

Memories of the Last Weeks **As Submitted By Immanuel J. Wilk**

The 103rd Infantry Division had moved to some small village a few miles north of Ulm and the Danube River in Bavaria. At that time I had been assigned to the radio detachment of the lead infantry elements. In the evening I took off with the regular messenger run and eventually we got down to regimental headquarters. After saying hello to the gang down there, I went over to the radio area, and my radio vehicle. We were billeted in a rather small farmhouse. The original occupants weren't too happy about it, because they had to live in the barn. Still, if we'd have followed the regulations to the letter, we could have thrown them out of the buildings completely.

One old woman was complaining and a GI, who talked pretty good German, told her off in rather plain but effective language. The rumor was that we were to cross the Danube River the following morning. It sounded true, because the artillery was going all night, both ours and theirs. A few artillery shells landed in the field adjoining the farm, but they didn't come any closer, so we didn't worry about it. Some infantry moved on the following day; my division didn't, but the engineers constructed bridges across the river. We finally made it across the river the following day. As far as we knew, the plan was to form a task force with tanks, and infantry, and go through Bavaria as far, and as fast, as possible.

Our radio, together with the regimental set, was directly attached to the regimental commander. We had about four or five vehicles in our group, including jeeps and weapons carriers. Our destination was some small village on the south bank of the river. However, we went right through it. On the highway we passed our infantry moving up. Some GIs had captured a few Krauts and made them carry part of their equipment. More and more Germans passed us on the road, wanting to surrender to us, but we were too busy moving up, so we simply told them to keep on marching and someone would take care of them. We finally hit an armored recon detachment sitting a few hundred yards outside a group of houses. They told us they had been fired on and one man got hurt, so we waited until one of the jeeps had come back from the village, without finding out anything.

Some civilian on a bike tried to pass us, I stopped and questioned him, he acted rather confused and forlorn. He wanted to see some relatives in the next town. The fact that American troops were around apparently didn't mean a thing to him. His papers were in a somewhat confused state; according to them he was still in the army, but he produced a paper signed by some lieutenant stating that he had been discharged. When I asked him why the proper changes hadn't been made he replied that during the past days the officers in his unit had simply written out these slips as the only way of getting them out of the army, legally or illegally. We were ready to move on again, so we had to let him go. Somebody else probably could spend more time on him, we hoped.

We passed a number of Frenchmen guarding POW's and they appeared rather happy with their job. One Frenchman told me he'd been waiting for this for a long time. Among the POWs were a group of Lithuanians who had been put into uniforms and formed into some sort of labor gang. They kept apart from the Germans and hoped for the best.

We finally moved into a small village, not exactly knowing what the situation would be. The people were quiet and just stood there staring at us. Right close to the city hall they were beginning to deliver all their arms and those left by the retreating troops. We took a look, but there was nothing interesting in the bunch.

Eventually we came to the house where the regimental commander had his headquarters. We parked our vehicle outside and began to really get busy clearing messages with division HQ with deciphering and enciphering the messages. One message gave the location of certain advance elements. When the colonel read those he couldn't believe it, it seemed much too far ahead, but after we received confirmation he just shook his head in amazement. Later in the evening an armored column passed us and sometime during the middle of the night we began to move again, only stopping occasionally for an hour or so, then a temporary Command Post was set up. One half was in a small village with a small road leading through it; quite naturally, all our troops used that road. Notwithstanding that some farmer came down the opposite way with an ox team and slowly created a neat traffic jam. He was soon informed, in no uncertain terms, to get off the road. After taking a look at the guns pointed in his general direction, he moved in an awful hurry, and the road was clear again. Just how intentional his actions were, no one could tell. Anyhow we didn't find any of that later on and so we kept moving, mostly first on side roads, and then the highway. Our little task force, consisting of about three jeeps and two weapons carriers, moved fairly rapidly. We didn't know whether the roads had been mined or not and to worry about it didn't do any good; as it was, the situation was somewhat tense.

The Germans were supposed to be somewhere ahead of us. Between them and us, not necessarily in the same line, an armored task force of ours was plowing ahead. Way behind us the infantry was moving up. This was the general picture, a rather changeable one. We ran into companies and battalions of Wehrmacht who marched by us with their hands over their heads and some one in the front rank carrying a white flag. These groups used to come out of the woods where they had probably dumped all their arms, at least so we hoped; we motioned them on so the infantry could catch up with them and take care of them. It was a good thing the situation didn't grow any more ticklish.

