

## 21.

# COMBAT IN GERMANY

MAASTRICHT, HOLLAND, September 29, 1944

WE DISEMBARKED FROM OUR TROOP TRAIN in Visé, Belgium, and were trucked into Maastricht, Holland. The brass seemed anxious to get me to the Aachen front, the first major battle on the Siegfried Line. Maastricht was our Corps base for the Aachen and Roer River drives. In our few days in Holland, the battalion was brought up to strength and we received a replacement to fill out our squad. He was from the New York town of Canajoharie. He reminded me of Tommy Wentworth—a bit taller but also of slight build, with adolescent pimples, and shy until he felt at ease with you. As wary as I was of letting someone get close to me, I couldn't help responding to his puppy-dog good nature. He took Wall Street's place as second ammo bearer. In moments of exultation, he would bellow out, "CANAJOHARIE!"—his personalized version of the paratrooper's "GERONIMO!" We called him "Can."

This border between Holland and Germany was coal-mining country—in the flat farmland, great piles of slag stood stark against the blue sky. The Germans had pulled back from the first German town across the border, which we promptly occupied. As we dug in our mortar at the eastern edge of the town, we stopped to watch in horror as a lieutenant led a rifle squad around the open face of one of the slag heaps—in full view of the enemy. It wasn't long before they were hit by 88mm tank fire. Great showers of gray slag were thrown into the air, along with the toylike bodies of men.

Company A had taken over most of the houses for shelter and were busy inventorying food stocks the Germans had left behind. In the back-

yard of our house, a 200-pound pig shared the space where we were to dig in and site our mortar.

The squealer obviously was in the way of our combat efficiency, so someone put a carbine bullet into its head. We hastily dragged it up into the attic (no sense disturbing neighboring squads). Having seen it done on the Cumberland Plateau, I volunteered to butcher it. Bayonets, I found out, are designed to stab, not to slice, and I soon understood what the verb “to butcher” really means. It was the first time any of us had blood on our bayonets. We literally tore that poor beast apart and laid the pieces out on a bedsheet. I wondered at the reaction of the returning German *Hausfrau* as she washed the blood from that sheet! Should she weep? Was it Fritz or Tommy blood?

The Germans had retreated to the next town, which proved to be better fortified. As the German soldiers retreated, the civilians waited out the battle deep down in a mine shaft converted into an air-raid shelter. The captain called me down to interpret for him. As I labored with my not-so-fluent German, I could hear the twang of a guitar deeper down the tunnel. It wasn't until I recognized the piece as a Spanish Loyalist song that my ears really stood erect, and I hurried to explain to these folks that they were obligated to leave the town for someplace in Holland until the front was pushed much farther back into Germany. They protested and they wept, but it was for their own safety, wasn't it? Finally, the captain lost his patience and told me to tell them to shut up and stop sniveling or we would “run them out through the f\*\*\*in' German minefields to join their f\*\*\*in' retreating relatives.” I said it, of course, in a much nicer fashion than he did—I was at a loss for such profanity in my German lexicon.

Freed from duty, I dashed off down the shaft to find the guitarist—who had gone through “Los Tres Insurgent Generales,” “Freiheit,” and was now on “The Peat Bog Soldiers”—songs from the Spanish Civil War and French concentration camps. It was a German coal miner who, in reply to my excited questions, said that he had learned them in Spain fighting in the anti-Fascist German Thälmann Brigade. (Some 5,000 Germans and Austrians fought in the International Brigade.) He had a long, lean face, a nose to match, and thin, bitter lips—the kind of face that needs time to grow on you. His was not a warm, spontaneous personality, but he seemed pleased to find someone interested in his life story.

We hadn't gotten very far when, behind me, I heard my name being called. He quickly drew me a map to indicate the house he had appropriated, and I dashed off.

That night, I cooked a slab of ham and went for an interesting visit. The ham made the right impression, but he had something to match—a washtub full of mashed sugar beets, which had been fermenting to feed a makeshift still. We sat on the floor before the still and took turns tossing back tiny glasses of raw moonshine as it dripped from the coils.

He was a coal miner, but not in this town—he was from another town on the border with Holland. Since some of their coal shafts opened into the Dutch mines, the German union miners would use them to smuggle political undesirables on the Nazi list out of Germany.

“One day,” he said, “they tell me, better get yourself out. I go into Holland, to Spain.”

