

Stories by Albert Ervine, 49th Armored Infantry Battalion, Company A, Third Platoon

The stories of my experiences while serving in the 8th Armored Division are abstracted from memoirs put together for my daughter. There is some overlap and repetition, since I've included pieces written as a member of an on-line writing group and I haven't bothered to iron out the combination.

*I'm never called Albert in the stories, just Bill from my second name, William. Albert is for official purposes. I've tried to reconstruct various incidents--creative non-fiction, they call it-- since my memory isn't perfect after seventy years. It doesn't mean that I reworked the story itself, only that I smoothed it out by supplying details I really can't remember seventy years later. In some cases, the first story "**The Wrong Word**" for example, I can't remember the name of the leader of the training-aid group and have simply called him "Joe." In the story "**When Things Went Right**," I supplied the looks and remarks that Jurczyk exchanged when we realized that we were pinned down and that the platoon might very well leave without us. Otherwise, it's just what happened. If the tank hadn't given us covering fire, we would have been either left or dead. However, some sort of talk was needed to make the story read right. Fortunately, the German machine-gunner acted like I hoped he would. The same applies to the other pieces. I didn't fictionalize the events, though even if I had, who's to know...now?*

The Wrong Word

A week earlier, I was enjoying life in the Army Specialist Training Program at the University of Illinois. We lived in requisitioned fraternity houses, ate at the mess hall set up in the field house, and studied engineering in an accelerated program developed by the government. The curriculum was exacting, but I'd taken half of the courses at Auburn the previous year. Best of all, in 1944, we were far from the shooting war.

D-Day persuaded the Army that they needed cannon fodder today more than they needed engineers in a year or so. "Disgruntled" is too weak a word to describe our feelings, but the government doesn't worry about that.

They told us we were joining the Eighth Armored Division. A training organization, the Eighth had hived off cadre for the Twentieth Armored Division, the last the army planned. Once re-manned and trained, the Eighth, too, would be headed for Europe.

Now I stood, with two-hundred or so fellow exiles, beside the train that had just delivered us to Camp Polk, Louisiana. The sun blazed. Innumerable identical barracks baked in the sandy wasteland. We waited.

A dozen trucks arrived. The drivers called our names. We'd each taken Infantry basic training, so the 49 AIB on the bumper of mine must mean the 49 Armored Infantry Battalion. Dogfaces! We tossed in our barracks bags and boarded.

At battalion headquarters, a personnel officer interviewed us. Most went to the rifle platoons, but he assigned me to the training aids section of Headquarters Company. Good. They'd need lots of charts and training aids as they re-built the outfit. Maybe this wouldn't be too bad.

There were four of us. I had fancied myself a fair artist, but the corporal in charge was far my superior. He had an amazing mastery of shape and color. I wound up doing the "busy work," but kept an admiring eye on his productions as he churned them out effortlessly. One day we were taking a break.

"Joe," I said, "Your work's great, but it keeps reminding me of something. It's like wall paper." The next day I was in a rifle platoon. One of the guys looked me up.

"I should have warned you, Bill. Joe went through art school with honors, but his father made him work as a designer in his wallpaper factory. He's sensitive about it, and he feels like you outed him."

Note here: If we felt disgruntled at the turn of events, the next batch to arrive was made up of air cadets whose training was cut short through no fault of their own, just like ours. Then the last bunch, needed to bring the division up to strength, was mostly run-of-the-mill draftees.

What do you do in the Infantry? One guess:

Night March

We plod on, hour after hour. Moonlight lessens darkness, so we can keep to the road. The pack-straps in front of me swing right and left, keeping cadence. When they told me a man could doze while marching, I didn't believe them, but here I am, going in and out of sleep. Or is it sleep? Perhaps it's hypnosis. Perhaps...but the thought is swallowed up again in weariness and monotony.

Commotion ahead wakes me. Did someone fall, break the column? No, it was just that the road turned and the marchers didn't. The sergeants help them up and fit them back into line. We go on.

How long has it been? How long will this continue? Where is the bivouac--or is there one? Is the prospect of rest just the carrot held in front of the donkey to keep him moving?

"Take ten!" We turn toward the ditch and drop in place. The pack-straps bite, but we dare not loosen their grip. Packs ride high, or they beat you to death.

Death. It doesn't seem as grim as it once did. Perhaps we will be ambushed, have to fight, get killed. But no, this is training, not war. Stay awake; don't fantasize.

"Everybody up!" We struggle to get up, help one another. Here and there a man can't rise, but I did. Maybe I *will* make it. He'll have roadwork tomorrow, and probably KP, but I'm alert, rejuvenated. The march resumes, the pack-straps swing, and again I doze as I plod.

Not much in the training routine that would interest you, but here's one minor adventure:

Thinking Doesn't Pay

A song from back in the '40s says, "The coffee in the Army, they say is mighty fine." It lies. But if not fine, Army coffee was at least versatile.

We always had to scrub our mess kits, sometimes with sand as well as Brillo pads, if we didn't want to suffer more internal distress than usual, but our canteen cups were self-cleaning. My scientifically trained mind took note of this. Like Miniver Cheevey, I thought, and thought, and thought about it.

Thinking, in the Army, is the prerogative of officers and top sergeants, and they don't hesitate to tell you so. Privates First Class should never risk it.

The draft was omnivorous and indiscriminate. It ate whoever it caught without tasting or chewing, and spit out very few. One result was that every company had a few untrainables—"yardbirds"--in Army parlance. When most of us were on maneuvers in the field, they did odd jobs or cleaned the barracks latrines. We were to keep the sleeping quarters clean, but one of the yard-birds was our barracks "latrine orderly."

Mac was amiable enough, but I suspect he couldn't even write his name, and he was still having trouble adjusting to wearing shoes every day. Cleaning the showers and toilets was bad enough, but the washbasins were the bane of his existence. They got filthy quickly, and the filth from Louisiana maneuvers was tenacious. He tried hard, but they seldom passed inspection.

One day I said, "Mac, you've seen how clean a canteen cup is after you've had coffee in it."

"Yup."

"You know, I'll bet it would work on these washbasins." He thought that over.

"Yup, I bet it would."

The next day, after breakfast, he got a big pitcher of left-over coffee from the mess hall. It worked. Pretty soon he was getting two pitchers a day. The mess sergeant grew suspicious.

"What do you want all that coffee for, Mac? You can't possibly be drinking it." Mac told him.

"Who the hell said to do that?" Mac told him.

Our mess sergeant was proud of his coffee for some reason. From then on, whenever I caught KP, I was the designated pot-scrubber.

Did you know that the medical journals have reported terminal cases of "dishpan hands?" I must have had many close brushes with death before we even left the States.

Mac went back to cleaning the washbasins with elbow-grease.