In every town we passed the flags were out or in the process of being brought out. They were white ones and looked mighty pretty. The Bavarians were standing outside their houses mostly watching us pass by. Once in a while they tried to smile and one woman made a little girl wave something we didn't pay any attention to. The people who were really happy were the former POWs and displaced persons. They would stand along the road, yell and cheer with laughing faces and at times applaud us

as if we had finished a superb performance. Some, who apparently had been in the army at one time, saluted every vehicle passing by. We kept moving. At one spot our tanks had run into a German supply column. The road was littered with parts of vehicle supplies and bodies; it looked quite messy. We made a little detour, trying not to run over too many bodies, and carried on. We ran into a column of our vehicles outside a small town, and moved therefore rather slowly. Much to our surprise, several Messerschmidts appeared all of a sudden, and strafed us; we were lucky. Apparently, one plane, seeing our antennae sticking up, considered us a vital target. He touched his trigger a fraction of a second too late. His right wing guns were hitting a couple of feet ahead of us and the left wing guns a foot or so behind us. Some fellows in the armored car ahead of us got hurt and there were several casualties in the convoy. We moved on. One time we took a wrong turn in the road, but found it out in time. There were still too many Krauts on the loose and mines. We finally came to a point where we could see the Alps in the distance. It was fairly warm in the plain and the mountains looked very cold. We were to find out later on, just how cold it was up there. We passed lots of burning vehicles on the road, indication that our armored column was not too far ahead of us. All during this time we were trying to keep in communication with division headquarters. Swindells, the radio operator, had been on the radio for some time trying his best. After a couple of hours, he got so disgusted not being able to raise any one that he took his headset off, threw it down, and began to swear something awful. No sleep for several days and then this on top of the tension already existing; it was a good thing he didn't smash the radio, he was mad enough. I took over and he half collapsed and fell asleep, totally exhausted. Finally we entered our first destination, Schöngau, Germany. The town looked dead. I didn't see any people at all, of course, we weren't really looking for any. Once we found a parking space, we could relax a little bit. The medics came and picked one of the fellows up, who had been wounded in the strafing attack. Then we got messages to be cleared to division. After all, our radio was the only link between our little group and the other American forces. Now began one of the most arduous tasks: using a radio, that under normal conditions would cover about thirty miles, we tried to cover about seventy. After a while the task force S-3 crawled into our vehicle and looked at me. I just shook my head, "can't get through, the others must be asleep". This time we really got mad at the people sitting back there who didn't have the foresight to put a relay set into a good position or issue special instructions to the other radios to especially listen to us. We were the spearhead of the Seventh Army, as a matter of fact of the Sixth Army Group, and certainly deserved some consideration.

Finally I succeeded in contacting another of the regimental station/410th/who told me upon inquiry that they were in contact with division. So I got all my messages, which I had previously enciphered and began to send them. The interference and atmosphere was so bad that I had to send the groups four or five times, sometimes more often. After a long while all messages had been cleared. When I told the S-3 that we were clearing the messages, he just said thank heavens, and for the first time smiled a bit.

The next day we moved into a house. The occupants weren't too happy about it. One item they didn't like was the fact that we were using their kitchen and chinaware. We finally told them they should be happy they were allowed to occupy part of the house, because under the official ruling Germans were not permitted to live in the same house as Americans. After that they kept quiet. We didn't stay there for long, soon we were out in our vehicle, waiting to move again. While sitting on the street we saw a CIC agent stopping a German on a bicycle. Apparently he had been looking for this German, because he checked his papers, asked him several questions. All of a sudden the sergeant began to slap the German and yelling at him. He then found out that this German was some partyman whom they had been looking for. Now he had tried to escape, using forged papers. It didn't work.

Just before we moved out again, the Red Cross began to distribute donuts, i.e. just "poured" them into helmets. That was one time when every one appreciated the Red Cross. These donuts just seemed to hit the spot.

Then we were on our way into the Bavarian Alps. The country was beautiful, except for the fact that we somehow kept looking for snipers. At first, in the hills, it wasn't so bad, we kept rolling along. Once in a while we'd see people staring at us, but they didn't dare to come close. In one place a young girl came down from their farmhouse to take a look at us and our vehicles. She seemed to think we were from another world, just staring at us. Finally the boys chased her back to her house, because her presence might have been misinterpreted. Non-fraternization was actually enforced at that time.

Most of the time we moved. Only when our armored spearhead ran into a road block, or some sniper fire, did we stop, until these interferences had been disposed of. One of these roadblocks was outside Oberammergau, Germany. Just before we got there, we lost our other vehicle. We didn't know whether they had turned off some place or gone into town. After a bit of debate we decided to take a chance, and enter the town. If the town were full of troopers, it was just too bad.

