CHAPTER 5. MY WAR

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The trip to Europe on the Sterling Castle was an experience I will not easily forget. We slept in hammocks, with about twenty of us in one area. The hammock, of course, remained vertical while the ship rolled, but the sensation was just the opposite. I never did adjust to sleeping in a moving hammock, and I didn't do too well on the first few nights out. I often felt waves of nausea during the night, but I think it was the relative motion in the hammock, because I was never seasick while on my feet! Luckily, the seas were not very rough during the voyage. We tried to be on deck as much as possible, to get some fresh air between various drills and inspections. Of course, at these times, the decks were full of blankets spread out for poker and craps! We were traveling in convoy, and although the weather was gray almost the entire voyage, it was pleasant on deck, and we could see many other vessels surrounding our ship. Our ship and crew were British. The food was terrible, and it seemed to me that the smell of boiled cabbage and sausage permeated the Sterling Castle. There was no escape. After a week of this, we were only too happy to disembark.

As we approached Ireland and southwest England, the sun came out. When we entered the Irish Sea, the water appeared emerald green. Whatever the reason for its color in the early October sun, it was beautiful. The sea was calm with long low swells, as we made our way to port. We docked in the early morning of the next day in Liverpool. It was several hours before we could disembark, but we enjoyed our first view of a world new to us, England. The regiment finally left the ship, and marched to

nearby trains for a ride to the south of England. Our regiment was housed near Winchester in Quonset huts, so commonly used at the time. We remained there for about one month, continuing intensive field training exercises. We had little time off duty, but I did have one opportunity to take a train to London on a three-day pass. (It was quite different from my next visit, during the summer of 1961, when, as a biomedical scientist, I returned to London and the continent to participate in a scientific meeting.). In 1944, I was only interested in booze and women.

By November first, we were on our way to France. We crossed the channel on LCTs (Landing Craft, Tanks), and landed at Omaha Beach. The crossing on the LCT was an adventure in itself. The channel is not usually a place of calm waters. The LCT was crammed full of men and equipment, the swells were high, and the ship was less than stable and many of us became seasick. I guess I must have a strong stomach, since I escaped the mal de mer! We were on deck for the entire crossing, which lasted overnight. Sleep was intermittent. At least we could slip out of our full field packs and try to get some rest. Our company bivouacked near Omaha Beach for 1-2 days in a sea of mud before we were enroute again. Meanwhile, a truck convoy had assembled to move us as rapidly as possible into the line. We rode without any significant stops, through France into Belgium (Namur), then into Holland (Maastricht) where we remained for about two days. One of the wonderful memories I have of Maastricht was being invited with a few men from my platoon to a simple dinner in a private home. We shared our own rations with them, but it sure tasted different. We were being treated like conquering heroes, not the fresh inexperienced troops that we were.

By November 9, we (the 335th Regiment) were temporarily detached from the 84th Division and reassigned to the 30th Infantry Division. The war began in earnest for us. We were on our way to the line near Aachen (Germany), and were to have our baptism of fire in the Siegfried Line. The Siegfried Line was a well armed line of bunkers, fortifications, and tank traps that was the western wall of protection for Germany. As we disembarked from a truck convoy, and started to advance on foot toward the front, the reality of what was happening began to sink in. The sounds of distant artillery became louder. It was a gray overcast day, which added to our apprehension. We began to see bodies of German soldiers by the roadsides, and could hear the noise of small arms fire. We were close! I did not know how others in the Company felt, but I was scared to death. What was going to happen to me? Would I survive? Would I be man enough to do my duty as an American soldier? I must not let my buddies down. Would I become a casualty? I was filled with self-doubt. All of us must have been having similar thoughts, but we were soldiers, and could not admit our fears to one another. Later, after we had been in battle, it was easier to admit our feelings. The rotting bodies we passed didn't help raise my spirits. At least, I didn't shit in my pants. We finally reached our destination, relieving a Company of the 30th Division on the line. It was dusk as we took over their positions and prepared for the night in the existing foxholes. After a cold meal of K-rations, we prepared for the night. My squad was in a forward position, and as the BAR man, I was out front. Chambers and I, in the hole, stood guard duty, two hours on and two off for our first night on the line. The first night was quiet, the silence broken only by occasional small arms and mortar fire. We were in a defensive position on high adrenaline alert, learning what infantry combat was about. For the next two weeks, the