I eventually made my peace with the sergeant and his coffee, but in Germany I learned that any "Hausfrau" could outclass Army coffee, using only the blend of grain and acorns the Nazi's rationed out.

But that's another story, one I never shared with our mess sergeant. Besides, "ersatz" coffee was a lousy cleaning agent.

A Moving Experience

For once, we of the Eighth Armored Division wished that training would continue, twenty mile hikes and all. The division had done its job and trained cadre for several of the armored divisions already overseas. Now it was our turn.

Brought up to strength with an infusion of draftees and disgruntled leftovers from abandoned programs, the Eighth had officially achieved "combat readiness." We weren't so sure, but General Devine, our new commander, was definitely readying us for deployment. We checked equipment, reported deficiencies, and prepared vehicles for the voyage to Europe, our sure destination; armored divisions weren't usable in the islands.

Things didn't look too bad in Europe near the end of 1944. The Allies had the Germans pinned back against their boasted Siegfried Line and were getting ready for the drive to the Rhine. The Eighth should be mostly needed for the mop-up. Perhaps we'd also be needed for Japan, but we'd worry about that when it happened.

Censorship began. The appointed officers read the most intimate details of our letters. Some of us baited them--and had our mail returned to us, shredded and unsent. Finally, all personal mail shut down. Tanks and halftracks, identifications masked, were loaded onto flatcars. We were issued field rations and marched to the railroad spur. We heaved our duffle-bags into the baggage cars as we passed, and climbed into musty day-coaches long overdue for retirement.

We waited...and waited. Seen through dusty windows, Camp Polk had never looked so hospitable. The final roll call showed a few men missing and unaccounted for. We fervently hoped they'd get caught.

The train started, stopped, and started again. This time it kept going. The day passed, followed by night and yet another day. Dice enriched some, impoverished others. Poker games flourished. Some men tried to sleep. Few seemed in a mood to talk. Not all would come back.

We arrived at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, in the middle of the second night. Sergeants shouted us awake and we waited

again. Finally, we de-boarded, formed up, and waited some more. At last someone showed up who knew where we were supposed to go and led us to our barracks. It was early November and cold, but most of us flopped on our bunks without even undressing.

Next morning the sergeants restored some sort of order and routine set in. Most of the AWOLs arrived, escorted by a brace of MPs, and the officers assigned them to various unpleasant tasks as a reward. Ladies from the Red Cross arrived and gave each of us an olive-green ditty bag with shaving equipment and other oddments. I still have mine. It's faded and ragged, but I use it when I travel. Why? I don't know; I just do. We've been together for nearly seventy years, so why not.

A couple of days later, with complete secrecy from everyone excepting the Germans, we went by truck to the docks and trudged up the gangplank. Once aboard, we found where we would bunk, but there were no bunks, just rolled canvas and hooks on stanchions. Hammocks! The same area would serve for sleeping, eating and whatever else was needed, for the RMS Samaria was a British ship. Once a passenger liner, she had been stripped of all but the essentials and modified her to carry a maximum number of troops. No trace of her former glory remained. We soon learned that we would be showering in cold sea water. Even worse, we would be dining on traditional British cuisine. Camp Polk's mess-halls fairly glowed in our memories.

We got more or less used to the hammocks, and there were fewer broken bones than expected. Trying to turn over in bed could be disastrous, even when it seemed possible.

We traveled as part of a convoy that stretched further than we could see. There were other troop ships, but too far away for us to read their names. Aldis lamps flashed signals, for we were under radio silence. Destroyers and corvettes must have been patrolling the borders, but we never spotted them, nor did we hear any explosions from depth charges. We also had a "jeep" aircraft carrier, deck packed with fighter planes. Some of the men expressed relief when they saw it, assuming it meant we had air support. We didn't. The planes, Corsairs with their wingtips squared off to fit between decks on British carriers, were just cargo. As I told a buddy, they couldn't have gotten a bumble bee off that deck without a catapult.

Ten days later we landed at Southampton in England and boarded a dinky looking train. Someone said we were going to Tidworth Barracks. Barracks! Our morale rose. We should have known better.

We arrived--in the rain, of course--at a seemingly endless array of six-man pyramidal tents dotted here and there with larger tents for company and battalion headquarters, for mess tents, and for latrines. The last named proved quite inadequate, but that's another story.

Hopes shattered, we moved in, two tents to a squad. We slept on canvas camp cots, with a toy-sized potbellied coal-stove for heat. Coal was strictly rationed. Rain that got by the grommet at the peak of the tent trickled down the stovepipe and flashed into steam on the hot stovetop.

After a few days of "busy work" to keep up morale, our vehicles arrived and we really got cracking. Our next stop was France, to make final preparation for the spring offensive.

Then the Germans re-wrote the script. They launched the "Battle of the Bulge" on December 16, splitting the Allied armies in two and driving for our main supply port at Antwerp. Our activity speeded up drastically. On January 2 we boarded the Polish motor-ship Sobieski in Southampton and debarked the following day in the battered French port of Le Havre. We were committed.

We were at Tidworth Barracks for most of two months. The hills north of the camp had been part of Britain's last-ditch defense when invasion seemed certain. The emplacements, dug into the chalk hills, were easily seen when we were there. I climbed up to them. The field of fire was excellent, but something was missing; there was no way of retreat. Their soldiers expected to die fighting.

Just over the hills to the east was an RAF airfield, whose pilots delighted in mock-strafting our encampment in their then-new Hawker Typhoons, whipping over our hill and down the slope a hundred feet above the ground. Much more convincing than Reveille.

Here are a couple of incidents from those weeks.

Encounter with Awe

Late autumn, 1944. The weather was depressing, in the featureless way that English weather has mastered through long practice. We had been isolated in our encampment for weeks, not because we were quarantined but because there was really no place to go and very little to do if we got there. The folk back home complained about deprivation; the British would have traded with them, sight unseen. So would we. Life in six man pyramidal tents, with rain running down the stovepipes and sizzling on the tiny coal-stoves, was not cheerful.

As a weekly boost to morale, Headquarters allotted our company half a dozen weekend- passes to London, plus a dozen one-day jaunts to Salisbury. I managed to get one of the latter. All I knew about Salisbury was that it had a hamburger steak named after it, but at least it wasn't the camp.

On the truck, I learned that it also had a historic pub, the "Catherine Wheel." I didn't drink, nor was I interested in helping to console the temporarily bereaved local women, but I figured there must be something else to do there. An hour after we arrived, I wasn't so sure. The buildings were old, in a dilapidated sort of way, but after a while even "old" gets old. The shop windows were empty except for a few flyblown pre-war props. The rain stopped and a thin fog took over.

I checked my watch. Two hours before the truck was to leave. I resumed my wanderings. At the end of the main street there was a narrow lane. Where did it lead? I decided to find out.