So we dashed in there full speed; we were lucky some of our force had entered before us so we parked among the picturesque houses, and waited for our orders to resume the advance. Some of the fellows went up to the city hall and came back with armloads full of all kinds of hunting rifles. It really was a sight. One of the men just about got left behind, because he couldn't move fast enough. I happened to run into several Frenchmen who had been put to work in that city. Those people looked quiet well. Nonetheless, although they did mention they hadn't been treated too badly, they were awfully glad we had come. One of them was from Paris and he began to talk about his home there, what he would do when he got back, just how wonderful a city Paris was. That gleam in his eyes was something worth seeing. They seemed awfully happy to talk French with someone, although my French was pretty poor. I finally said goodbye to them, for we were on the march again. All those high ranking officers had probably made some more decisions, i.e. the generals who came down to Oberammergau.

On we moved, right through the mountains. The road was winding around and around and the mountains on each side were getting bigger and bigger. Ever so often we would come to a guard who stopped us and said that there was an enemy machine gun nest on one side of the mountain covering the road farther on down. Vehicles would be dispatched singly and the run was made at top speed. One time, however, we were stopped cold for a while. While we watched the machine gunner open up, the M-8 armored car silently swung its turret around, aimed and fired. Only a few of us saw it so we were prepared. The others, however, among them a couple of captains, thought we were being fired at and dove into the ditch. After we'd informed them of the facts, they came up again and one captain complained: Why doesn't someone tell me about these things. The armored car kept firing and finally silenced the machine gun. On we moved. At long last at about six in the evening we rolled into Oberammergau. Here we hoped to take a little bit time out, another overoptimistic assumption. We had our vehicles parked around the main city square. Lots of people were milling around, staring at us, among them many beautiful blondes. It was an odd setup. A bunch of Oberammergau police were standing in the center of the square and one lonely military government member was trying to handle the situation. Some of the headmen apparently were in conference in the city hall. I walked up to the group in the square. The first thing I noticed was that the German police officers was still giving the raised hand salute. I walked up to one of them and told him that the time for giving the salute was about over and that he better notify the others of that fact too. This chap at once apologized and said that he was so used to it he forgot to dispense with it. However, he talked to the others, and that was the end of that salute in Oberammergau.

Although the official curfew for civilians was on, people were still thronging the square. Again I got ahold of the police officer and mentioned the fact to him. Oh yes, he quite understood the situation. But all those people had never seen so many Americans and all their equipment. Our vehicles: armored cars, tanks, jeeps, etc. fascinated them. I told him I quite realized that but that the civilians must be off the streets, otherwise we should be forced to start showing off with all our equipment. He looked a bit worried, again talked to his brother officers and soon the civilians disappeared. One person in uniform, about twenty-three years old, was standing by a German motorcar. Some of us went up and wanted to know whether he was part of the police detail. He looked at us, shook his head and said, "I'm a major in the former German army. I was the one who officially surrendered Oberammergau to the Americans. Believe me it was the toughest moment in my life as an officer. Don't misunderstand me. The surrender was a necessity. Further resistance is absolutely useless. Still, it's always unpleasant for an officer to surrender." He turned out to be an old army man, who had been wounded several times, could hardly walk, and had been given a vehicle so he could move around. According to him, he had never been a party member, but spent most of his life in the army, on practically all fronts. We had heard enough, so we went back to our radio vehicle. In the meantime some of the other fellows had gone to Gestapo headquarters and found quite a few agents around.

It so turned out that they all had nice little pistols, which of course, they didn't keep for much longer. What happened to the Gestapo agents I don't know for sure. However, some of the GI's said that they were arrested shortly after they had been relieved of their little guns.

We got very little sleep that night. Radio contact with our headquarters was finally established early in the morning. Some time before that an armored radio car had been sent back in the direction of headquarters to established radio contact with headquarters. At least they were considerate enough not to send us back in weapons carrier, with half an inch of plywood as "armor". The hills were still full of snipers. Later on we found out that headquarters had sent out a radio relay vehicle, on some kind of a suicide mission on top of one of the mountains. This vehicle must have been nicely misplaced because we never heard it.

Next morning we were just ready to have breakfast when the order to move came through again. We grabbed a sandwich and took off again, Austria bound, maybe. Not quite. The main road was blocked and under fire. So we went up into the mountains, taking a narrow road up the slope. When we were nearly all the way up, we stopped. A bit ahead of us a bunch of SS troopers were desperately trying to hold a village. We understood that some of their men who wanted to surrender, were shot by their officers. That was about all the information we received while sitting on the mountainside.

