

MY CLOSE ENCOUNTERS UNDER ENEMY GUNFIRE

Speech Written and Given By: Kaleel C. Skeirik

Born: 1917 (100 years at posting)

I first will explain what my major responsibilities were in the 14th Armored Division and also give you a summary of our Division's route of march during combat in the European theater of operation during WWII. Then as background I will briefly describe the significance of two major battles our 14th Armored Division was involved in as a part of the 7th Army (an Army contains from four to as many as 18 divisions). The 7th Army's Division ranged from five when it was fighting in Alsace, France to 13 when it drove into central Germany.

After the background information I will describe several of my war experiences. In describing my war experiences, there will be some duplication of our 14th Armored Division's combat action.

During the war, I was a member of the 14th Armored Division and served in the Army from May 1942 to December 1945. During the time I was in the United States, I was an instructor teaching new recruits in artillery and gunnery subjects for the 14th Armored Division. However, during combat overseas, as a Technical Sergeant, I was Chief of the Military Intelligence Section of the 501st Armored Field Artillery Battalion of our 14th Armored Division from October, 1944 to the end of the war in Europe (May 8, 1945).

Five men were under my supervision: my assistant; two drivers, one for the halftrack and the other for the Jeep; a radio operator; and a soldier to man our machine guns. During combat the intelligence section was a part of the command post where I provided the Commanding Officer with current front line intelligence, mainly enemy targets for our artillery battalions.

I began active combat duty overseas in November of 1944, when our 14th Armored Division joined the 7th Army in Alsace, France. The 7th Army was fighting the German forces in the Vosges Mountains. In December 1944, our 14th Armored Division helped drive the Germans out of Alsace, cross the German border and reach the Siegfried line. Then on December 16, 1944, the Germans launched the mammoth attack in the Battle of the Bulge. Our 7th Army immediately went from an offensive position to a defensive position. Our front line extended from the 3rd Army's right flank eastward for 84 miles along the Alsace/German border to the Rhine River, then south for 32 miles along the west bank of the river to the City of Strasbourg, France.

The two weeks after the Bulge began on January 1, 1945, the Germans began a major offensive against our 7th Army. They had almost twice as many troops as the 7th Army had on its front lines. After a short withdrawal against a massive German assault our lines held and we were able to stabilize our lines with the reinforcement of additional divisions. We remained stabilized until March 16, 1945, when all the allied Armies on the Western Front began a major offensive against the German forces in which we successfully drove the German troops into Germany, forcing the German Reich to unconditionally surrender, ending the war in Europe on May 8, 1945.

Before I recount some of my personal war experiences to you, I now will describe, as a background setting, important battles of the 7th Army in the Alsace sector and the role of the 14th Armored Division in these two battles. One was called the Battle of Alsace (or the Battle of the Small Bulge), and the other was referred to as the Battle of the Saar Industrial Basin. These two battles caused major damage to the German forces and prevented additional casualties on allied troops. Also, these battles severely weakened the German Army and helped to reduce the length of time for the allies to defeat the German Reich.

The Battle of Alsace began on January 1, 1945, two weeks after the Germans had launched their attack in the Battle of the Bulge. The 7th Army was located on the right flank (or right side) of the 3rd Army fighting in the Bulge. Because our 7th Army had to spread its forces to occupy the front vacated on our left flank by the 3rd Army (General Eisenhower had ordered General Patton to immediately move his army to support the U.S. divisions fighting in the Battle of the Bulge), and because several of the 7th Army divisions were directed to transfer to the Bulge, the 7th Army's northern front was severely weakened with soldiers thinly spread along the front line which was along the German boundary. The initial German plan was to break through the 7th Army's front northern line and cut the 7th Army off from the U.S. troops fighting in the Bulge. If the Germans had been successful in trapping the 7th Army, it would have exposed for the German troops the vulnerable rear flanks of the U.S. troops fighting in the Bulge. This would have created a major crisis for the allied forces and it would have inflicted many more U.S. casualties as well as delayed the defeat of the German Army.

The 7th Army front lines held even though we were forced to withdraw several miles in the initial German attack. (This is the reason the Battle of Alsace was also called the Battle of the Small Bulge.) As the German forces continued their attacks, the 7th Army inflicted heavy casualties on the Germans, captured thousands of POW's and destroyed thousands of military equipment.