Pushing through the wet bushes, I came through onto a wide, grassy field. On the far edge of vision, a cathedral grew out of the very ground and reached for heaven. For the first time in my life I knew awe. I don't know how long I stood before I began walking slowly toward it.

On a museum tour, I had seen one of Monet's paintings of Rouen Cathedral in the mist, and was half-afraid that, as in the painting, the details would vanish as I approached. They didn't, but as the stonework and carvings became more defined, the magic faded.

What has never faded--will never fade--is that first defining moment of awe. Nothing will ever look quite the same.

I also got a week-end pass to London and visited my father's sister Nellie--Helen Clement--her husband Jimmie Hall and their three sons. May tell of that later

Merry Christmas, Adolf

Nineteen forty-four. Cold and miserable. Reveille woke me, that joyous Christmas morning, in a six-man pyramidal tent--one of several hundred--in a staging camp twenty miles north of Salisbury. Traditional English sunshine drizzled out of a depressingly gray sky and pattered on the canvas. A few drops found their way around the grommet at the top of the tent, coursed down the stovepipe, and suicided on the stovetop.

As I struggled into my boots, our sergeant tried to coax more heat out of the little iron stove with the last shards of coal. It proved futile. I shrugged on my raincoat, pulled the hood over my head, and picked up the empty scuttle.

When I ducked out of the tent and started up the muddy company street I hoped First Sergeant "Scrooge" wasn't in

charge of doling out fuel that day. Vain hope, but to my surprise he almost filled the container. Had he suffered an epiphany? No, by the way he gritted out his "Merry Christmas," his generosity pained him.

Back at the tent with my hoard of black diamonds, I made up my cot, fell out for roll call, hurried back for my mess kit, and got in line to the kitchen tent.

Breakfast was fried cornmeal mush with Karo syrup, two slices of limp bacon, and a full canteen-cup of what the Army swore was coffee. Not a gourmet start, but it was Christmas day, and they promised us a turkey dinner with all the trimmings.

Thanksgiving Day had held similar promise, and we even invited the kids from the nearby village of Tidworth to celebrate with us. We shouldn't have. Somehow our turkeys had been thawed and re-frozen, putting the bacteria into suspended animation. They recovered during cooking, and the results showed up before suppertime. The latrines did double, overflowing duty, and the lines moved too slowly for many of us.

We recovered and were provided clean uniforms, which promptly got dirty as we drilled, hiked and maneuvered. Weekend passes to London helped a chosen few, but if it's true that a griping soldier is a happy soldier, we were ecstatic.

Now it was Christmas day--probably the last Christmas day for many of us since things were not going well at the front--and they assured us that the Thanksgiving fiasco would not be repeated. It was.

Once in France, we were trucked inland. In a battered chateau north of Rheims, I met Calvados and decided it missed its calling as a lighter fluid. I'm no expert on liquor, but I understood that fermented apple juice is "apple jack." Freeze it, and what will still pour off is Cognac. Distill that even further and you have Calvados. Must be 180 proof. It's served in very shallow-bowled stemware. It made excellent lighter-fluid for our Ronsons. I didn't smoke, but lighters do come in handy.

We didn't stop there other than to sleep; our goal was the nearly deserted town of Louvigny, near Metz, where we waited for a possible attack should the Germans attempt a pincer move--which they didn't-- and waited for our vehicles. The place had been fought over and was littered with frozen bodies: Germans and GI's of the Fifth Division with the red diamond insignia on their shoulders. Some of our men decided this was a perfect time to compare weapons. Using dead Germans for target practice, they found that the Mauser rifle and our Garand would each put a bullet through helmet and head, and would come out the other side, whereas the bullet from our carbine--issued in lieu of a pistol to mortar crews and machine-gunners-- stopped somewhere in the skull. Verdict: "No damn good." That proved true in combat, too.

Life in Louvigny was miserable. Few houses had intact roofs. When we managed to warm ours up a little, the ice in the attic melted and soaked us. We were glad when the German offensive was pinched off.

A Watch in the Night

January, 1945. Louvigny, France. Three weeks ago we were huddled and miserable in our six man tents in England. Those were the good old days. Now we're here, billeted in bombed out houses or standing outpost duty from little clusters of pup-tents scattered on the snowy waste surrounding the village. Within a short walk, the dead lie unburied, men of our Fifth division and their German foe, frozen to the ground in cold camaraderie. There's no time for them now, with the Battle of the Bulge still raging north of us in Belgium.

They'll keep. Would we, if Jerry attempted a pincer movement? Despite our lack of combat experience, we might do fairly well if we had our half-tracks, but we haven't seen them since we left England. As for our tanks and artillery, we

didn't see them even there.

Tonight I'm on outpost, roused from my sleeping bag--a pitiful thing stitched from blankets--just before midnight. I struggle into my "shoe-pacs"--a sort of calf-high galosh--whose entire purpose is to keep feet from freezing with an assist from an extra pair of socks and a felt innersole. Not fighting wear by any means; one couldn't march far in them. I pull on my knit gloves and my helmet, and take my rifle. My post is about a hundred yards from the tent. There are no landmarks, but I follow the tracks in the snow.

Now I'm alone. My fellow-sentries are out of sight in the grayish white that bonds the dirty snow to the overcast. There must be a moon somewhere, for the familiar row of fence-posts stands out, though indistinctly. Strange how, as I strain my eyes for danger, they seem to advance toward my position.

A multi-engine plane thrums slowly overhead. German. We synchronize the engines and adjust the propeller pitch. They do the opposite, and the engines drift in and out of phase with each other. Too slow for a fighter. A troop transport, then? Perhaps; we have heard rumors that they're dropping paratroopers behind our lines, but we haven't been told to watch for them.

The fence-posts advance, retreat in a sort of minuet. Two hours pass. The plane returns by another route--or perhaps doesn't.

My relief shows up. "All quiet," I say, and return to the misery of the pup-tent for another four hours.

This is a few weeks after we debarked at Le Havre. I heard that there was some fighting closer to Metz, but we saw nothing where I was.

The Pause that Distresses

Hitler's last gamble had failed. The front, in Belgium, was pretty much where it had been two months earlier. Our division, freshly arrived in France, had been left there to get organized and, if needed, to fight.

In mid-February, after several cold, boring weeks in the ruined French village of Louvigny, orders came to move north.

The Dutch farming village of Sibbe was peaceful; the fighting had bypassed it. Our platoon was billeted in a large, whitewashed stone barn well stocked with hay. The people were welcoming, and we were on our best behavior. In the barn, the hay was soft and made good insulation. We were content, but the Germans were only a few miles away. Too weak to attack, each night they still reminded us.

