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Sessenheim, January 19, 1945

After the fiasco of the Third Battalion's attack on Hill 387 near Morsbach in Lorraine, the entire division was moved back eastward to Alsace again. But the situation there was different from what it had been when we left in December. The "Battle of the Bulge" may have exhausted Germany's last offensive capacity. But it had also seriously blunted the Western Allies' drive to take the entire west bank of the Rhine as the next-to-last step in defeating Germany, while the Soviet armies battered inexorably into eastern Germany.

We had been hauled some distance in trucks on January 18, 1945. Around dark we unloaded in some fairly thick woods, a few kilometers east of Hagenau. (Hagenau, in turn, is about 25 kilometers north of Strasbourg.) It was quiet; we couldn't even hear any artillery in the distance, so we assumed that we must be some distance from the line. Word came down that we'd be in this area all night. We were to spread out a bit and dig slit trenches to sleep in. But we were to maintain a blackout—no smoking, even, except in the holes. Sounded as if we were fairly close, after all.

Next morning we got the word on the situation. The First and Third Battalions of our regiment, the 411th, along with a battalion from the 410th Regiment, were now the main part of a "combat team", the other part of which would be tanks—eight of them, of the 781st Tank Battalion. We, the Third Battalion of the 411th Infantry, were to replace some other outfit ahead of us to the east in the edge of the forest. Then, working with the tanks, we would attack a village named Sessenheim, across a broad plain. Sessenheim is on a small river, the Moder, making its way to the Rhine, which is only a couple of kilometers more to the east.

The Germans had begun applying pressure in the area north of Strasbourg, and we were now in that area. By taking Sessenheim, we were told, we would thwart their attack, throw them off balance. There was not much intelligence on what was in Sessenheim, or what kind of an outfit or outfits we would go up against. (Later we learned they included some Waffen SS units, which would not have been regarded as good news.) We wondered why the brass thought we'd need tanks. But the tanks made us apprehensive. As someone usually managed to pronounce about that, always in gloomy tones, "the bastards draw artillery." Artillery was the dread of the infantryman.

Before dawn the next day, the 19th, we moved out along a road through the mostly pine forest. Soon the outfit we were replacing began moving past us toward the rear in a column of twos, as we moved forward in the same formation. They were bedraggled: unshaven, muddy, weary-looking, and mostly quiet. As they filed out and we filed in, a few of them offered their own succinct briefings, such as "Tough shit, boys," or "You poor bastards are in for it."

There had been a thaw and much of the snow had melted, followed by a hard freeze. Many of our guys had had their helmets painted white back in Morsbach. I had declined what I figured was too permanent a form of camouflage, and had instead gotten hold of a white piece of

cloth to stretch over mine. This I had by now taken off and stuffed into a pocket. These woods had been shelled a lot, and tree trunks, standing, leaning, or down, looked black. Some of the troops we were replacing grinned at those with white helmets and said "Target-heads," or "bull's-eye!"

I must not have been alone in thinking all was not right in this situation. Couldn't put my finger on it—it just had a bad feel. One man in our platoon—I don't remember who—began to lag. When Kippen told him to catch up, he said, "I can't. I'm not going this time." Kip said, almost snarling, "You'll go if I have to kick your ass every foot of the way." The guy, obviously terrified, said, "I've had enough. I'm scared. I'm not going." Another voice joined the dialogue: "You think we aint scared, you son of a bitch? How do you get to be one so scared you don't have to go?" Kip gave him a shove and another word or two, and the guy, sniffling by now, moved ahead and took his place again in the column.

As we got closer to the edge of the woods, we could hear the rumble and grinding of the tanks that were joining us. They were not in our part of the column, so we couldn't see them. But as the noise they made grew louder, sure enough we began to pick up the whine of incoming 88s. We hit the ground, but could hear enough of the tonal change of the whine to know they were not going to hit close. About a dozen cracking explosions, a few hundred meters behind. The tank engines ground on. Jeez, why couldn't they put better mufflers on those things?

No more 88s. After a few minutes, we moved on. But now we knew that they knew that we were here, with tanks. Dawn had passed, and we had a cold, grey, overcast early morning. We could make out the edge of the woods, and the wide flat plain that it bordered. K Company moved down to the right, moving back a bit from the plain so we'd be less visible.