After the major German attack on January 1, 1945, on the 7th Army's northern front, the German forces also attacked the 7th Army in four other locations between January 1 and January 8. One of the attacks occurred on January 6, when German forces crossed the Rhine River and established a bridgehead in the Gamsheim area referred to as the Gamsheim Bridgehead. The 12th Armored Division, which had recently been attached to the 7th Army was directed to attack the Germans in the Bridgehead to prevent them from advancing westward out of the pocket. Although the 12th Armored Division took a severe beating they managed to prevent a German breakout of the Bridgehead. The reason for the 12th Armored demise was that they had only a short training period in the U.S. and had recently joined the 7th Army. This was their first encounter against a well-trained and experienced German army.

After the 12th Armored Division was directed to withdraw from the Bridgehead, elements of the 14th Armored Division replaced the 12th. It was then that Capt. McClintock and I were directed to reconnoiter the Bridgehead front to determine the status and condition of the front.

Traveling in our Jeep we came to a field which disturbed us emotionally. We saw many dead soldiers scattered across the field. Apparently they had advanced into a German crossfire of hidden machine guns.

In another field we viewed another devastating sight – 6 to 8 Sherman tanks disabled or burned with dead American soldiers lying on or hanging down from the hatch of the tank or lying on the ground beside their tank. These tanks had driven into a trap. When they were halfway across the field, Germans who were hidden in camouflaged holes in the ground stood up and began firing German-type Bazookas at the rear of the tanks – the weakest and most vulnerable part of the tank. (It was a sad and emotional occasion when we reported our observations to the Commander at the Command Post.)

How was our 14th Armored Division used in the Battle of Alsace? One of the important tactical characteristics of all armored divisions is their mobility and massive fire power. In the initial German attack, our 14th Armored Division was the only armored division in the 7th Army. It was held in reserve so that one or more of our armored units (three combat commands) could move quickly from one front line sector to another where the enemy was threatening to break through.

Our armored infantry and/or tanks of one of the combat commands would move quickly to reinforce another infantry division that was dug in on the front where the German troops were trying to break through. Then our artillery would concentrate heavy artillery fire on the Germans who were attempting a breakthrough. In this way our 14th Armored Division was a major factor in preventing German forces from breaching the 7th Army front lines.

In another battle on March 16, 1945, General Eisenhower directed the 7th Army to take the lead in attacking the German forces defending the Saar Industrial Basin. This attack was the beginning of a major assault by all allied armies along the western front. As the 7th Army began its attack, General Patton's 3rd Army was also to attack the Germans in the Saar Basin. The 7th Army was to attack northward and the 3rd Army was to attack eastward in order to trap the Germans within the Saar Basin. The attack was successful in trapping thousands of troops including destroying hundreds of military equipment. The remaining troops were forced to flee across the Rhine River.

Our 14th Armored Division was not involved in this specific sector. Our division was on the 7th Army's right flank attacking the Siegfried line. While our objective was to breach this formidable barrier, it also was designed to be a diversionary attack to draw German units away from the main attack at the Saar Basin. Not only did the 14th Armored Division breach the Siegfried line, but our division also captured thousands of fleeing German troops.

I now will describe the structure of the Siegfried Line and tell how our 14th Armored Division successfully breached this formidable barrier.

Attacking the Siegfried Line.

Prior to the attack on the Siegfried Line by our 14th Armored Division, I was part of a reconnaissance team that had patrolled near the front of this defensive position. My role was to provide target information for our 501st Artillery Battalion which was to be one of the many artillery units to play a major role in this attack. The 14th Armored Division's objective was to capture two towns that were an integral part of the Siegfried Line in our sector. The two towns,

Steinfeld and Schaidt, were about 2 miles apart. However, before I describe this attack I will describe how formidable a defensive barrier the Siegfried Line was to breach.

The Siegfried Line was a defensive barrier that the Germans had built along their western border in the 1930's. It faced France and extended from the Swiss border northward to the Belgium border. This defensive barrier was also referred to as the West Wall. However, it was not a continuous solid wall along the German border. Instead it was a series of different types of fortifications or barriers, which were built along terrain that provided excellent views of the approaching enemy and also was strategically designed for cross firing their machine guns at the approaching enemy. The main fortifications were the "Pill Boxes." They were located in innocent looking houses along the edges of towns, in farm houses in the country, or built into a hillside. This fortification consisted of a belt of many mutually supporting structures spread out along the German border. They normally were located in 10 positions per mile. The Pill Boxes were not large, measuring only 20 x 30 feet in width, but they had a depth of 40 to 50 feet and extended 20 to 25 feet above ground. The walls and roofs usually were 3 to 8 feet thick. These Pill Boxes contained 8 mm cannons and machine guns.