I told him that I, too, had wanted to go to fight in Spain, but I'd been too young.

“Ach, your Lincoln Brigade, great casualties, many too intellectual for war.”

*Some Spanish Civil War notes.* When I met Fernando Saenz Leon, my Spanish ex-schoolmate, at the Black Mountain College reunion in 1995, we talked about the Civil War, and he sent me copies of notes and letters on his experiences. In 1939, the war lost, Fernando fled Spain and crossed over to France. He wrote:

In Munich, France and England lost the alliance of Czechoslovakia, which was the best armed nation in Europe after Germany; of Russia, which was left out of the Munich meeting; and of Republican Spain, with a fighting army of 600,000 men but without arms. In September 1939, they had to stand up to Germany and Italy alone.

Franco had not received any armament from Germany during the spring and summer of 1938 because the Germans were accumulating it on the border with Czechoslovakia. After Daladier and Chamberlain gave in to Hitler, Germany sent all this accumulated armament to Franco. With this armament, Franco

dislodged the Republicans from the Ebro [River] and had enough to run through Catalonia. From February 5th to 9th—when Franco's troops reached the border—300,000 Loyalists, mostly military personnel, crossed the border. The airplanes, tanks, artillery, machine guns and ammunition which Russia had been sending us since early summer through France, were piled up on the French side of the Pyrenees.

When the Loyalists were defeated, my coal miner, along with remainders of the International Brigades, also crossed the border. The French received them not as exiles but as criminals. Led off to poorly equipped concentration camps, the men had to survive on 1,600 calories per day. When the Germans combed the camps for forced-labor battalions, "I say, I am coal miner, and they send me here—full circle."

In the morning, after a heavy artillery barrage, we attacked across the beet fields. I had no idea whether I was sicker from my usual fear of combat or from my hangover. They were similar feelings. After months of close hedgerows and fortress Brest in-fighting, one would expect the great open vistas of the northern German plains would be a welcome relief. But it was flat, featureless terrain, with no place to hide. Our heavy artillery fire falling on the town kept the Germans down as we staggered across the field. We, however, were getting some fire from hidden tanks and from our German mortar counterparts. Our two rifle platoons disappeared into the edge of the town. As I moved across the field, I was totally absorbed in searching for any slight depression that would at least partially shelter me. I had just spotted a shell hole when I heard Sergeant Schwartz shout urgently: "Gunner's hit! Take the mortar, Willi. Set it up in this shell hole."

I grabbed the mortar where it had fallen and rolled with it into the pit. "Change helmets with Gunner!"

In the lining of Gunner's helmet was a table of firing ranges. The Sarge and Miner dragged Gunner off to the closest house, leaving me alone with Can and the mortar.

Hunkered down in the shell hole, I read the chart—for XXX yards, it called for elevating the mortar to 45 degrees. As I fumbled around trying to set the tube at 45 degrees, I called for Can to arm four shells.

In town, there was fierce fighting. The Germans had mounted a counterattack and we had run into new German tactics—they defended the perimeter lightly and kept their main force in town. Our hold on the town was very tenuous, and when someone yelled, “TIGER TANK!” it was wisely decided to pull back. In a panic, I fired off the four shells, hoping they were clearing the village and doing some good. A knot of German prisoners emerged from the house carrying a huge couch, on which lay our gunner. Typical overstuffed German furniture, I foolishly thought! Staggering across the uneven field with the great couch was our sergeant, wedging a fistful of rags tightly in the wounded man’s stomach. He motioned for us to join them. I noticed then that our sergeant was also wounded, blood staining his left sleeve.

I folded the mortar, hot tube and all, hoisted it across my shoulder, and lit out in the general direction of the retreat. I moved as in a nightmare, slithering helplessly on mashed sugar beets in my funk. I passed the corporal on his overstuffed couch, the prisoners slipping and sliding as urgently as they could with the panicky knowledge of Tiger tanks entering the town behind them. The great German tanks never made it to this edge of town in time to shell us. I shuddered—next time they would.

Back in our cozy house, Sarge said, “You’re the gunner now, Willi. Who’s your choice for assistant?”

“Can, I guess. He seemed pretty steady out there. But, hey, I was never really trained on the mortar.”

“You’ll learn,” he said, as he left for the aid station to have his own wounds treated.