We knew the sounds of war...we thought. We'd crawled under live fire and knew the hard snap of the bullet that just misses. We'd fired all the infantry weapons. Yes, we knew.

We weren't prepared for "Screaming Mimi" or "Buzz Bombs."

"Screaming Mimi" was a multi-barreled rocket launcher. It was noisy. The sound would start off low and gradually rise to a shriek before the round passed overhead with a screech like a freight train descending a steep grade with its brakes on. The "Buzz Bomb," or V-1, was Hitler's first terror weapon against British cities when Germany held the Channel coast. The Germans still used them against our supply ports. Basically a winged, one-ton bomb, the V-1 was timed to shut off its engine and dive when it ought to have reached its target. Its pulse-jet engine drove it at 400 miles an hour, or half the speed of sound. It could do a lot of damage when it hit.

Approaching, the pulses of the engine bunched up, making it sound like a heavy bomber. Going away, the pulses spread out so it was more like a one-cylinder outboard motor. No problem, as long as it kept going.

One night, in the middle of a poker game, we heard the familiar roar approaching. Just overhead, it stopped. Cards flew. We hunkered down. A few burrowed into the hay. It seemed as though hours passed, though it was probably more like twenty seconds. We hardly dared breathe. Finally, there was a distant explosion.

Sergeant Curtis spoke. "I call a mis-deal."

We gathered the scattered cards and the game continued.

The Man Who Wasn't There

I was an infantryman in Europe during WW II. I may not have been a good one, but I tried. The Army had born soldiers. It also had "yard-birds," usually totally inept. I was definitely misclassified and fit nowhere.

We were the Eighth Armored Division. Our tanks led in breakthroughs, garnered headlines and suffered some of the more spectacular casualties. Our division artillery, mounted on tank chassis, provided longer range support. The infantry rode in armored half-tracks most of the time since our job was to protect the nearly-blind tanks from enemy infantrymen. They were on their own against the German tanks.

My company suffered heavy casualties in the war, but I never got a scratch. There was a good reason. Most of the time, I wasn't there. I should have been. I wanted to be. But I wasn't. Let me give an example.

Our division was part of the Army Group assigned to clear out the Germans west of the Rhine and to take a bridge across the river. Just before we jumped off, I found myself back at battalion headquarters, a "yard bird." My crime? I thought. It's axiomatic in the Army that thinking is reserved for commissioned officers and properly accredited noncoms. I was neither, so "Dickie"--the men's pet name for our platoon leader--got me bounced.

The attack was making good time. Our column had just entered the city of Rheinberg when all Hell busted loose. The lead tank company was wiped out by German 88's hidden in the woods. The infantry fought back from the half-tracks before dismounting and digging in. Our company lost over thirty dead and wounded in minutes. Dickie was wounded, though a friend told me later he had done much better than expected. The company commander abandoned his Peep and driver, crawled into an empty "track," and waited out the battle lying on the floor.

Meanwhile, I was standing by the Colonel's command car and listening to the battle reports. An anti-tank projectile ricocheted off a ridge beside us and tumbled to a stop nearby. I started over to look. It was a non-explosive, armor-piercing round, but the officers screamed so I came back.

Our fighter-bombers worked over the Germans in the woods and, shortly, a regiment of the 35th Infantry Division relieved our men. Casualties started arriving. I told the colonel, "The third platoon lost its mortar gunner. I'm going up." No one tried to stop me.

Dickie--Lt. Richard Blansett--was awarded a Bronze Star to go with his Purple Heart. He eventually came back and, after VE Day, was one of the handful sent back to the States with a three-month leave. I had no further contact with him. In a more enlightened time the company commander would have been shot for cowardice, but he was simply removed from command and, I heard, reassigned to Military Government. Captain Wade Carder, who formerly commanded our Service Company, replaced him and proved a fine soldier and an unflappable leader. We would have followed him anywhere. MacBrearty, the driver of the captain's Peep, happily survived the war without a scratch.

An ode to our platoon medic. After the fighting stopped, we did a lot of free-lance exploring together.

Nick

Stocky, of medium height, handsome in a Byronic sort of way but without the poet's roving eye, Nick was the closest approximation to a buddy that I had in the army. I word it that way because, while we were all comrades who would die

for one another, I was basically a loner who would rather hole up and read than go pub-crawling. Nick--Nicola Vernese, to give him his official name--was of much the same mind. Not that he was a reader, as far as I know, nor non-convivial, but he sent home every cent he didn't absolutely need. Nick was a married man and a father. I was not, but we hit it off.

I knew Nick from a distance when we were at Camp Polk, in Louisiana, but got really acquainted after our outfit was mauled at Rheinberg. Our orders were to take the bridge over the Rhine at Wesel, where the river bends west into Holland. The Germans were ordered to make sure we didn't. We didn't.

We, I should say, were the Forty-ninth Armored-Infantry Battalion, part of the Eighth Armored Division during World War Two.

It happened that my platoon leader decided he did not want me in his command, ever, and had sent me back to the "basics," the misfits and "yard-birds" that constituted our battalion reserves. As a result, when our company ran into the meat-grinder, I was standing by the colonel's jeep, listening to the field reports of the disaster. Three half-tracks had been knocked out. The light-armor company had only one tank left. The mortar squad of Company A's third platoon had lost several of its members. A half-track, with the machinegun blown off its ring-mount, limped in carrying casualties. Things looked bad. Then a regiment of the Thirty-fifth Infantry Division moved in and started rooting out the Germans. Their blue and white division patch was a beautiful sight.

The mortar squad of Company A's third platoon needed a gunner. I was a mortar gunner, and I was tired of being classed as a yard bird. Without really asking permission, I yelled to the colonel that I was going up--and went. He was too busy to say me nay.

Nick was our platoon medic, and the men were high in his praise. Fearless without being foolhardy, Nick had been everywhere the anguished cry, "Medic!" went up, and it had gone up often.

The Germans seemed under control, so the company survivors gradually re-grouped and moved forward into the town. I joined the platoon, the mortar squad. The mortar itself was in sad shape; it turned out that the fleeing tank had landed squarely on it after it vaulted an embankment. Never mind; I still knew how to use what was left.

I said the Germans seemed under control. Not quite. As we straggled in single file up the road into Rheinberg, past Sherman tanks lined up for cover along the stone buildings, there was a bang, a puff of smoke, and a cry of "Medic!" Nick took off at a run.

When we reached the spot, we found that a Sherman had taken an anti-tank round through the turret and through the tank-commander's lower left leg as he sat on the edge of the hatch. Nick was already busy as others lifted the lieutenant down. He had snugged a tourniquet on the leg, just below the knee, and was deftly amputating what was left with what appeared to be--and turned out to be--a straight razor.

