



By

1st Lt. Gordon W. O'Donnell
Headquarters
25th Tank Battalion
14th Armored Division

PASSED FOR PUBLICATION
PER FIELD PRESS CENSOR
24 APRIL '45 s/H

North of Haguenau, in Alsace, lies the Haguenau forest, dark and thick, an obstacle to armor. To the north of the forest is the plain, open and rolling. And then the Forest of Wissembourg noses out from the east to a point about four kilometers from the steep, wooded Hardt Mountains. Through that gap, the Wissembourg Gap, lies the German border, the Siegfried Line, and beyond that-- Germany.

Such was the picture facing Chester, South Carolina's Lt Col Ernest C. Watson, as he mounted his tank that morning at the railroad crossing south of Surburg. But to Col Watson, commanding officer of the, 25th Tank Battalion, this was no study in geography. To him, the forests meant danger from snipers, left behind by Jerry to harass his column; the plain meant hulled-down Kraut tanks and AT guns. To him, his map was a book with a few missing pages; those missing pages were the changes in the terrain made by Jerry's blown bridges and road blocks. Soon he would know the whole story.

Engines which had been idling broke into a roar. Tracks turned and the column moved out, led by the light tank platoon of boyish, 21 year old 2nd Lt Paul M. Klinefelter, of Owaneco, Illinois. "Smiley," they called him. His was a big job and he knew it. The column moved out and he was smiling.

Through Surburg, through Soultz, and then east to Hoffen. It was December 14, 1944--Objective, Wissembourg. Through Hoffen and north again. At 1430, Lt Klinefelter reported, "Bridge blown." And it was 1715--less than four hours later--when the engineer platoon commanded by 2nd Lt Charles Bardwell had constructed a new bridge, and the column rolled across. With darkness it halted again--and contracted.

The Battalion CP that night was a railroad station at Hunspach. The 25th would move again in the morning, following the tracks to Wissembourg, and would learn that along those tracks lurked trouble. Now they sat in the old waiting room and mapped their plan.

Dawn, December 15. The column moved out again. East into Oberseebach; infantry patrols from Company "A" of the 62nd Armored Infantry Battalion, commanded by Capt Daniel R. Iannella of Rossville, Illinois, had reported the town clear. Now there were just the usual groups of Alsatian civilians lining the streets. Later the cellars yielded seven happy-to-be-captured Krauts. The column turned north through the town. Wissembourg lay six kilometers ahead.

The formation had not changed. Klinefelter still led with his lights, followed by the medium tank platoon of 2nd Lt Fred H. Gisse of Salem, Oregon. Back along the road it stretched; an infantry platoon, the assault guns led by tall bespectacled 1st Lt John R. Martin, of Tiffin, Ohio, and the command tanks of Col Watson and Major William E. Shedd, III, Battalion S-3. Then the rest of the infantry, and Bardwell's engineers, followed by "C" Company, Headquarters, and "D" Company. Four miles of tanks and half-tracks, men and guns. "A" Company was in reserve, "B" Company would be on the left, on another road, and it was good to know that they were there.

At 1030, the crackling of the radio was cut and Lt Gisse came in--"Two lead tanks hit by AT fire--both burning." That would be Smiley and Sgt Manuel

Mello. And this was it. The report would say something about making contact, and later on, there would be long discussions of "how it happened." Ask Klinefelter, who refused to withdraw until he had relayed all the information he had. Ask S/Sgt Preston N. Rensch of the Medics, who crawled almost 200 yards out ahead of the infantry to evacuate the casualties. Ask him, or read the citation awarding him the Silver Star.

It had been a typical German position. About three kilometers north of Geitersshof, the road curves slightly and crosses under a railroad. Here, just around the bend and close up against a building, the 88's waited. Later bow gunner, Pvt Robert Menzel described the sound of the hit as "the ringing of a huge bell."

From the turret of his tank, Lt Gisse could see that it was impossible to fire on the position until the wounded men were evacuated from those two light tanks. He watched Sgt Rensch crawl forward, watched him drag the men from the burning tanks, and saw that there was no one around to drive the litter peep forward. He had been adjusting mortar fire from his vantage point, but that would wait. He drove the peep up himself, and was later awarded the Bronze Star Medal for heroic achievement.

Now could the infantry deploy and move in? It's hard to write about the kind of fire the column was getting that day, Mortar, Artillery, anti-tank, machine gun, snipers-the works. Not now and then, but for hour after hellish hour. An afternoon crept by; an afternoon which none of those who saw it will forget.

One Lieutenant of the infantry, won't forge it. Aggressive and eager to maintain absolute control of his platoon, he forgot for just an instant when the fire was screaming over his head and stood up. Later, in the aid station, where Capt Lloyd I. Sexton was treating his wound, he grinned ruefully, "I hope my men saw that. Maybe now they'll keep down."

You may have heard the Jerry is a "very methodical guy!" At least he is in many ways. He always counterattacks when he figures that we're getting tired. And so at dusk, when the tanks came, Col Watson was ready. He was tired, his men were tired, but they were ready and the Germans attacked and were forced back. But one of their tanks didn't get back. A bazooka team saw to that. Lt Martin's assault tanks were firing constantly. All tanks were deployed, ready for all Jerry had to offer.

Darkness came; not just nightfall with a few stars and a silver of friendly moon to help out. There were no stars and the clouds blanketed the moon so that not a trace shone through-a night to remember. The men didn't need to be told to stay alert that night. There was no movement, no noise except for the sporadic machine gun bursts from a suspecting outpost, spraying a warning at the enemy. And the defensive fires of the artillery, ringing the head of the column in a angry thunder. There was no light, nothing, only the darkness and the thought that out there somewhere were the Germans who wanted to destroy you.