line was relatively constant. On most nights, we went out on reconnaissance or combat patrols, usually 2-3 men, or the full squad (about 10 men). Sergeant Valuenzuela, our squad leader was a man I trusted. A Mexican-American, he had been with the outfit since its activation. In February 1944, when the 84th Division was filled out with the ASTP boys, he proved to be a competent friend. Now in combat, we trusted one another. In those few weeks, I changed from an untried infantryman to a combat veteran, actually doing what had been drilled into us in the months since we joined the Division. I learned what it was like to fire the M-1 or the BAR at a target other than a "bullseye".

The entire month of November had been cold, wet, and cloudy. Everything was colored grey. By Thanksgiving Day, we even had a few snow flurries. We had hopes for a hot meal, since we had not had one since we took over the sector of the frontline. Thanksgiving could be the occasion! Instead, all I got was a mess kit with a serving of cold green peas. Nothing else! Sgt. Storm, our supply sergeant, was as ineffective in combat, as he was back in the states. Sitting in my foxhole with cold peas, in damp, cold weather was not my idea of how to spend the holiday. At least I enjoyed a cigarette.

Then came that fateful day. While my regiment was attached to the 30th Division, the 84th had already taken two towns, Geilenkirchen and Prummern, on the way to the Siegfried Line. The 335th returned to the 84th Division on November 26, and our regiment was to lead the attack on the Lindern-Beeck area. The attack on Lindern was really the first major offensive for our regiment. From our patrols, we expected heavy resistance, and this proved to be the case. The 3rd Battalion (mine!) was to take the offensive, and Company I (mine!), along with Co K, was to lead the attack. The point of the attack was to be the 2nd platoon (mine!). We were to lead the way. We started off in

the dark cold of 6:00 am November 29, 1944, and rapidly advanced several hundred yards toward Lindern, but the Germans soon hit us with mortars, artillery, machine guns, and small arms fire. We were ordered to dig in and hold as best as we could, in a defensive position. By the time it was light, it became apparent that our platoon officer, Lt. Kellerman, had us isolated on relatively low ground, with fire pouring in from several directions. It was an untenable position. We could not advance or draw back. I was lucky to find an old mortar hole half full of water. I slid into it and used it as a foxhole. Hopper was about five feet from me when he was hit in the throat and died. I was using the M1 on this attack with bayonet fixed. We were ordered to hold our positions and not retreat. We held out like this without relief, and without artillery or mortar support for several hours, until we were without ammunition, surrounded, and Germans were coming from all directions. Kellerman gave the order to surrender, as they came at us shouting "Hande Hoch"! I stood up, dropped my weapon, and was taken prisoner. Only then did I realize that most of the platoon was dead. Why they didn't kill me on the spot I'll never know. Bodies of my friends and buddies were strewn around where they had tried to dig in. I did not know then, but learned later, that our battalion reserves came in shortly thereafter and retook the area from the Germans, and that our regiment had taken Lindern by the next day. But for me it was small comfort!

At the time I felt that I had let my country down by surrendering, and I honestly felt ashamed of what had happened. Even today, I feel the same way. I would have preferred to continue in active combat rather than become a POW. It was not right for my active combat duty to have lasted less than one month. This may be faulty reasoning, but that was my true feeling then and now. To this day, I blame Kellerman for what

happened. As for me, I had sustained three small shrapnel wounds, on my right thigh, my right hand, and a nick below my right eye. I remember that there were about ten of us alive, the remnants of our platoon of thirty-seven officers and men. The Germans disarmed us and started marching us to the rear. I did not know what was to come, but I did know that now I was MIA, missing in action. I wondered what my family would think about this. I knew that it would not be long before my mother would receive that telegram from the War Department informing her that I was missing in action. There was no way I could let her know that, at least for now, I was still alive.

It never occurred to me back in Camp Claiborne that I would become a POW. We had been instructed how to behave under the circumstances, to give the enemy no information other than name, rank, and serial number, but none of us really thought it would happen to us. Being killed or wounded was a real possibility, but being taken prisoner? Not on your life! It brings to mind the old joke that there are three ways to get out of the infantry: killed, wounded,and missing. Two out of three isn't so bad. Being taken prisoner also reminded me that, back in Camp Claiborne, when we were on maneuvers on a map and compass course, Kellerman did not do as well as many others in the platoon.