Companies I and L were, with the tanks, to cross the plain from our left and hit Sessenheim, of which we got glimpses of a church steeple and some roofs, off to our right front. We (K) were to hold up in the edge of the woods as reserve, either to follow I and L in or to hit Sessenheim from the right flank if necessary. Word came down that we wouldn't be in position long enough to dig in, so each of us looked around for any naturally available cover.

But when mortars began to come in, many bursting in the trees above us, few, including me, had decent shelter. We were well spread out, but after each batch of shells bursts the call for "Medic! Medic!" could be heard. I wondered how many casualties K Company was taking. Should have been more worried about I and L, heading out onto the plain with the tanks.

I was at the edge of the woods and had a clear view of that scene. The tanks, each followed by a couple of squads from I or L Companies, were stretched out in a ragged line. It looked as if the lead tank was getting close to the first buildings of Sessenheim, amidst a lot of rifle and machinegun fire, punctuated by an occasional deeper blast from the big guns on the tanks.

Suddenly we heard something new and terrifying. It sounded like 1,000 mile-per-hour freight trains, screaming and roaring across that plain, roughly toward us—a rapid series of horrendous roars and explosions. For a moment I wondered whether this could be some new "secret weapon." When I realized they were not hitting in our immediate area, I managed to lift my head high enough to see what it was. A few others were doing the same, and someone figured it out and hollered, "It's point-blank 88s! Look at the tanks!"

The lead tank had reached the edge of the village, where it had been hit and stopped. The troops with it had made it into the village and taken cover. The tanks still out in the open were being hit, one after the other, by those 88s firing point-blank. From four or five of the tanks, the top had flown open and their crews had piled out and begun a mad dash back across the plain where they'd come from. The tops didn't open on the others; they were smoking, having apparently

been stopped by shells that had pierced their armor and probably killed their crews. It was missed by some of those 88s that came in our general direction, making such fearful noise.

The option of taking off for the rear was not open to the riflemen who had gone out with the tanks at the head of the column. Those closest to the village had rushed it, seeking cover. Many others were scattered on the ground in the wakes of the tanks, killed or wounded—or playing dead. Only those following the last few tanks were able to make a reasonably orderly withdrawal—although “orderly” has to be understood here in an elastic sense. It looked like a total wipe-out of the tanks, and a very high proportion of losses in the two rifle companies. (The regimental history, *From Bruyeres to Brenner*, p.9, gave I Company’s roster afterward as 28 and L’s as 50. Assuming 150 in each company going in, I Co.’s losses were over 80 per cent, and L’s were over 67 per cent. An unstated but probably significant number of these were captured, inside Sessenheim. K Company’s losses were not listed. They were less dramatic, for we remained in reserve all day and took only a routine number of casualties, mainly from mortars.)

Another footnote to the wipe-out of the tank unit deserves inclusion. Years later, in 1965 or ‘66, I was on the faculty of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. I fell into conversation with Dave Kayser, the director of the Joint University Libraries. I don’t recall how the discussion moved to such a subject, but it turned out that he had been a captain, in charge of those eight tanks of the 781st Tank Battalion. He had been among the lucky ones who popped out of the top of their tank and set records for the dash back to the woods. But he remembered the name “Sessenheim” from an even more harrowing perspective than I did.

By then it was late morning, and the order came down for K Co. to shift to our right, staying in the edge of the forest. Our movement of a few hundred yards must have been visible to their mortar fire controllers, for mortars soon began to rain in on us. They seemed to have generous supplies of ammunition and were well zeroed in on our position. We began to take casualties.

Time passed and the mortars let up. The medics had a lot to do, moving from one to another of those hit. Most were only wounded, and few were killed. The tree-bursts blew a lot of metal among us, but most of the mortar shells were evidently small (50-60mm. or less), and only those that hit very close could be lethal.

When most of the incoming stuff is exploding in the trees, and there are no holes in the ground in which to take cover, the best position is hunched in a squatting foetal position, head up, in the smallest knot possible close against the trunk of a solid tree, rather than stretched out flat on the ground. Muscles get tired holding that position, but the fear inspired by the overhead explosions keeps one tense. During this lull I leaned my back against the tree and spread my legs to relax. There was time to call around to see if others in the squad were OK. All OK.

