk, but expecting to get sick. We finally got to his old field and gassed up (no one else was in sight) and returned to the starting point for me. I was one relieved guy when this pilot went on his way and I went on to my hangover."

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We ride across the Neckar River and follow the south shore to the East, deeper into Germany. We are almost the first American troops to enter Heidelberg where aluminum canteen cups make the champagne taste funny.

Picture postcard castles and the University of Heidelberg perch on the hills on the south side of the Neckar River. Spring is in the air; no one is shooting at us, and we hope for an end to this war. On the north side of the road, blown-out bridges across the Neckar remind us of the War.

Another stroke of luck! We guard an underground factory. My partner, a machinist, admires the rows of machine tools that line the miles of tunnels in the old salt mine. He puts aside a couple of precision micrometers. The railroad tracks appear to end at the edge of the hill, but they actually go deep into the mine. Four-star General Devers visits; we snap salutes and breathe easier when he and his entourage leave.

## 58. HEIDELBERG TO NANCY

The castles on the hills south of the Neckar River have survived for centuries. For them, this war is like a passing moment. I look up at these famous scenes; entranced with the peaceful, enduring beauty of these buildings. Behind me, at least one span of each bridge lies in the river.

Fortune smiles again; and I spend a night with Company M Headquarters. I greet my old tent mate Twomey, newly promoted from T-5 to sergeant.. Mess Sergeant Burns plays his guitar. Ashkin, Bowman, Engles and I join Burns in the garden behind the house. The air is mild with a promise of spring. A full moon illuminates our group. I admire these handsome fellows, so full of life and strength.

We sing of "Annie Laurie" and the "Rose of San Antone." - And we each think of a special girl, - thousands of miles away. Concrete telephone poles cast shadows in the moonlight and take me back to that last June night at home.

I draw a 3-day "R & R pass" to Nancy, France. About 2 a.m. the train to Nancy stops; we climb down and walk between rows of gallon cans filled with burning fuel; a scene from Dante's Inferno. I wonder if our control of the air is really good enough to guard this arrogant display of light. The fires light our way to a GI kitchen; powdered eggs and oatmeal; hot coffee and dry toast. Delicious!

Nancy is a welcome respite. No loaded weapon to carry; a shot of cognac with dinner served by waiters; white table cloths, real china plates and a formal silverware setting. My fork-spoon rides in my boot, unused for a few days.

We walk through the quiet streets, sample the beer and soups of the taverns. We read, and enjoy quiet moments reflecting on the joy of not being on the front. We sneer at the clean, pressed clothes of the rear echelon troops. They tell us that Patton makes his Third Army troops wear neckties on the front. He can not possibly get up to every foxhole to pursue such idiocy.

April 14: The French newspapers - and our own "Stars and Stripes" carry black bands and headline the death of President Roosevelt. Too soon, the R & R is over, and we take the train back to Germany. This time there is no stopping to eat.

The trip to Nancy gives me a new perspective on the massive operations which supply the Army. In the Italian mountains, pack mules help our Seventh Army, but jeeps are our pack mules, and "The Red Ball Express" brings supplies

from the ports. The prime mover of "The Red Ball" is the 2-1/2 ton 10 wheel truck, known as the "deuce and a half." From space, they must look like a long line of ants stretching from Le Havre, Marseilles, Cherbourg and Antwerp to mobile supply depots that follow the armies.