In German hands, we had already been divested of all our weapons. Now they took our helmets, watches, wallets, all personal effects, and all our cigarettes. They removed any photos we had, rings, and anything of value. At least for the moment, they allowed us to keep the clothing on our backs, but even this was to change soon. At their forward command post, they interrogated us, but there was little information they could obtain from the enlisted men. They knew what Division we were, sporting our

Railsplitter shoulder patches. Kellerman had been captured along with us, but he was soon separated from the men, and that was the last I saw of him. Other Americans that had been taken prisoner joined us, and we then started a march that would take us eventually to northeastern Deutchland. What started for me as an attack on the Siegfried Line in the direction of Koln (Cologne) became a forced march as a POW toward Dusseldorf. It was depressing. We were also very apprehensive about what might be coming. I also had the additional concern that I might get special treatment because I was Jewish. I did not know whether it was wise, but I decided to get rid of my dog tags, which I did as soon as I could. Imprinted on the dog tags was an "H" for Hebrew, so that the American army could give me a proper headstone if I had died in battle! I also did not want to let it be known then that I had reasonable fluency in German. (I had studied German for two years in high school, was fairly familiar with Yiddish, and had developed some fluency in spoken German, learning from some distant cousins who were refugees from Hitler's Nazism). We were among the first American troops in Germany, and I guess the population at that time still fancied they might yet win the war, eventhough it was going badly on two fronts. They were not generally friendly as we marched through one village after another. At one point, a grenade was thrown at our group, which by now had grown to about twenty-five. Luckily, it was a dud and did not explode. It probably disturbed our German guards more than us. We marched the better part of three days with little food or water, until things became a blur. On the second day, we stopped for a rest in a turnip field. They allowed us to dig up some turnips with our bare hands, which we did, scraped off the dirt, and ate. On the third day, we arrived at a railroad yard filled with the typical box cars of the Reichsbahn, the kind that during World War 1 were

called “forty and eights”, since each would hold forty men or eight horses. They put us in a boxcar with half a loaf of a dark sour bread and a canteen of water, and then locked the doors. There was little comfort! The floor was strewn with straw, which helped some, but there was little room to move about. We could either sit or stand. There were no windows, except one on the door to view the world outside. There were no toilet facilities. We definitely were not traveling first class. Eventually the train started to move, and most of us fell asleep. We were the walking wounded. Most of us had some wounds, albeit minor, but we never received any medical attention. The wounds on my leg and face became infected and started to drain. It was impossible to clean them.

It was hard to tell day from night. The best thing to do was sleep. The half loaf of bread had to be eaten slowly, since we didn’t know where or when our next meal would come. We would be let out once daily from this prison, to urinate or defecate in some field. Unfortunately, this was inadequate for most of us, and the boxcar became foul and rather aromatic. At many times during this trip, the train was halted in some railroad yard, no doubt sidetracked for more important cargo. Our most frightful time occurred when we were halted during an air raid. While we wanted our boys to inflict as much damage as possible, we did not want to be the target. Fortunately, we were not hit, but it delayed our transport, and made our guards somewhat less friendly. It was difficult to tell where we were, but some signs suggested we were in a railroad yard near Hannover, where we remained for about two days. In all probability, the bombing had damaged the rails. When the train started moving again, it continued in the same general direction. We would get more bread and water about every third day, and so it went for almost two weeks.

We were getting weaker and filthier. The wound on my right thigh was infected and draining pus. The wound below my left eye was getting worse. It was puffing up and interfering with my vision. Near the end of the second week, we passed a town called Neustrelitz, and shortly thereafter came to Neubrandenburg. By this time, I could not see at all out of my left eye, and the wound had broken open and was draining some foul smelling material. On the outskirts of the town, we entered a "Stalag fur Kriegsgefangene" (Camp for Prisoners of War), and, finally, got out of the boxcar. Neubrandenburg is in the northeastern part of Germany, in Landkreis Mecklenburg (Province of Mecklenburg), directly north of Berlin, about half way to the Baltic Sea. It was not the best part of the world in which to spend the winter of 1944-1945.