Daybreak found the column ready to go again, cautiously, feeling out the route. Jerry had pulled out.

It was slow traveling, through road blocks and bypasses. There were halts while treadway was inserted over the gaps littered with the remains of what had once been bridges. The point with its three light tanks had been taken over by Capt William H. Smith, of Ravenna, Kentucky. The two tanks which had been hit yesterday were now replaced with Smith's command tank and the maintenance tank from "D" Company. The crew of the second tank was commanded by Tec 5 Glen Burgraff who, up to now, had been the company mail clerk.

But the first man into Wissembourg was not Capt Smith with his light tank, nor was it Lt Dave Compton of the 94th Cavalry with his Ren Platoon. Here's how Lt. A. F. Hyde of "B" Company, coming into town on the left describes it. "As we came into town we spotted a road block a couple of hundred yards up the street. I put a couple of rounds from my 76 into it and then moved up, prepared to clean out any Heinies we saw. Behind the road block, coming this way, I saw a peep. In it and grinning right back at me was Capt Emmet". He referred to Capt Grenville T. Emmet, Jr., who with his driver, John M.S. Curran of Rochester, New York, had gone ahead of the column to "nose around town."

It took a long time for the column to move through Wissembourg. There were more blown bridges, more road blocks, and the streets were lined with civilians. The newspapers the next day carried headlines: "14th captures Wissembourg." For the 25th it had been a step in the completion of a mission that still faced them. And the words of higher headquarters, "Push on vigorously, we must go forward," rang in their ears.

The Battalion Command post was in Germany that night. The house which quartered the command group was just across the border, according to the map. Actually, the real border would come later--the border which marked the edge of Germany to American troops--the vaunted Siegfried line.

As he invariably shells to destroy that which he has lost, Jerry was pounding Wissembourg that night, and angry reply, our artillery was screaming over our heads to land somewhere in Germany.

It was Saturday, December 16, 1944. A month ago, this group of tankers had been in a staging area, preparing for a combat that was only a vague future to most of them. Now they were sitting around a table in a house in Germany, planning their Sunday schedule, smashing the Siegfried Line.

Up till now it had been a clearly defined mission--there had been defenses of road blocks, AT guns, Machine guns, and Men. Now there would be a defense with which we had not reckoned. The Siegfried Line had cost millions, taken years to construct.

At 0745, Lt Gisse led the column into Schweighofen, normal population of about 450. Present to greet the 25th: One aged farmer, a few stray goats, pigs, and cows. Jerry offered what the communique refer to as "light resistance," his Siegfried Line was too close behind him. By 1130, Gisse and the infantry, followed by Capt Andrew W. Winiarczyk's Charlie Company had entered the second town, Kapsweyer. It proved an anti-climax, though. The column was ordered to withdraw to allow bombers to attack Steinfeld, a kilometer to the east.

Back to Kapsweyer, that afternoon went the tankers. And in the shadow of the Siegfried line, they were subjected to a raining hell of lead--from burp guns to 105's. Under that rain they gave up ground. "C" Company deployed and returned the fire with vengeance. Over the radio Winiarczyk reported to the Commanding Officer: "The little ones won't do it. I'm going to try the big babies." Little ones--the 75mm tank guns. Big babies--the new high velocity 76mm guns. He sounded as if he were trying keys in a lock--he was that calm.

The end of the fourth day came, and it was beginning to show in the men. Actions were mechanical and the grind of 100 hours of steady fighting had produced a fatigue which is like nothing else. The mission was not yet accomplished--but, so far, it was our ball game.

The night was pitch black. At 0200, Bardwell led a group of his engineers through town, to the dragon's teeth. The question; could they place charges and blow a gap through the seven rows of cement obstacles, so tanks could pass through? The answer; a screaming hail of machine gun fire from every pill box within range.

Later, in the CP, this conversation took place:

Col Watson: "How many casualties?"

Lt Bardwell: "We had one man lightly wounded."

Col Watson: "Can you get some more demolitions?"

Lt Bardwell: "More?"

Col Watson: "Yeah, you lost all the other didn't you?"

Lt Bardwell: "Hell no, sir, we brought it back."

He'd taken 700 pounds of TNT, been subjected to the worst fire the Krauts could muster, he'd had a man nicked, and he brought back all 700 pounds, plus a German Sentry.

The next day, our artillery stopped playing around. The concentrations received by the Jerries were in the hundreds. And there was air power.

"One bomb lead fell a little short," remarked Col Watson, later, "about 200 yards from the CP." "But hell, I guess it wouldn't have helped much. Those babies were in their pill boxes so deep it would have taken a steam shovel to find them," he mused.

There were casualties.

The tankers used every trick in the book those last two days. But it wasn't a question of tricks. The job required more men, more guns, more surprise. Kapsweyer was now a blazing inferno from constant Jerry artillery and mortar fire. Jerry snipers infiltrated into the town almost continuously through their elaborate system of trenches. Their burp guns were firing up and down the streets, from cellars, and buildings--everywhere. The doughboys hunted them from building to building and silenced many of them, the firing of the burp guns and the doughboys rifles continued until no one was able to fire any longer. The church was destroyed because it contained Jerry snipers and observers in the steeple.

Under a huge smoke screen the 25th was pulled out of Kapsweyer and ordered to an assembly area to re-equip, and prepare for another mission.

Although the Siegfried Line wasn't cracked in that operation, it was battered, pounded, slugged, and studied. The lessons learned in this operation were the beginning of the return weeks later, when the same tankers passed through row after row of bristling pill boxes to crash into Germany.

This has been the story of a battle. It was written, not at a desk in a Battalion Command Post, but on the ground on which it took place. An accurate record is found in the Unit Journal of the 25th Tank Battalion, but the true picture is recorded only in the minds of the men of the 25th and its supporting elements.

