



L to R: Pfc Millard Strait, T/5 Dallas Schrock,
Sgt Fred Kuta, Cpl Donald Esrig.
Crew of Tank #7 "Bloody Yank", 36-B

My Personal Summary of Events At Rhineberg 5 March 1945
By "Fred Kuta" 

It was a cold rainy day and we had made a 30 mile forced tank march through several Army units and over a pontoon bridge to help assault the town. We were in an extended formation without the usual preparation at our Company Command.

Tank Commanders were given meager information regarding the strength of German troops in or near the town of Rhineberg, except that Corp intelligence considered the strength as minimal, with no German tanks or heavy anti-tank defense. We were told that the 35th Infantry Division of 12,000 men were unable to attack the city and were in retreat. Our battalion of 4 tank companies was assigned to pass through the infantry division and to assault the German defenses. One company of Sherman tanks was held in reserve and 3 companies of tanks assaulted on 3 different roads. Normally, when assaulting, infantry would follow closely behind tanks to prevent enemy forces from encircling our tanks after we had destroyed their defenses. This would prevent other enemy troops from replacing those who were killed and then attacking us from the sides and rear. We had no infantry to assist us. Tanks alone cannot hold a position.

Our B Company of 15 tanks, with limited radio communications, entered in line along the main south road. When the 1st platoon of 5 tanks were about 2 miles from town, all 5 were destroyed by 88mm anti-tank guns, German tanks hidden in a bordering woods and by soldiers with Panzerfaust. These were similar to American Bazookas, but were four times more powerful. These troops had been hiding in deep fox holes on both sides of the road, for miles. Four of the 5 tanks were in flames and all were blocking the front of our company column. Only Lt. Erickson's tank #6, in front of me, and my tank, "Bloody Yank" #7, were able to get off the right side of the road, drive over the enemy in the fox holes and by pass the column of 5 destroyed tanks of our 1st platoon.

Both Lt. Erickson and I were firing our own sub machine guns and dropping grenades at the enemy troops on the ground around us. Lt. Erickson was hit and dropped into his tank's turret. When he came up, he had no helmet and was bleeding from his head. He did continue on and when our tanks got back on the road, I passed his tank and the two of us assaulted the town. It was impossible for me to contact the tanks behind me by radio. There was so much chatter on the radio with so many people shouting on our broad band radio. The only command from Captain David Kelly, our company commander was, "Keep going, keep going". I signaled Sgt Stan Buckley, tank #8, behind me, to get off the road and move up with me. He moved too slowly and initially bogged down. I later learned that his tank barely made it to the edge of town and was knocked out.

Because of the 5 destroyed tanks of the 1st platoon blocking the road ahead of us, I could not fire our 75mm cannon, or coaxial 30 cal machine gun, to the front. Some of the 1st platoon tank men, who had escaped their tanks, were trying to find protection. Without being able to get out of my tank to stand on the rear tank deck, the large 50 cal machine gun on my turret was worthless. If I had stored many more grenades in my turret, they would have been very effective. I could only place 10 of these on top of the

tank radio by my knees. As busy as Esrig and Strait were in firing, no one was able to secure any more grenades from our limited supply to pass to me. This was the first time that we were in a position such as this, where grenades were needed so much. We generally did not carry many fragment grenades in tanks, but I am certain that this was discussed in later after-battle reviews.

My driver, T/5 Dal Schrock, and asst. driver/Bow machine gunner, Pfc Leonard Weber, in the lower front of my tank, had their hatches closed and could only see through their periscopes. I told Dal where to drive and for Weber to fire his machine gun along the side of the road but to watch for the 1st platoon tank crews. I turned the turret by my power control and directed my gunner Cpl Don Esrig to fire our 75mm cannon and 30 cal machine gun. I had my loader/radio operator, Pfc Millard Strait, keep loading HE(high explosives) shells as rapidly as possible. There was no reason to load AP(armor piercing) rounds, since we were not firing at German tanks, but at gun emplacements or troops.

I, as all tank commanders, had my top turret hatch wide open with my shoulders and head exposed. We did not wear our steel helmet, but wore a tank helmet with radio phones. All of my crew wore similar tank helmets with ear phones.