But mortars come in without the whistle or whine which is the tell-tale warning of spinning artillery rounds. One gets only a brief “whoosh” before the explosion. So when the next batch came in, there I sat with no time to move. The tree bursts were almost directly overhead this time, and at the same time I heard a loud but non-explosive “thunk” right in front of me. Mid-way between my spread thighs, a round hole had appeared in the damp ground. It was about two to two-and-a-half inches in diameter. Looking directly down the hole, one could see a portion of the fuze mechanism on the tail of the kraut mortar round. Had it not been a dud, my army career would no doubt have come to an abrupt end right there.

I was petrified, just staring, hypnotized, at that hole in the ground. One of the guys close by happened to be Patsy Mastramico. Patsy had been one of the earliest replacements in the platoon, back in November. His family had immigrated to the States when he was a kid, but he

still spoke with a marked Italian accent when excited. He was looking at me and at that hole, bugeyed. "Jee Skarice, John!" he groaned. "Counta you balls!"

The mortars had slacked off again, and our movement continued to the right, along the edge of the woods. I scrambled up with the others and ran a bit farther along, keeping an eye out for possible cover every yard of the way. A sizable tree had been blown over, putting its roots in the air and leaving a hole five or six feet across and a couple of feet deep in the center. I dove for it just as more mortars began to come in. Bud Brown also landed in the shallow hole. Most of the bursts were in tree branches, alarmingly close overhead. At the height of all the noise, a sharp stinging pain caught me behind the right shoulder. "Bud, I'm hit," I said, and he stuck up his head and yelled "Medic! Medic!" I pulled off my right glove and worked my fingers. They all moved. I moved my elbow and upper arm. Both in working order. A delighted thrill began to suffuse me. I'd be out of it! Maybe not a million dollar wound. But weeks in a hospital, I was sure. Weeks!

"Where is it?" Bud wanted to know. I told him, and in a second he pulled the right strap of my pack off my shoulder, I unhooked my ammo belt, and he clawed up my jacket, shirt, and undershirt. About that time Meche the medic scrambled over. They bared my back up to my neck. The medic spoke first. "Tough shit, John. It just pinked you at the edge of the shoulder blade. Barely a drop of blood. Hold still, I'll bandage it."

"To hell with it," I said, my vision of the hospital fading rapidly. "Lemme get all this crap back on."

There were two little pieces of jagged shrapnel, one about half the size of the tip of my thumb, the other smaller. The larger had gone through the outside of my pack and into a waxed cardboard box of K ration, where it penetrated and lodged inside of the cat-food-sized can of yellow cheese, denting outward the opposite side of the can. Had it not been stopped, it would have done considerable damage to my lung. The smaller one had also gone through the K ration box, but missed the can. It had gone through the canvas of my back pack, barely cut my shirt and undershirt, and, its force spent, had stopped there, producing the sting and the very slight cut in the skin. The worst damage was to my spare pair of dry socks. Folded over and tucked just inside the pack, on top of the K ration, each had ragged holes torn through them. (I put the two little chunks of kraut mortar shell in a pocket, to keep as souvenirs. But eventually they were misplaced and lost.)

When I got my shirt, jacket, and pack back on, Bud slapped me heartily on the arm. "It's great, John! You're OK!"

"Yeah," I muttered. "Great."

After a number of short moves along to the right, followed by periods of waiting, and keeping far enough from the border of the woods along the plain that (we hoped) we were not visible to observers in Sessenheim, the word came down to dig in. Two-man holes. But first, we should try to find a clearing where we could set up at least two of our three mortars, aimed so that we could fire defensively into a zone a couple of hundred meters wide in the plain parallel to the edge of the woods. The company's two machine guns were positioned at the edge of the woods, one at the farthest right flank of the first platoon, one at the corresponding place on the left. It was a standard defense, in which we would have the advantage of planned fields of fire, should they

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decide to cross the plain and come after us. What we did not know was that K Company was the only reasonably intact rifle company left in the battalion—only fragments of I and L were left.

