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#### INVITATION TO SCHILLERSDORF

The return address read Schillersdorf, France...a village some forty kilometers north of Strasburg in the Alsace region of France. The letter was from the Baltzers, a young couple who live in the first house..#43.. on the north side of the village, on the left side of the main, though dirt, street of this village of perhaps 500 population. Edith Baltzer's letter invited us to stay with them the next time we came to France. Which, the letter stressed, she hoped would be soon.

I know their house. Its brick wall facing north had been my protection on that bitter cold day in January of 1945 when my infantry company attacked the snow covered town to recover it from elements of the 6th SS Mountain Division which had taken it from our 2nd Battalion the day before. I was a ~~10~~<sup>20</sup> year old PFC in an infantry rifle squad.

*ITALICS*  
We came across the open field...a spread out company of infantry accompanied by four Sherman tanks. Our artillery lay down a barrage ahead of us. At first we simply walked towards the town...slightly behind or abreast the tanks which were firing randomly at likely targets in the town some couple of hundred yards ahead of us. The turret of the tank closest to me turned to the left and with one shot toppled the church steeple...a likely location for enemy observation. I was impressed.

*ITALIC*  
Closer to the town, we drew enemy small arms fire and took to the ground...employing short rushes to dash forward and then fall prone on the snow. All the time firing at the Germans. At last I came to the edge of the town and the Baltzer's house which shielded us from enemy fire.

My wife, Cathy, and I met the Baltzers in the summer of 1989 when I returned to Alsace with others from my infantry division, the 103rd, which had liberated much of Alsace and which had been invited by a committee of Alsatians to return for a weeks' festivities including visits to the numerous towns in the area where we had fought. Actually, I'd visited Schillersdorf before on a trip to Europe. Then, as now in 1989, I had walked around the Baltzer's house, stood where I had stood 44 years before, and remembered so well the life and death minutes of that battle.

This time as Cathy and I walked slowly in the street outside the Baltzer's house, Jean and Edith Baltzer came out. Jean is the chef for the local school system. He's probably 35 years old, friendly and attractive. Edith is charming and outgoing. They could speak some English, notably Edith; we a bit more French. Their house had belonged to her grandmother at the time of our battle there. They asked us in for a drink of wine.

Tanks  
 After making it across the field and coming up on the wall of the Baltzer's house, the lead tank took up position on the road just short of the first houses. With the tank firing ~~its~~ its machine guns and 76mm gun down the street, it was now up to the infantry to clear the houses on either side of the road. Tanks are vulnerable from their sides and rear. Most of the armor is in front. They can't advance unless their flanks are secured from enemy fire.

My Platoon leader was Jim Luck, a well known Georgia Tech

football player and post-war member of its athletic department. He died in an auto accident about a year ago. Jim was a fine man and a first rate combat officer. By war's end he had four Purple Hearts and both Bronze and Silver Star medals. I remember vividly the strained look on his face as, huddled against the Baltzer's wall, he gave the order for us to move out into the street and start clearing the houses on either side of the road. He knew what his order meant. It had to be done...this is what our job was. But he knew that most probably some of us would die or be wounded.

3-4/1/65  
 "Sergeant," he yelled. "Get these men out to the tank and into the houses." The Platoon Sergeant said something like "Okay boys. Let's go," and the two or three of us there followed him at a trot. When we came to the edge of our protecting wall, he sidestepped and gave each of us a pat on the back as we ran past. Whether there were two, three or four who ran out to the rear of the tank, I don't know. But from that moment on, I don't recall fighting as a team. Village-street action is like that. It is almost entirely individual action.

2-4/1/65  
 It seems absurd, but I remember how good it was to feel the warmth of the tank's <sup>exterior</sup> engine. The temperature was probably in the teens or lower and my hands were so cold it was difficult to reload my rifle. The snow covered village street with our tank in the middle was only some 18 feet wide. The distance to the door of the Baltzer's house was probably <sup>about 18 feet</sup> 20 feet.