Since my tank crew were buttoned-up, with hatches closed, they could never see anything except what was visible through their periscope sights directly in front of them. They saw but limited action and probably this was just as well. They told me later that they would have been scared to inaction if they had seen what I was seeing. We talked about this later, after they told me about the extent of German fire power between Rhineberg and the Rhine River, when crossing the Rhine River as POW's.

Normally when going through a town with buildings containing enemy firing down from those buildings into our tank, I, as other tank commanders, closed the hatch of my turret and used a 360 degree battle periscope. When doing this you are unable to effectively observe and direct fire.

I tried to keep my head as low as possible. When we entered the town we drove over a small vehicle, our tank glanced off the side of a house and we sprayed gun fire as we circled a small plaza. We were alone and well behind the enemy line. I saw a clear road between buildings to the right and I directed Shrock to hold his right track so that we could go east. As we temporarily exited the town, I observed a heavy concentration of German artillery and ground troops. We fired at some and I directed Shrock to brake his left track and go back to the protection of some buildings and we drove north. Shrock, of course, was still buttoned-up and could not see well through his periscope. A shell hit the front of our tank and blew out his periscope. While I was engaged in directing fire and looking for a way out of town, Shrock, who could not see, drove into the side of a brick building. Our cannon punched through the wall of the building and stuck there. We were being surrounded by Germans and I was telling my crew to dismount. As I was standing in the turret with my head exposed, a shell hit the side of the turret, I saw a red and black flash and my head struck the edge of the turret. My mouth smashed the turret and a front

Tooth was broken at the gum line. A fragment of steel entered my cheek below my right eye.

This I did not learn until later, because the concussion and force of the shell blast against my head, knocked me out. My crew later told me that Shrock insisted that the Germans take me with them. The Germans threw me on the back deck of a tank. The tank fired a round into our "Bloody Yank" Sherman, and the German tank crew took us towards the Rhine River. There we were taken across the Rhine. Later we were placed in a box car and taken through Hannover. I regained consciousness on the train, but I was unable to hear until ten days later in a POW camp. I did not receive any treatment except later from a POW British aid man. He debrided the facial wound and covered it with a bandage. The broken tooth was infected and swollen. This remained until, following liberation when I was flown from Germany back to the 93rd Army General Hospital in Oxford, England and the tooth was extracted.

Years after the war was over, I learned that most of our B Company was destroyed on 5 March 1945 and my best friend, Sgt. Don Severine, a tank Commander in our 3rd Platoon, was killed. His tank was so completely destroyed by fire that they could not identify the individual crew members. This was not uncommon in tank fires and when internal ammunition exploded. All 5 of his crew were buried in a common grave at the American Cemetery at Margraten, Holland. Lt. Erickson was also killed and only his gunner, Cpl Beck survived, although he lost a leg that day.

Two other tank companies that assaulted Rhineberg did not fair any better. Of all the 50 tanks, only Lt. Erickson's got partway into town and our tank went from the south end to the north end of the town. Days later the town was taken and the initial intelligence reports were proven to be completely inaccurate. We would never have approached the town in single file, had we known the strength of the German forces. We were like sitting ducks. We should have assaulted the town abreast through the fields, with armored infantry assisting.

The book, "The Last 100 Days", by John Toland, pages 189 to 191, contains a record of the assault on Rhineberg. An extraction of the 36th Tank Battalion, "Bloody Rhineburg", refers to three tanks of B Company found the next day to have actually penetrated into town under heavy fire before being knocked out. Two were reportedly found north of the town and the 3rd in the center of town. Lt Erickson's, tank # 6, was in the center of town. Although my tank, #7, was all the way north of the town, I do not know whose the 3rd tank may have been. The Battle Action Report of 14 March 1945 does not identify a third tank

At the request of my wife, this recall is being written 61 years 9 months after the event. Not only can I recall minute details of this engagement, I can also feel the cold winter rain and the smells of burning cordite (gun powder) and the burning tanks.

Former Sgt Fred Kuta

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