We continued on, and finally took shelter in the basement of a ruined house. There was enough daylight coming down the stairwell to show shelves with loaves of German "swartzbrot"--nicknamed "bogie wheels"--and jars of preserves. We needed no invitation.

Just as we were digging in, Nick, having placed his charge on a medical jeep for evacuation to a field hospital, ambled down the stairs. Someone passed him a loaf. Razors worked on more than legs, so he was soon enjoying black-bread with strawberry preserves and chatting with his buddies as though nothing unusual had happened.

That, in essence was Nick. Unflappable. Professional. Gentle. Affable.

At the same time, he was a great companion on a jaunt when things got peaceful. Sometimes he and I, strictly unofficially, rambled in search of abandoned German weapons to blow up. We got quite good at it.

After VJ Day, we were all anxious to get home. Repatriation was on a "point" system, based on decorations and months of service. Nick fell short. We put him in for a Bronze Star. Headquarters rather snottily asked why he deserved it. We put together several pages of documentation. He was given a Silver Star instead.

I was on a furlough in England when he left, so I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to him. Somehow I didn't follow up.

Many years later, when I first got on the Internet, I looked up Nicola Vernese. There was one, a doctor, in his part of New Jersey. There was another in Daytona Beach. The first was a woman. Nick's daughter? Perhaps. And the one in Florida? Could that be Nick? Foolishly, I didn't check. Now it's too late.

I'd like to think that Nick put the GI Bill to good use. He'd have been a great doctor. He was a great man.

Back to the narrative. After the area of Germany this side of the Rhine was taken, we were pulled back to recoup and re-man. We'd incidentally liberated some of Holland by eliminating the occupiers, but the Dutch were destitute.

Shared Riches

A matronly middle-aged woman in a fur coat, she stands beside our mess truck clutching a metal soup pot. Other women, similarly laden, queue behind her as we pass through the chow line, holding out our mess kits for the cooks to fill. Our canteen cups steam fragrantly with the much maligned Army coffee. It's not haute cuisine, but it's hot food and a great improvement over K-Rations.

Together, we sit down and lean back against the wall of an apartment building to eat and watch. Survivors of a failed drive to capture a bridgehead across the Rhine, we are in Venlo, Holland to rest and re-group.

There are far fewer of us than there were ten days ago, so there is more than enough food. Garbage cans wait for the excess from our mess kits, and the cook-pots are far from empty when all are fed and portions taken to those on outpost duty. Now it's the kitchen crew's turn. They eat. The women wait.

One by one, we empty the residue of our meals into the waiting garbage cans, wash and sterilize our mess kits in hot, soapy water, rinse them well and let them air-dry. We then return to our activities--repairing equipment, cleaning weapons, sorting the belongings of fallen comrades.

The cooks' assistants stand by the pots, take up their ladles, and the queue begins to move. None of the women gets all she might have wanted, but all share liberally. For the first in line, theirs comes from the cook pots; for the last, from the garbage cans. Each silently returns home to share her bounty or to preserve it for leaner days to come. They will return again and again until we move on. The structures of Venlo stand intact, but the institutions that bound it into a living organism are shattered. Until they are restored, there will be buildings, but no city.

We are wounded, but the framework stands sure. The gaps in our organization will be filled with strangers. A few will be seasoned men returning to active duty. Most will be green kids just out of basic training, or equally green "ninety-day wonders" from the Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning. We will learn together. We will teach each other. We will bond.

And perhaps, someday, a few of us will pause to write down what we can still remember.

Sic Transit Gloria

Wesel lies on the eastern bank of the Rhine, just where the river bends left toward Holland and the North Sea. Never large by modern standards, the medieval city was a member of the Hanseatic League whose dumpy-looking "cogs" monopolized trade in northern Europe for centuries. Situated where the Lippe flows into the Rhine, Wesel grew rich and its burghers strove to outdo one another in housing elegance. Old guide-book illustrations show how magnificently they

succeeded.

The League gradually lost its preeminence, and Wesel's glory dimmed, but its location made the city a natural transshipment point between river traffic and the growing rail network. A strategic railroad bridge across the Rhine at Wesel tied northern Germany to the Low Countries.

1945

Von Rundstedt's Ardennes offensive toward Antwerp had failed, but it was close. In late February our division, the Eighth Armored, joined with others to invade Germany itself. Our orders were to take the bridge at Wesel and isolate as many Germans as possible on the wrong side of the Rhine. The Germans' orders were to stop us. They did. Most of their troops got across before they blew the bridge, but each side lost hundreds dead.

Farther south, at Remagen, the Army had captured and secured a Rhine bridge before the Germans could destroy it. With a pontoon bridge at Wesel, our troops could cross at both points and encircle the main German army. The enemy dug in at Wesel to block us. They failed. Heavy bombers, attacking day after day, obliterated the city and its defenders.

Our engineers built the bridge, two lanes wide, but at heavy cost. The Germans never gave up easily.

Our division had pulled back to re-equip and re-man, so we weren't the first across, but I vividly remember the bridge undulating under our half-track's weight. The crossing took perhaps ten minutes, and we arrived in Wesel, but where was the city? I could only see an expanse of bomb-craters interlaced with more bomb craters.

Part of a medieval church still stood, and my platoon bedded down there. In the darkness we heard the throbbing diesel and squeaking tracks of a heavy German tank as it inched by, skirting bomb craters. We were across the Rhine. Not all would re-cross the Atlantic.

Wesel was rebuilt in the 1950s, but much was lost. Would that I might have seen it before the war.

When Things Went Right

I don't remember just where we were in Germany that day--probably somewhere north of the Ruhr Pocket--but a couple of hours stay vividly with me.

The Ruhr was the industrial heart of Hitler's Reich. The 8th Armored Division was part of a drive to trap the German divisions defending it. So far, we were doing fine. We moved fast, and my platoon had no casualties for a week.

I say 'my' platoon, but I was just the gunner of our eight-man mortar squad, a lowly private first class. Three year of engineering school, and now this. Army classifications defy reason.

Normally, each squad in the armored infantry traveled in its own armored half-track, an ungainly vehicle that must have resulted from miscegenation in the motor pool. I appreciated our half-track more than most. When we had to walk, I carried the mortar--all 42 pounds of it.

A 60mm mortar was an unprepossessing piece of hardware that stood about three feet high and weighed forty-two pounds. The barrel was a piece of steel pipe pivoted on a base-plate that took the shock of firing. Adjusting screws on the two-legged front support controlled range and direction. A good gunner could hit a target a mile away, or one as near as a hundred yards.

We were supposed to carry the mortar in three sections, but I chose to lug it assembled and ready for action. We'd had

action enough, but never under conditions that would let me show what my baby could do. I felt frustrated.