With my hands a little warmer, I started. Enemy small arms fire was coming down the street. I crouched and

*FALIC* | darted out from the tank's rear and ran as hard as I could into the Baltzer house. The god's were with me; I wasn't shot. With my rifle at waist level, I quickly went through the rooms. No Germans.

That day in the summer of '89, 44 years after the battle, it all seemed quite unreal as I sat in the Baltzer's living room, drinking wine, eating cake and meeting their two children, Marc and Anne. It's a small old, old house (Schillersdorf dates back to the 13th century) with a barn to its rear. I tried to remember details of the house from 1945. I drew a blank. But it had to have been in these rooms that I had been...rifle at the ready, grenades hanging from my jacket...searching out the German troops who had evidently retreated from the house, probably just minutes before.

*I H/CS* | Our tank moved up even with the courtyard of the Baltzer house. I ran out and again stood behind it, warming my hands and readying myself for the next sprint. Out from the protection of the tank and to the next house... some 30 or so feet...and again enemy fire didn't pick me up.

*I H/CS* | And this time, too, no Germans in this house. I searched it out and it was empty. But then, standing in the shadows in the back of the front room and looking out the front window, I saw helmeted men in the basement window of the house diagonally across the street. I couldn't identify them. I couldn't even discern the shape of their helmets which would have told me if they were Germans or our own. I believe they saw me, because one of them waved at me.

Somehow...I don't know how...I got word back to our troops asking if we controlled that house. I was told that we thought so.

*I talk*

Our lead tank then moved forward. There was an explosion as Germans fired an anti-tank round from the cellar window into the tank's right side. The turret opened and two tankers scrambled out. The third had been killed. The second tank in line attached itself to the stricken tank, pulled it out of the way, and then returned, depressed its gun and fired round after round into the basement window.

*I talk*

I watched all this from across the street. And suddenly a side door opened and out came eight...I think it was eight...Germans with hands on head, surrendering. Eight German prisoners, one dead American tanker, one dead American tank.

I thought of all this as I sat in the Baltzer's living room. Schillersdorf hadn't changed much since 1945, but the house from which the Germans had killed our tank didn't seem to exist. Or at least not ~~be~~ in the right place. In our broken English-French conversation I gathered that the house had been torn down.

For all the years since 1945, I had thought often of those men in the cellar who had destroyed our tank, killed our tanker, and then, hands on heads, walked away from it all. I had seen them. Could I have known they were Germans? And what if I had shot them one by one...or perhaps just one or two of them...as they came out of the house. It would have been simple. They should have paid a price.

With the new tank ready and the across-the-street house at last secured, our tank moved up a few feet and I darted out to its rear. Then, again, the crouch and the sprint to the next house. This was not so easy. To get into this house, I had to run up the street, ~~a few feet~~, turn left into a courtyard, and make for the front door on the side of the house facing the courtyard. As I ran, a German machine gun had me in its sights. It got off two bursts. Bullets hit the wall of the house right behind me. The second burst took chips off the wall directly...inches...in front of me. I hurled myself into the house on all fours. When I got up, I saw two Americans with bloody bandages on their heads. They had been wounded the day before and had somehow kept out of sight when the Germans were in the house.

Apparently there were no enemy in the house, but there were plenty of them on the far side of the courtyard, about 100 feet away. On the second floor...again staying back in the shadows...I looked out the window overlooking the street. There in the second floor window of the house opposite...20 feet away...was a German SS. I believe from his smart, grey uniform he was an officer. He was looking down the street in the direction I had come. I crept to the window, placed the barrel of my weapon in the window sill corner, and held it snug against the wood frame. I wanted nothing to go wrong with this shot. I took aim, squeezed off the shot, and then dropped to the floor, fully expecting return enemy fire. Going back to the rear of the room, I crouched in the shadows and looked out the window. The German was gone.