But also it was getting late, and daylight was fading fast. We didn't have time to search until we could find an adequate clearing for mortars, much less to get them laid for possible firing at night, should the krauts decide to come out and see how badly we'd been hurt during the day. (At that time, of course, our officers had not passed that very discouraging intelligence along to us.) We could only find places for our holes, and start digging. Fortunately the ground was damp and relatively easy to move, nor did we run into too many large roots. We were able to dig out pretty good two-man holes in relatively short order. As usual in this sort of situation, the rule was one man awake at all times in each hole. This meant two hours of sleep, sitting in the bottom of the hole, followed by two hours standing, head above ground level, peering into the dark and trying to interpret every crack of a twig or cough from some other hole. With luck, a total of four to five hours of sleep for each. Never enough.

The grey morning arrived, and nothing much seemed to be going on. The word was that we'd probably move to another position during the day, but that we'd probably spend another night in these woods, still close to Sessenheim. During the morning we began to learn the extent of the Battalion's losses the day before. Companies I and L were, to all intents and purposes, gone. What was left of them was put together in a couple of platoon-sized units, to function as reserves for K Company. The latter was deployed along the edge of the woods, to cover that plain still separating us from Sessenheim. We found positions from which our three mortars could fire up between treetops and onto that plain, and set the mortars up. The problem was that we did not have a large supply of ammunition. We'd not be able to support the defense for a very long time against a sustained German attack. Thus as the hours passed, the level of anxiety and tension remained fairly high. There was not much to do, and time dragged slowly.

When darkness finally came, and we made preparations to spend another night there, many of us were as tired from the nervous tension as if we had been working physically all day. The sleep deficit from the preceding night, and the stress of the day before that had contributed their quotas to the cumulating fatigue. I looked forward to some sleep.

We got less than two hours sleep. Word came down to the platoon to get ready to move again. Coming at the time it did, this was not received with great glee. But the order was soon supplemented by information that this was not just another tactical shift of position. Other U.S. forces on each flank had begun a general withdrawal; as we pulled back, bridges we crossed would be blown up by the engineers. We (the Allied forces in this sector) were going to cede a sizeable chunk of territory to the Germans. "We are going," said one noncom, "to haul ass. An' anybody lags, or drops out, will just have to wait for the krauts to pick him up an' tend to his achin' back and bleedin' feet."

So, under orders to keep it as quiet as possible, and not to talk at all, Third Battalion began a retreat that would last all night. Following the shoot-out at Sessenheim, the battalion was down close to half of its normal strength—which, of course, due to the attrition of "normal" casualties, was never as large as full strength of over 700. There was probably a unanimous sense of relief that we were pulling out of a situation that was obviously very dangerous.

We started out at a fairly normal clip. We were on a road before long, and the terrain in the ~~time~~ plain was relatively flat. When we crossed bridges over small streams, a team of engineers was usually standing by. After we'd passed, and allowing enough time for the rest of the column to get across, we'd hear the explosions as the bridges went up. We hoped those guys were also

laying a lot of mines. It was obvious that none of the bridges was large enough to cause the krauts much of a delay, if they wised up to our sudden departure and organized a reconnaissance in strength to harass our rear.

However, the pace slowed after an hour or so. The buildup of fatigue and sleeplessness must have affected even the officers, who did not carry the load of weapons and ammunition that the rest of us did, for they were not hassling us to move faster. Instead they seemed much more solicitous than ever in encouraging people to keep going if they showed signs of beginning to straggle.

It became another one of those all-night marches, with occasional ten-minute breaks to rest. It got colder, and we came into snow-covered ground. The road was not icy, however, and footing was steady enough that one could doze while walking—a trick that many of us had learned back in November and December on those not too frequent occasions when we had smooth and relatively level surfaces to cover at night.

Finally, about dawn, we came into a village large enough to billet the 350 or so left in the battalion. Most of the mortar section was able to get into one small house, for with our sleeping bags we did not need beds. An elderly Alsatian lady dithered about, smilingly making sure everyone had a good space to stretch out. We were soon all asleep.

Late that afternoon, when some of us began to wake up and move about, we could not help noticing photographs of a couple of her sons in Wehrmacht uniforms. The lady even proudly identified them. I could not decide whether she did not know that we were Americans, or whether to her it no longer made any difference. Perhaps she was willing to welcome and try to make comfortable any mothers' sons who were far from home and engaged in this unlucky business.