We had holed up the previous night in large, stone "Gasthaus" with a massive barn behind it. They didn't tap me for guard duty, so I managed a fair night's rest in the Gasthaus basement. A lot of crates of empty beer-bottles lay along one wall, and they made a pretty good bed once I turned the bottles upside down.

We expected to move out after breakfast, but at dawn on that cold, foggy morning the order came to dig in. The half-tracks moved into position so the drivers could use their heavy machineguns. Two of the tanks with us covered the road in both directions. The third was behind the Gasthaus in case the attack came from the rear.

I was delighted. For the first time, I'd have a regulation mortar pit and set things up properly. Somehow the possibility of getting killed didn't occur to me.

While the riflemen dug their foxholes, I lined out a five-foot square a little to the right of the tank behind the Gasthaus. Jurczy, my assistant gunner, worked with me. The ground was soft, so in half an hour we were down about four feet.

I set up the mortar while Jurczy ran a telephone line from the pit to the barn. Since a mortar gunner seldom sees his target, he has to depend on an observer to direct his fire.

Sergeant Trotta, our squad leader, found a vent in the barn's hayloft that would give him a good view of the field when the fog cleared. At this point, visibility was less than a hundred yards. The whole German army could have been out there for all we knew, but since they hadn't done anything, we weren't much worried.

Jurczy--Hilliard Jurczykowski--came back, bringing our phone, an extra ammunition vest, and a couple of K-rations. Breakfast. I hooked up the phone and called Sergeant Trotta to make sure everything worked. The wires went over the edge of the pit directly behind my head. I piled dirt on them to keep them in place. For the first time since we landed in France, I was ready.

The fog lifted a bit. I bent down a bit to adjust the level on the mortar. There was a hard snap of bullets close overhead, the three or four rounds burst typical of German machineguns. So there really were Krauts out there. Probably dug in, but if Trotta was on the ball I could root them out.

I kept my head down and reached for the phone. When I picked it up, the bullet-cut wires dropped into the pit beside me. I looked at Jurczy and he looked at me. That guy out there had me in his sights, and if I hadn't bent down when I did.

We hunkered down a little further, trapped and useless. We needed an observer to guide us to the target, and the cut ends of the wire to the barn were out of reach. Neither of us dared expose himself to go after them.

"Well, at least we're safe here," I said.

Jurczy was a Chicago kid who seldom worried, but he looked worried this time. "Yeah, but what if they decide to move out. You plan to stay here?" I got the point.

The tank had loads of firepower, but they couldn't see any better than we. Inside all that armor they probably hadn't heard a thing. Well, maybe I could get them to help anyway.

I did a lot of hollering and finally got through to them, and their gunner reluctantly agreed to use his turret machinegun. Firing low to the ground, he swung it slowly from side to side.

Gambling that Jerry would have his head down, Jurczy and I heaved the mortar up onto the ground behind our pit and scrambled out. He grabbed the ammunition vests and telephone. I picked up the mortar and we headed for safety behind the barn.

Shortly after we got there, Lieutenant Fruehwirth yelled, "Mount up," and we ran for our half-track. Minutes later we were on the road again. My one opportunity to do things "by the book" had passed. I did get to use the mortar later, but

never in the way the manual said.

A month later the war was over except for mopping up, but I'm grateful for the one thing that went right that morning; the shots intended for me came close but missed.

Sometimes I think of the man who came within a fraction of a second of killing me. I hope he also survived.

The Peacemaker

We only lost one man that day.

We were just west of the Harz Mountains when our half-tracks stopped by the side of the road. The division had been moving almost continuously for three days, pushing to link up with the Russians. We were walking in our sleep when we dismounted that morning.

The German front line -- or what had been their front line -- was far behind us. The infantry had their troops tied down while our artillery and fighter-bombers pounded them. Our armored divisions -- long olive-drab snakes of steel -- went through the gaps in the line to cut the Reich into pieces others could mop up later. Organized resistance was sporadic, but some scattered units held out.

The worst for us were the kids trying to make a last-ditch stand. They endangered our supply lines and we had to deal with them. Mostly Hitler Youth, they were all fired up with the glory of serving the Fuhrer. They died, but they weren't soldiers. It was sickening to see the mangled bodies of boys the age of our kid brothers, dead for nothing.

An hour earlier, one of the reconnaissance patrols came under fire. Headquarters sent our armored infantry platoon to assess the threat and eliminate it. The enemy was dug in on the far side of a small wood and around a two-story stone farmhouse, covering a parallel road. When we came up behind them, they faced about and opened fire. We took cover.

I was a mortar gunner, but firing a mortar in the woods is suicidal. Since we had only carbines, the lieutenant sent our squad to secure the right flank. The rifle and machine-gun squads faced the enemy. I scraped out a slit trench behind a tree and settled in. Except for bullets singing overhead it was very peaceful.

Most of the Germans were in slit trenches. They had dug foxholes on our side of the trees, but redeployed quickly. Older reserves, I figured. Upstairs in the farmhouse, someone had a light machine-gun, the kind we called "burp guns". They fired much faster than ours, so that the bursts made a noise like "brrp, brrp". This one's bursts were shorter than usual. He may have been short on ammunition. He was a lousy shot.

The man who won the battle was one of our squad leaders. Jim was in his late thirties, older than most of us. He had been in the regular army long before Pearl Harbor. Jim was a born leader, but easily bored. Before he came to us he had been promoted to sergeant and busted to buck private at least three times. Now he was a sergeant again. His squad would have followed him anywhere. War, not peace, was his natural habitat.

Jim was an expert shot. He carried a bolt-action 1903 Springfield sniper's rifle with a telescopic sight. To this he had also fitted a grenade launcher. It was an odd combination. When the other squads discarded their anti-tank rifle grenades, knowing that they wouldn't raise a hickey on the hide of a tank, he kept his. He took a bag of them with him when we dismounted. He wanted to try something.

A good leader, Jim wanted victory at the lowest possible cost. If we fought this out, one on one, we would have casualties. He decided to break the Germans' morale.

Jim was like an Indian in blending with the scenery. A wiry little guy with sandy hair, he moved like a ghost. He took off his helmet, rubbed dirt in his hair and muddied himself up good. With a grenade in the launcher, he inspected the

enemy positions through his telescopic sight.

The dirt from the abandoned foxholes provided clues. He spotted the glint of a German helmet at the base of a tree. Aiming high to allow for the different trajectory, he fired. The grenade hit the helmet dead center and exploded.

An anti-tank projectile, such as a rifle grenade or a bazooka, travels slowly. The explosive in it has a pocket in front, shaped something like a headlight reflector. When it hits, the whole force of the explosion is focused at the point of impact. In theory, the concentrated energy overstresses the armor plate and sends a jet of steel bouncing around inside the tank.