During village fighting like this, the civilians, who have remained, huddle in the protection of their cellars. They are quite safe unless one of us did the very normal thing of tossing a couple of hand grenades down the cellar stairs. After the sounds of battle are over, they come upstairs to whatever is left of their homes. ~~The fighting troops have moved on and the headquarters and rear echelon groups have probably not arrived.~~ And while the civilians check out their homes, they find the dead in their houses, in their barns, and outside in their yards.

I had purchased a book on the history of the war in this part of Alsace with a good chronicle of that day's battle in Schillersdorf. It said the Germans suffered 21 killed. I asked Jean if a dead German had been found by the second floor window of that house just up and across the street from his. He said yes.

The Baltzers showed me a letter from another American, Clyde Reeder, who had fought in Schillersdorf and whom they had met when he (like I) had come back to Schillersdorf, and they had seen him walking about their house, viewing it from the street and obviously studying it. They had Clyde and his wife in for wine and they had become friends. I could hardly place Clyde, but then I remembered he had been in Birdsong's squad in my platoon. I remembered Birdsong well. He planned to become a missionary after the war and had become a sergeant and squad leader. I was a few feet from him in a night action when he stepped on a mine and was blown to bits. Evidently Clyde had then become squad leader. His letter to the Baltzers explained in some detail his adventures in their house.

His squad had been held in reserve as we attacked Schiller-  
ersdorf. After we had entered the town and were fighting  
one or two houses up the street, Reeder's squad was  
called forward and told to re-search the houses.

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He approached the Baltzer house. In the courtyard was a  
dead American. On entering the house, he almost shot  
an aged civilian..undoubtedly Edith's grandfather who must  
have come up from the cellar, and was wandering about  
muttering "Allas Kaput." Then Reeder drew fire from two SS  
who appeared from the direction of the Baltzer barn.  
Somehow he got a tank (probably the second in line) to direct  
fire on the ~~Baltzer~~ barn. <sup>It</sup> ~~The barn~~ took heavy damage and  
the Germans, if not killed, must have retreated from the  
barn and made their way to their main force.

Reading his letter and thinking back to that day 44 years  
ago, I remember that as we came across the field towards  
the Baltzer house, a German was standing on what was  
probably a small loading dock at the rear of the Baltzer's  
barn shooting at us. I recall how frustrated I was,  
lying in the snow while trying to reload my rifle with  
near frozen hands so I could continue firing back at him.

So when I had cleared the Baltzer house, there were no  
Germans in it. They were in the barn. How and when the  
American was killed in their courtyard, I don't know.  
Reeder, on emerging from the Baltzers, and I suppose  
heading for the next house up the street, was hit by rifle  
fire in the leg. He had ever since been perplexed by the  
angle of fire that ~~hit~~ hit him, thinking it must have  
come from the Germans in the cellar who moments later hit  
our tank. But that angle didn't agree with the entry path  
of the bullet. When he learned of the German in the second  
floor whom I had shot, he decided that was where the person  
who hit him must have been.

Edith, Jean, Cathy and I strolled slowly down the street.  
I suppose our attack had started about 6 or 7 in the  
morning. By dusk we had routed the Germans. But we had



not even covered the first full block of this street.

I pointed to a house and asked Jean if it hadn't suffered considerable damage which he confirmed. I recalled it had been on fire and an old woman had come out and was trying to douse the flames. She was stopped by a few of our troops who were heating coffee on the coals of the fire.

I asked Jean about the feelings of the townspeople. They were more German than French...even speaking a German patois. Schillersdorf struck me as a cold town. None of the villagers said hello, smiled or even nodded a greeting. It was an unfriendly town in 1945, and, except for Jean and Edith, remained so 44 years later. Jean said it was a mixed situation, but that there had been plenty of pro German sentiment. And as we slowly walked the street, I wondered which house it was in which at dusk after the fight I had politely asked the elderly woman and her husband ~~for~~ for hot water for my coffee. They understood me; I'd asked in German. But they ignored me until I made it very plain with my rifle that I wanted hot water and I wanted it fast.