In front of the Pill Boxes other types of barriers were strategically placed to prevent enemy tanks, vehicles and soldiers from approaching the barrier. They consisted of machine gun emplacements; dragon's teeth that were concrete pillars staggered in 5 to 7 double rows; a medium high flat concrete platform in front of the teeth; a deep wide ditch called a "tank trap" to prevent tanks from advancing; and also layers of barbed wire and mine fields. In addition, strategically located trenches were dug in front of the Pill Boxes.

Before our actual attack began, a team of engineers, during the night of the attack, crawled about 400 yards to the dragon's teeth carrying a total of 300 pounds of TNT explosives. They destroyed several rows of the teeth wide enough for tanks and vehicles to pass through, then bull dozers moved to the tank traps to fill in the deep ditch to allow vehicles to drive over. Prior to this, land mines had to be removed and barbed wire had to be cut to open a pathway to the dragon's teeth.

Our infantry and tanks now were poised to move out following a 7-minute barrage of many artillery guns. The last two minutes of this barrage included smoke shells to conceal the infantry soldiers that were following the tanks as they began to crawl towards the Pill Boxes. As the attacking forces moved forward, our 501st Artillery laid down a rolling barrage of artillery shells in front of our advancing troops. Initially, as the men moved forward, there was no resistance and only moderate enemy fire. However, when the smoke began to lift, "all hell broke loose!" and the area became an inferno. In addition to our many artillery guns and tank guns firing on enemy positions, the German forces suddenly opened up with every gun they had: from guns in the Pill Boxes; from guns of the artillery units located several miles away; from mortar guns; from machine guns firing at our crawling soldiers; from German infantrymen located in trenches firing their rifles; and from multiple rocket guns we called the "screaming meemies." The enemy artillery shells exploded in fiery flashes and in deafening concussions. The noise was such that we could not hear each other talking. The intense enemy firing resulted in our troops sustaining many casualties. As the first infantry unit of soldiers advanced close to the Pill Boxes, more infantry, along with tanks moved forward to replace the first group of infantrymen and they then approached the Pill Boxes and machine gun emplacements.

When a second wave of our infantrymen reached the Pill Boxes, they dropped or pushed white phosphorous and fragmented grenades into gun slots of the Pill Boxes, then moved around to the doors. They blew the doors open and threw more grenades inside, killing and capturing the rest of the Germans in these particular Pill Boxes. After these Pill Boxes were captured, our soldiers moved into the town of Steinfeld and had to fight from house-to-house where many more German soldiers were stubbornly defending the town. After our infantry and tanks had secured Steinfeld, our combat command moved forward two miles to repeat the same tactics to capture the town of Schaidt. It took three days (from March 21 to 23) to breach the Siegfried Line. Tens of thousands of artillery shells were fired by many guns of the 7th Army. Our 501st Artillery Battalion alone fired an average of 1,500 rounds each day for these three days. After moving through the Siegfried Line our 14th Armored and the rest of the 7th Army moved rapidly to the Rhine River.

I found it interesting that the fore-mentioned battle of the Siegfried Line was similar to a battle described in the Book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament of our Bible. This battle was predicted by Ezekiel (and I believe it actually occurred many years later) in which the combat action was similar to the battle of the Siegfried Line. The tactics were the same, only the weapons of war were different. Listen now to the vivid account found in Ezekiel, Chapter 21, V.1-11.

For thus says the Lord God: Behold I will bring upon Tyre from the North Nebuh-kuhd-nez-ure, King of Babylon, King of Kings, with horses and chariots and with horsemen a host of many soldiers...He will set up a siege wall against you, and throw up a mound against you, and raise a roof of shields against you. He will direct the shock of his battering rams against your walls, and with the axes he will break down your towers. His horses will be so many that their dust will cover you; your walls will shake at the noise of the horsemen and wagons and chariots, when he enters your gates as one enters a city which has been breached. With the hoofs of his horses he will trample all your streets; he will slay your people with the sword; and your mighty pillars will fall to the ground.”