A helmet offers no protection against that sort of thing. The German never knew what turned his head to mush and drove pieces of skull and helmet lengthwise through his body. Jim put a new grenade in the launcher, loaded another propellant blank and resumed scanning. He spotted another glint and repeated the process. The other Germans watched this happening, and after the fourth grenade they had seen enough. They abandoned their positions and headed back toward the farmhouse.

Joey was the newest member of Jim's squad. A baby-faced kid with his mother's picture pasted in the front of his Gideon New Testament, he was no more than nineteen. We had picked him up, fresh out of basic training, when the last replacements arrived a week earlier. To him, war was a great adventure. He had never been in action. Joey--not his name--was hunkered down behind a tree when the Germans pulled out. A German medic had been in their rear until we arrived and hadn't had time to run for it. He spent the whole time crouched in his hole between the lines. When the firing stopped, he sprang from cover and ran toward our side with his hands up.

"Kamerad!"

Joey jumped up and sprinted toward him, yelling to our men not to shoot. The German machine-gunner in the farmhouse scored his first hit of the day. As Joey went down, his buddies fired. A dozen rifle bullets sent the medic sprawling backwards to lie in the mud, one knee pointing upward.

That was it. A tank company, advancing on the other road, blew the farmhouse to pieces. Before we left, two of us went with Jim to bring in Joey. His helmet was still in place, chin strap fastened just like they mis-taught him in training. In the top, right in the center, was a three-hole cloverleaf. Imbedded in his left collarbone, with about two thirds of its length showing, was a single brass-cased bullet with the standard German four-grooved rifling. He was still warm. His death had been instantaneous, the best kind.

Jim looked down without expression, crossed himself, and took hold of Joey's right arm. I had his left and the other man his feet as we carried him to the Medic jeep. We strapped him on the stretcher and folded his arms across his chest. He looked completely at peace. Except for the grayish cast of his skin he might have been asleep. The driver was spreading a poncho over him when the call came to mount up.

I'd picked up his rifle in passing. It had never been fired.

I was just now looking over the company history. We put it together in Czechoslovakia to kill time while we were waiting for orders that might take us to the Pacific. It doesn't even mention the battle.

Graveyard Shift: Germany, April 1945

I check the time again, squinting to make sure I'm reading it right. Twenty-five minutes left on my watch where I'm babysitting a field radio. The others are asleep, mostly in the basement. I almost wish something would happen. I lean back against the thick stone wall of the house. Take inventory, Bill! Maybe that will help you stay awake. A high hedge parallels the farm-house, a few yards away. Beyond lies a wide grassy field and a small wood. It's useful space by day, but what of the night? Fanatics roam, men who don't believe they've lost. Crazy bunch, but...

A blast. Another. Panzerfausts! The tank at the far end of the hedge opens up with everything it has--cannon--machinegun--even the tank commander's "grease gun." No return fire, though, so it's not an all-out assault.

The racket goes on. The radio buzzes. I pick up the handset.

"PFC Ervine here." I press to receive.

"This is Major Brown. Go tell that tanker to cease firing."

"But I'm on guard duty, Sir. I can't...."

"I don't give a damn, soldier. Do it NOW!" The line goes dead.

Brown is second-in-command in my battalion, but he has no right to make me leave my post. On the other hand, he just gave me a direct order. No one comes up to see what happened, so I sigh, get up quietly, and ease out the front door. There's moonlight, but the other side of the hedge is in shadow. I cross over and start to edge along in the darkness. The tank is easy to spot by the gun flashes. The tank commander is standing half out of the turret. When he looks my way, I freeze. Move. Halt. I'm close now. When he looks away, I make a dive for the ground next to the tank track. He snaps back and sees me. I start yelling, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

"What do you want? You pretty nearly got killed."

"Major Brown sent me to tell you to cease fire."

Brown can't order him around, either, but he leans down into the tank and yells something. Things get quiet. I stand. Moonlight glints on his lieutenant's bars. I salute and leave.

Back at the house, I slip in, lock the door, and go back to my radio. All still sleep, but in fifteen minutes I'll get to wake my replacement.

Our platoon leader, Lt. Frauwirth, was killed by friendly artillery fire just outside Schloss Neuhaus. He was a fine officer. I was about a hundred yards away, having been sent with others to secure our flank. Again, I wasn't there when trouble struck. The next story involves his successor.

At Face Value

Our latest platoon leader, a freshly minted second lieutenant with carefully-polished gold bars, was an authority freak. His late predecessor had leavened discipline with common sense before an errant artillery shell deprived us of his leadership. We were unprepared for the change. Fortunately, the war was almost over, that late April in 1945. The regular German troops were surrendering in satisfactory numbers, but there was word of a last-ditch stand planned by fanatical Nazis for the alpine regions of Bavaria. That could be tough. Our outfit, Combat Command B of the Eighth Armored Division, was diverted into the Harz Mountains to help deal with the threat. The defenders weren't really determined to die for the Fatherland, so we suffered few casualties securing the cities and villages. That left the hamlets, the crossroads, and the woods--the endless woods. Who knew what might be hiding in the woods?

Our armored infantry platoon, about fifty men, was fairly comfortably billeted in a country hotel on a hillside, the 'Café und Pension Sans Souci'. The lieutenant took over the manager's office, where he reigned from a leather-upholstered swivel chair.

We kept pickets out to cover the approaches, and the Polish farm laborers in the crossroads settlement showed us where a few bedraggled German soldiers were hiding. After we shipped them back to the stockade, all was quiet, but some of our units had been attacked, so we stayed on alert. Our main job was to secure the nearby crossroads, so we

set up a road block. Each morning we were given the password for the day. The lieutenant was emphatic: "No one, and I mean NO one, is to get through without the password. If they don't know it, take them into custody. Some Krauts speak English, and they could use our uniforms. Don't trust your own judgment. Bring them to me!" He pounded on the walnut desk so hard he scrambled his solitaire cards. It really didn't make much difference. There was little traffic and we couldn't have stopped a German armored car with our rifles anyway. One late afternoon, a deuce-and-a-half army truck, buttoned up for the cold, came down the hill and skidded to a stop at the roadblock. After a short parlay, the corporal waved it through. The lieutenant gave him the usual "third degree" when he reported in. "How many vehicles?" "Three. A courier in a peep, a three-quarter-ton, and a supply truck."

"All passwords in order?"

"All but the truck. He didn't know the password, but I took his excuse at face value and let him pass." "You let him pass? You knew my orders!" He was practically livid. "Well, Sir, when he rolled down the curtain, leaned out and said, 'Boss, is you evah see a cullud Ge'man?' I thought we could take a chance."

Germany surrendered. We moved into Czechoslovakia.