We strolled a few feet farther and again I stared at houses and remembered. At dawn of the day after the battle, we continued our search of every house in the town. In one, just up the street from Jean and Edith's, I found a civilian, dead, tied back down on a table. His feet and hands had been cut off. For some reason I did not ask Jean about this.

We had several more days remaining in Alsace. The Baltzers asked us for dinner and we arrived bearing gifts of cognac and wine. Dinner was good and..despite the language problem...all had a good time. Their children..

Marc and Anne...were most appealing. Well behaved, helpful and fun. I felt comfortable in their front room and don't think I gave even a thought to the first time I'd been there 44 years ago. There was lots of conversation to keep my mind occupied and we were there only a couple of hours.

Our last day in Alsace was a Sunday. We were staying at the Auberge de <sup>L'Alsace</sup> ~~Boch~~, a country inn, in Pfaffenhoffen, about 3 or 4 kilometers from Schillersdorf. The day was to be a festive one with bands, parades and ceremonies. The French were celebrating their bi-centennial and we Americans were included as a minor part of the overall event. We had asked Jean and Edith to join us and to bring Marc and Anne.

In the morning, Cathy and I went to the Protestant church service. The church bells were pealing loudly as we walked up the steps of the Lutheran church and were greeted by the pastor. It is an old church; simple, even stark. The congregation included numerous American veterans and their wives. The service...was it in French or was it the German patois...was reasonably understandable and not unfamiliar. We all pray for the same things.

Later that morning, I was outside the Auberge walking towards the next corner when I was approached by a tall, elderly Alsatian who asked if I was an American veteran who had fought in Pfaffenhoffen. I explained that I had not been in Pfaffenhoffen, but had been in Schillersdorf and the Hagenau Forest...the scene of another sharp engagement with the SS. He understood me, took my hand and said "Merci." I was touched, but my French was too limited to reply. All I could think of was "de rien"... it's nothing. But that was hardly what I wanted to say.

About noon I went into the bar of the Auberge. No Americans, but a number of male villagers both seated and standing at the bar. I suppose their ages ranged from the 20s to the mid sixties or seventies. Some too young for WW2, others the right age. I had my drink and noted the high spirits and laughter of the group. Perhaps I imagined it, but I think not. I felt an undercurrent of laughter directed at me and Americans in general... sort of a belittling of these people who had come back to Alsace to relive memories of a conflict years ago. It was a curious feeling I sensed. It was as if they'd have preferred that the Germans had won.

The Baltzers joined us and we walked the streets, enjoying the food, the crowds, the music. Ten year old Anne took my hand and held it ~~in hers~~ as we walked.

Dinner at the Auberge was crowded and festive. Music played and the wine flowed. The dining room was packed with Alsatians and Americans. During dinner, Jean touched my arm and whispered in my ear. He was indicating a man at a table close by. He had been an SS, Jean said. The man was tall and wiry. Probably mid sixties or seventy. He was devouring his food with a napkin tucked in his collar. He had an air of superior detachment from all those around him. I wondered if we had seen each other before.

We said our goodbyes to the Baltzers in the parking lot next to the Auberge. I kissed Edith and Anne. Shook hands with Jean and Marc. They off to Schillersdorf; we back to the Auberge for our final night in Alsace.

When next we write, we have to say something about this invitation. Undoubtedly we'll get back to Europe in the next year or two. And I'd like to see them. They're nice people. But I just don't know about staying in their house, staying on that street. Where it seems no one (aside from Jean and Edith) smile or say hello. And the people would know who I was---an American who had fought the Germans there in 1945. And how would I feel looking at those houses and windows that had been full of danger and killing. Or walking out into their yard where a dead American had fallen. Where Clyde had been wounded. Right across from the place where our tank had been hit and our tanker killed. And just down the street from where I had shot a German in the head.

It may have been years ago. But when I stand on that dirt street outside the Baltzer's house and look around, it all comes back. The shell fire, the tanks, the killing.

I just don't know that I want to spend another night in Schillersdorf.