After our 14th Armored Division had breached the Siegfried Line, we went to a rest area for a few days to regroup, repair and replace men and equipment. (During that time I had the opportunity to examine the inside of one of the Pill Boxes.) Then we left the rest area, crossed the Rhine River and moved up to the front lines to take the lead in attacking the Germans. When our division reached the City of Gemunden, Germany, chasing the German army, our combat command force had to stop and face the Germans because they decided to take a defensive position in this city. The 7th Army contained three combat commands – “A,” “B” and “Reserve.” (Each combat command usually operated independently when attacking the enemy). Gemunden was 95 miles east of Frankfurt. It was located on the Main River. Two other rivers joined the Main River at Gemunden. This created a formidable defensive position for the Germans.

As our artillery battalion went into firing position several miles behind the front line, Capt. McClintock contacted me. He said that he and I were assigned to go to the front line as Forward Observers. We were to locate enemy targets in Gemunden and direct our guns to fire on those targets.

We took off in our Jeep from our artillery position and drove forward to the front and to the top of the ridge where our infantry and tanks were hiding behind the ridge and firing on enemy positions in Gemunden. We looked down to the right and left of the hillside sloping to the river for a place for our observation post. We saw a water tank about 200 yards on our right a short distance down the ridge. We decided to use the water tank as an observation post but had to travel on an exposed hillside to get there. I was driving the Jeep and took off at a high speed on the rough terrain. We made it safely to the water tank and hid our Jeep in the few trees and bushes growing behind the tank. Leaving the motor running, we got out of the Jeep and found a ladder which we climbed up to a catwalk which circled the tank. We cautiously moved around to the front and had a commanding view overlooking the town. As we stood on the catwalk, not only were our artillery guns firing on the town, but enemy artillery shells were also exploding constantly around us and on the other side of the ridge.

Using our binoculars, we began to locate some enemy targets, tanks and machine gun positions. We then located these positions on a city map. As we started to communicate locations of enemy targets to our 501st guns, we suddenly heard an instantaneous bang on the metal tank above our heads. (No water was in the tank.) We immediately recognized that it was an 88 mm shell that did not explode. It was a dud – a rarity for this type of German shell. Needless to say, we raced around the catwalk to the ladder, slid down to the ground, jumped into our idling Jeep and raced away from the water tank (I was driving). However, just as we were starting to move out, this time a live shell hit the tank and exploded with shrapnel flying everywhere. Fortunately, we were not hit as we began to move out and then raced over the exposed ground to the other side of the ridge. We must have moved too rapidly for them to make the necessary adjustments to their guns to fire on us as we drove away. When we returned to our Command Post, our map with the recorded location of the enemy targets was given to the firing batteries to begin firing shells on the enemy targets.

Later that day when I had time to reflect on this close encounter, I realized we had miraculously escaped from being a casualty because the shell did not explode. I began to wonder why? Was it fate? Was it luck? Or as many GI's believed, the bullet did not have our names on it, or was it just not our time. Of course it was our quick reaction to get away from the tower when the first shell struck that saved us. However, in my prayers, I thanked God that my life was spared and I felt that maybe He had something to do with my survival.

Another close encounter occurred later while we were chasing the German forces in Bavaria. Our combat command column to which our 501st Artillery was attached was held up by a strong defensive stand of SS troops at the town of Allersberg, which was about 20 miles south of Nurnberg. Our guns immediately went into firing position several miles behind Allersberg to support our armored infantry and tanks as they began to attack the town. My assignment was to follow in my Jeep behind our troops that were attacking Allersberg and set up an observation position. If I saw the Germans infiltrating to the rear of our units that were attacking Allersberg, I was to immediately contact our artillery gun units to fire on the Germans.

I dug a shallow foxhole (actually a slit trench) at the edge of a large open field where I could observe the flanks (right and left sides) of our troops fighting in front of me.

During the time I was in the trench, enemy shells were exploding to my rear and frequently all around my location. After several hours on my knees, looking through my binoculars, I suddenly heard a loud explosion in a tree in front of me. As the concussion threw me backwards, I heard a zinging sound and then a thud between my legs. I looked down and saw dust spiraling up from the ground. I gingerly probed the spot with a stick and exposed a piece of metal, or shrapnel, the size of a silver dollar. I fell back, feeling weak and shaking, realizing that if I had been leaning forward a few inches I would have been hit. I again wondered why I was not a casualty. I said a prayer and thanked God for my safety. After these two "Forward Observer" assignments, I was awarded the Bronze Star for meritorious service.