Light in August

Czechoslovakia, 6 August 1945. Rokycany, a small city fifteen miles east of Plzen. On the second floor of a former Czech army barracks, that lazy Sunday afternoon, I lay half napping in my bunk. On the enclosed parade-ground of the barracks complex, our company mechanics were tinkering with a half-track that had limped in the day before. Outside of that, nothing was going on except for the routine changing of the guard. Germany had surrendered. We could afford to relax.

Eventually we would have to re-organize and train for the invasion of Japan, but we'd worry about that later. Just now the priorities were letter writing, poker, and rest...mostly rest. Even the omnipresent crap game had died from lack of enthusiasm.

Half a world away, things were similarly peaceful. The people, accustomed to waves of heavy bombers passing over en route to more promising targets, wondered idly why one solitary enemy aircraft, having reached a point high above the city, suddenly turned and headed away. A parachute blossomed. It was the last thing that many on the ground were to see.

Back in the barracks, someone had a "liberated" German radio tuned to Armed Forces Broadcasting. Glenn Miller's music was interrupted by a bulletin:

"The Air Force announced a few minutes ago that a nuclear bomb was exploded over the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The damage is believed to be extensive, but cannot be evaluated until the dust settles."

That was all. The music resumed.

I was only a PFC, but I had a reputation for having more information than most. Two guys came over to ask why the announcement and what it meant. I'd been an engineering student. I'd also read a lot of Science Fiction as a kid, so I felt confident.

"It means the war's over."

They shrugged incredulously and went to tell the others. I heard the laughter, and rolled over. Now that I knew I wasn't going to Japan, I could dare to dream again.

The Army basically ceased to exist as a fighting force. This would have been foolhardy in the extreme, but the Russians knew that Truman would use the bomb again if they moved against us. Stalin was both cautious and patient. Points were awarded for time in the service and for decorations. The ones with the highest points were sent home to be mustered out if they hadn't re-enlisted. As I said earlier, we got Nick a Silver Star --which he richly deserved--and with it enough points to go home. Part of the division was reorganized into constabulary units to police Germany, and some of us were transferred to other divisions for occupation duty. I wound up in Headquarters Company, 51st Armored Infantry Battalion of the 4th Armored Division. I was based mostly in Passau, and served as a writer and photographer for The Occupier, our unit newspaper. As my "points" rose and the number required decreased, I was transferred to the 102nd division for repatriation and discharge at Fort Bragg, NC.

I also wrote quite a bit of fiction that built on things that happened during the war but never happened quite this way. Here's an example. We were held up on a road while an advance party made some Volkssturm prisoners dig up mines they had laid under the direction of a die-hard SS trooper. We found him while checking the area. He was lying on his back, quite dead, with a bullet hole where one eye had been. We didn't know who killed him. Once the road was cleared, we went on. For the story, I promoted myself and brought in a bit of Germanic mythology. Here's how it turned out:

Karl

They stood at attention beside the mountain road, a dozen boys and old men in the ill-fitting uniforms of the Volkssturm, the "people's militia" for the last stand of the Reich. Across the road, their old rifles were neatly stacked beside a pile of anti-tank mines, panzerfausts and potato-masher grenades. As our half-track rounded the bend and slid to a stop, they locked their fingers on top of their heads. I swung my fifty caliber machine gun on its ring mount to cover them as the rest of the squad dismounted and spread out as skirmishers. The other four "tracks" behind us followed suit. If this was an ambush, we could make things interesting.

This part of Bavaria was supposed to be "werewolf" country, but these birds seemed pitifully eager to surrender. They always were, unless some fanatic fired up on Wagnerian heroics bullied them into fighting. I turned my fifty over to the driver and got out as Jake came up. Jake--tech sergeant Lichtenberg--had been acting platoon-leader since Lieutenant Johnson's "peep" hit a mine three days earlier. We hadn't even been able to find his dog tags, and there was nothing left of his quarter-ton but the rear bumperettes with their painted identification. Hopeless as these barrel-scrappings looked, it was men like them who laid that mine. My "track" was about a hundred yards behind the lieutenant when the explosion vaporized him, and I'll swear I saw one of his boots go into the trees.

Jake was a soldier's soldier. He was from Prague, but emigrated to the US around 1936 after serving his stint in the Czech army. His parents and most of his family were still in the old country when Hitler moved in. They were among the first rounded up by the Nazis. He never heard of them again. He joined the army the day after Pearl Harbor, and had been in Europe since shortly after D-Day. He was a man with a mission.

Jake looked at the awkward squad and the piled mines; then he signaled me to join him. I had studied German in school, but this bunch understood Jake's Yiddish just fine. Yes, they were all there were; they came from the village just down the road. Yes, the mines across the road were all they had; they showed us where they had buried them and dug them up again. No, none of them was even a non-com. Then who had organized this fiasco?

"Karl," they said. And where is Karl? One of them pointed up a path.

"There."

My squad fanned out to both sides as we started. A hundred paces brought us to a clearing and Karl. Unlike the

Volkssturm detachment, he wore the black parade uniform of a corporal in the crack SS "Deathshead" division. Why he was in this patch of the woods I'll never know; his outfit was on the Russian front. The Germans down on the road told us not to worry, and they told true. Karl lay on his back, at attention even in death, with one hand near his holstered pistol. His left eye gazed steadily up at the sky. Where his right eye had been was a bullet hole with dried blood turning black. Flies rose up as we approached. Beside him was a torn scrap of notepaper. Jake picked it up, glanced at it, and handed it to me. He could handle conversations, but written German threw him.

I don't remember the exact wording, but Karl wanted his mother and "Lise" to know, if he didn't make it, that he died for the Fuehrer. Then came a military address at some place called Mauthausen, "Heil Hitler" and the signature. When he heard "Mauthausen", Jake stiffened. He pulled out his lighter, snatched the letter from me and burned it. I didn't ask why, but he obviously wished he could have punched Karl's ticket for Valhalla personally.

Back on the road, the prisoners had been piling the weapons and explosives into a sink-hole to the left of the road. We couldn't leave that stuff lying around, and we couldn't take it with us. Jake sent two of them to pick up Karl and toss him on top of the pile. He made the prisoners add their uniforms to the collection, then let them head back to their village in their underwear. I rigged a demolition charge with a long lanyard so I could pull the igniter and set off the cache. We mounted up and hit the road again, the others leapfrogging my vehicle to get a head start. The delay had cost us about twenty minutes. I pulled the lanyard and we got out of there.

It was a magnificent explosion, with a cloud of dust and yellowish fumes spiraling up for hundreds of feet. Jake was satisfied; Karl's mother and Lise would never know his fate, and he had Karl's Luger in his duffel bag. I had to settle for this watch.

As the half-track picked up speed I looked back once more at the smoke from Karl's funeral pyre. For a moment--just a moment--it took the form of a woman on horseback with a warrior's body slung across her saddle-bow.