Another unrewarded promotion! A mortar gunner rated a corporal’s double stripe and extra pay. But not for me! I wondered if my Camp Shelby records had followed me into combat. I was to carry the heavy mortar and fire it with the instructions under my hat as a private.

The next day’s attempt at crossing the field was to be a major effort, with more artillery, air cover, and tanks. This time, there was to be no retreat; we were to dig in, if necessary, in the open field. That kind of briefing foretold heavy opposition and heavy casualties.

Our seldom-seen kitchen unit had moved up, and we had a rare “hot” meal. Served outside in the dark, we filed by the cooks who filled our mess gear with stuff. Our decimated squad sat around the mortar eating. We

felt lost without the Sarge. His leaving left a vacuum that filled us with dread. In the chill October air, the food had gotten cold, and in the dark the mess gear was full of unpleasant surprises. I could identify greasy lamb stew, beets, mashed potatoes—all mixed with dabs of orange Jell-O. Help, Mom!

After washing our gear, we sat around in our cellar, our normal pre-attack queasy stomachs made worse by the greasy dinner. Walled in by our fears, we talked little. From time to time, the others shot me quizzical glances. Could I do it? I stood a two-hour guard duty after midnight, out by the mortar tube. I kept eyeing it. It was my mortar now. I visualized the quick, practiced manipulation of the machine by the Gunner. Could I do it? Could I fend off the rush of a counterattack? I was overcome with the sick stupidity of not having forced my hated Gunner to teach me more about using the mortar. Back at the cellar, the bodies were packed so tightly that I had to quickly slip into my relief's slot before it closed up and disappeared. I fell asleep listening to the grunts and cries of the sleeping men.

In the morning, we took off, as usual, behind our two rifle platoons. Some of the men were carrying long ladders. For what? To scale walls, cross moats? I had little time to speculate. We were instantly deluged by artillery and mortar fire. Automatically, I dove to the ground. But having to dive and rise with the heavy mortar soon exhausted me, so I just ducked my head and plodded blindly ahead. I hissed, "Spread out, spread out," at Can, who tended to drift too close to me.

About halfway across the field, I noticed very few men still on their feet, so I, too, dropped. Tired and numb with fear, I lay still, pressing my body as flat as possible against the ground. I moved very slowly, and shifting my pack and mortar to protect my head, I detached my folding shovel. With a minimum of movement, I started to dig, keeping my shovel handle flat to the ground. With mortar and artillery shells exploding around me and showering me with earth, it took total concentration.

Dimly I became aware of Can calling: "Hey, Willi, what do we do now? Hey, Willi!"

"Stay where you are," I shouted back. "Put your ammo bags and pack in front of your head and play dead. I'll call when the hole is big enough for both of us."

Completely absorbed in digging, I was astonished to find I had exca-

vated a slit trench 2 feet deep and wide enough for two. The shelling had slowed to an occasional round, and all seemed static on the battlefield. I called for Can to crawl slowly to me, and we took turns digging down to 4 feet. I was glad to have him for company. He obviously looked up to me for help.

“What do we do now?” he asked again.

“We stay in this hole until someone whistles us out to attack or tells us to retreat.”

Suddenly I became aware of tank noises—our promised tank support had arrived. I had dug my foxhole parallel to the German lines, in the hope that oncoming or retreating tanks would cross my burrow’s short dimension. Tanks that came close made a horrible rumble in our slit trench, and dirt dribbled down the sides. We could hear the cough of our Sherman 75mms, the sharp crack of answering 88s of the German tanks, and the rumbling explosions of tanks going up in flames. Finally the tanks left, and a heavy silence settled on the battlefield.

Books were an important ingredient in my surviving the long hours of isolation in these foxholes. Blanketed as I was by leaden fear, I welcomed the short periods of relief they allowed. So now I wedged myself in a corner of the slit trench and pulled out a book. It was Mark Twain, and I found myself snorting at his sardonic humor. Can grabbed my arm.

“Take it easy, Willi, it’ll be all right.”

He had become uneasy at my withdrawal, so I put away the book and we talked about his part of New York state—the Finger Lakes and the nearby Adirondacks. He had worked in the Beech-Nut plant in Canajoharie, but he hoped to pick up more education when he got home.

I heard the approach of a slithering body and peeked out nervously, revolver in hand and cocked. It was the company runner.

“What’s up?”