Late in the day I left my foxhole and returned to our command post which was located several miles behind Allersberg and reported to my superior that I saw no Germans. I left the command post to go to our halftrack that was parked on the shoulder of the autobahn. As I was walking to the halftrack my assistant came out to meet me. As we were standing in the middle of the autobahn talking we suddenly heard the rapid fire of a machine gun. Bullets began flying all around us and many ricocheted off the pavement. As my assistant and I sprinted to hide behind our vehicle for protection, I saw where the sound of the gun was coming from. It was to our rear, about 700 to 1,000 yards away. Several German soldiers were firing their machine gun at us from an overpass. I do not know why we were not hit by one or more of the bullets since we were such easy targets. Fortunately an anti-aircraft gun and crew assigned to the 501st were located next to our halftrack. The crew lowered their four barreled 50-cal. Machine gun and fired on the German machine gun crew. They quickly fled. This incident immediately put our artillery battalion on the alert, not only because of the possibility that the German machine gun crew would return, but that other German soldiers might show up sometime later. (The reason was that the rapid advance of the 14th Armored Division resulted in overtaking many German Units, thus leaving them behind our position.) As we had anticipated, that night we discovered German infantry had begun to infiltrate our artillery position. We were surrounded and they were closing in on us. Our battalion tightened up our perimeter defenses and we prepared ourselves for hand-to-hand fighting. With forethought, our battalion commander immediately communicated with another artillery battalion to fire shells around our perimeter. This firing stalled the German infantry from advancing any further and provided time for a friendly infantry unit to move to our position and drive the German soldiers away.

Finally, I would like to share with you a very unusual religious experience I had several days after we had breached the Siegfried Line. This religious experience expresses my faith in God in an unusual way. After our 14th Armored Division had breached the Siegfried line, we rested and regrouped in a bivouac area for several days. We left our rest area on the last day of March 1945.

We traveled all day and it rained all night. Then we crossed the Rhine River over a pontoon bridge very early in the morning on April 1st which was Easter Sunday. It was an overcast day with low-lying clouds. As we crossed the river, I could hear in the distance the booming of our artillery guns and the explosions of enemy shells. After we had traveled about one mile beyond the river, our convoy stopped for a rest period before our division moved to the front line to attack the Germans. A few minutes after we had stopped, Army Chaplain Logie drove up in his Jeep and asked if I had time to assist him baptize 9 GI's in the Rhine River.

I had become acquainted with Chaplain Logie soon after I arrived overseas. Chaplain Logie was a Baptist minister who was assigned to our battalion after we arrived in France. I not only attended his worship services but also assisted him sometimes. We soon became very good friends.

At the river the Chaplain conducted the baptism ceremony and baptized the men by emersion, with each soldier completely submerged in the cold water. After all the soldiers were baptized and standing shivering on the shore, the Chaplain asked us to bow our heads as he said a final prayer and that we repeat with him The Lord's Prayer at the end of his prayer.

Just before we started to pray, a very unusual event occurred. The sun suddenly shone through a break in the clouds of an overcast sky and its rays fell upon us. At this same moment an absolute stillness enveloped us – I did not hear the distant booming of artillery guns and the explosions of enemy artillery shells. As the Chaplain prayed, it remained absolutely quiet and I could feel the warmth of the sun's rays on my back. I had a sense of well-being, a sense of absolute calmness and peace within myself – a feeling that seemed to overwhelm me.

It seemed to me that God was present among us. I then wondered why? In this war I was mainly preoccupied in finding targets to destroy lives, but now I felt the presence of God. Was God reminding me that even though my attention and time was focused on fighting a Nazi regime that destroyed lives and bred hatred and violence, He, at this moment, wanted to let me know that He represented love and peace?

On our ride back to our convoy, no one spoke – we were a silent and solemn group of soldiers.

In conclusion, I will recite a short verse taken from the United Methodist Hymnal. This verse expresses my feelings as I stood on the banks of the Rhine River many years ago on that Easter Sunday morning, April 1, 1945:

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place,
I can feel his mighty power and his grace.
I can hear the brush of the angels,
I see the glory on each face.
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

After serving his Country in the Army, Mr. Skeirik continued his service in government, working as an economist at the State Department, Federal Trade Commission and the Small Business Administration where he retired as Director of the Division of Size Standards. Mr. Skeirik resides in Richmond, Virginia, with Kathryn, his wife of 67 years. At age 100, he continues to write about his life experiences. May 2017.