“The Germans have pulled back in several places. The captain thinks we can gain the town without much trouble. C Company will push through us and we’ll follow them in.”

“What’s left of A Company?”

“Hard to say, with everybody holed up. We lost a few, that’s for sure, and some tanks.”

Actually, the enemy had withdrawn completely, and we were able to

dig in our mortars on the far side of the captured town. Can and I practiced using the mortar. Setting aiming stakes around the mortar, I put Can in a hole to our front with a telephone. In an attack, he would guide our fire in relation to our numbered stakes. "800 yards, stake 2. Fire one. More to the left, fire one. Good, fire 3." As the attack came in closer, I would be able to see my own shell bursts and pull Can back to us. Over the next weeks, we managed to make it as a team. I found that the more responsibility I had, the better I could survive the tension. I never did learn what the ladders were for.

In northern Germany, we frequently attacked across flat open fields, our hearts chugging away a mile a minute. With the expectation of incoming artillery, I would scan the ground ahead of me, evaluating it for even the least depression to dive for. Once on the ground, I would get as close to the earth as my clothing allowed. I quickly learned that there was no such thing as a completely flat surface.

In *On the Front Lines*, John Ellis wrote:

Being shelled is the real work of an infantry soldier, which no one talks about. Everyone has his own way of going about it. In novels you read about soldiers, in such moments, fouling themselves. The opposite is true. As all your parts are contracting, you are more likely to be constipated.

Completely random and impersonal shell fire is total terror. One day the company was pulled back for a little rest and hot food. The kitchen truck arrived with our barracks bags, a rare opportunity to get at our personal effects. For me, it was a chance to access a few more pocket books. It meant, too, that we could utilize the comfort of our sleeping bags. The kitchen crew set up a chow line and served hot food. At the end of the line, they placed a garbage can with soapy water for us to wash our mess gear. We were sitting around enjoying the break, when out of the blue a single shell whistled in and exploded, a direct hit on the garbage can. One of our men at the can was killed instantly, bloodily ripped apart by the explosion, shrapnel, and pieces of can. No other shells landed. It was completely random, purposeless—more upsetting to us than a deliberate artillery attack. It negated any good the rest stop had afforded.

On their home territory, the Germans made copious use of mines. Our engineers, when possible, marked off paths through a minefield with white tape. We followed the tapes, stepping in the footprint of the man in front with heart-stopping precision, praying his shoe was a larger size. The ultimate horror was getting stuck in a minefield during an artillery attack.

A most bizarre night battle was fought under the auspices of General Bernard Montgomery. The 29th Division, as part of the Ninth U.S. Army, was briefly attached to Monty's drive to the Rhine. We arrived at his command in trucks late in the day. Each of our companies had a Limey guide to take us through the British troops holding the line. These troops, wearing berets in contrast to our large iron helmets, had scooped out pits big enough for five or six men and were busy brewing tea. Each group seemed to be well equipped with hard biscuits and restaurant-size tins of bitter orange marmalade. I am very fond of bitter orange marmalade, especially as made in England. While we waited for darkness, I garnered from our mortar squad an assortment of our rations—cans of meatballs and spaghetti, franks and beans, pork and beans, ham and eggs—and negotiated a swap for a large can of marmalade. It made an enormous heavy hump in my pack but was well worth it.

At dark, a long line of powerful searchlights, mounted on Sherman tanks and directed into German eyes, was turned on, and we attacked down its beams. Talk about chasing your shadow! In the flat Rhineland plain, my shadow was a hundred feet long. We never got to punch out Nazi eyes with light as was planned; instead, we found ourselves silhouetted like moths. Suddenly, German machine guns opened up and the picturesque shadows instantly disappeared. Fortunately, Montgomery, being the careful Scot he was, turned off the lights and aborted the attack before casualties became too high. According to General Montgomery, "A good general must not only win his battles; he must win them with a minimum of casualties and loss of life."

HURRAH, we say, for Montgomery! He himself had been severely wounded in World War I and never lost sight of the ultimate truth of war—battles were won with the lives of men at stake. He was known for his great concern for his troops, careful to have everything well prepared before a battle. He was looked down upon by "aggressive" types such as General Patton, but the average infantryman thought highly of him. The

British had been fighting for several years before we showed up, and their manpower had been seriously depleted. His sparing use of troops was understandable. I certainly understood!