It was raining a bit down in the valley, but we didn't get much of it. Ever so often a jeep with litters would wind its way down the road, getting our casualties to the aid station. An air raid alarm came over the radio. Low flying planes were supposed to be cruising between the mountains. We passed the alarm, but the planes didn't show up. We had our hands full without them. Finally, toward evening, we moved down the mountain, into Garmisch. A short while later we were on our way. This time our destination was Austria. While we were on the highway moving farther and farther up into the mountains, it grew colder and colder. Then it began to snow and finally a regular blizzard set in. Just about that time we had to stop because a bridge was out and the engineers had to construct a new one. As it turned out, we sat on the highway all night. We were freezing and miserable in general in our vehicle but the infantrymen were much worse off. I talked to one later and he told me he didn't know how he survived. It was indeed quite a change from the spring weather in the valley, especially when no heavy clothing was used any more. Those fellows in the armored car behind us felt like they were closed up in a refrigerator. There was an end to this and we moved on slowly. Once in a while we ran into some former inmates of concentration camps, a sad sight. A Hungarian army unit, in neat formation, surrendered to our troops and marched away to captivity. But the enemy was still in the mountains and the going was not pleasant. The driver of the battalion commander was shot through the head by a sniper and the fighting became so bitter that our infantry cleaning the mountainsides didn't care to take any prisoners, also partly due to the order issued by the battalion commander.

For a while we sat right outside a house being used as an emergency first aid station. A fairly steady stream of casualties trickled in and the general feeling was that of extreme bitterness. A couple of GIs brought several German prisoners back. They were a sad-looking bunch, could hardly walk. One of them was so severely wounded, general opinion was to just let him die. He had to be carried with blood tricking down from his head. However, he did get some medical attention.

We finally came to a small village where we thought we'd be able to stop for a while. A couple of hours was about all, also gone were all dreams of some food. Instead we watched POWs streaming in. Some, the very high-ranking ones, came in class. I saw a couple of generals drive up in their own car, with an orderly, to surrender to our regimental commander. So it went on and we went on.

Finally we crossed the border and moved into a small town in Austria. Everything was peaceful and quiet for a while. Then, all of a sudden, all hell broke loose. The mountains surrounding us seemed to be full of snipers and machine guns. Then our guns opened up. It was dark and gun flashes could be seen all over. This was one time we really observed blackout. After a while our guns ceased firing, because our infantry was moving into the mountains again, to take care of the enemy. However, they claimed that a few confused people were still firing when our troops were already in the wood's looking for the troopers. A bit of ill feeling was created, but soon dissipated.

When we came to another small village, I went into a house to get some hot water, because I needed to shave badly. Oh yes, the people there were very cooperative. I merely mentioned what I wanted and already had it. One fellow was from Stuttgart, I believe, he was worried what had happened there. He hoped to get back there soon, a view which had to be considered rather optimistic. Most people seemed to hope, although generally they didn't know what exactly had happened. They wanted to be friendly, because they knew that was their only way to get on the good side of the conqueror. This they knew from experience. Anyhow, they thought it was worth a try. We stayed overnight in this village and heard a rumor that the war was over. This rumor increased steadily until we nearly believed it. Just about then our artillery opened up so we forgot about all the rumors and moved on again.

Next day we went deeper into Austria. But fighting wasn't over yet. The roads were mined badly and we suffered quite a few casualties trying to get through them. Among the casualties were two chaplains and a doctor, who tried to help those in the field. We had stopped outside a few houses and I went inside a bit to warm up, although it had warmed up considerably. A bunch of infantrymen were sitting there eating a bit and drinking. One fellow asked whether I wanted to taste something real good. Sure. It really was something excellent. He told me he had found some one hundred year old whiskey and that was it. It was out of this world.

Zirl was our next stop, only a few miles from Innsbruck. We went through Zirl and stopped again on the highway before it made a bend. The new M-18 Tank Destroyers were with us and soon they began to fire at some moving objects on the other side of the valley. A yell for the ambulance was passed down the line. It seems

that an I and R jeep had gone around this curve, only to run into an ambush. Two of the men were captured and another left wounded. The two men captured, by the way, were freed again shortly after we moved into Innsbruck, one of them being in a hospital. Quite a few correspondents were around now to learn about the surrender of Innsbruck, which, actually was quite a bit of confusion. A infantryman stopping by our vehicle told me of a little miracle that happened to him that morning when he was in that minefield. A mine exploded right near him and part of it hit him, but was deflected by some object he had on him. He had told his story to one of the correspondents and hoped it would be in the papers in the States.

In the afternoon we went back to Zirl to let the big guns move through and afterwards moved into Innsbruck. By mistake we fell in with one of those convoys and left Innsbruck with one of them again. But we found out in time and went back to the city. Our first troops had been giving a rousing welcome, like in a French city, with cheering etc., and the girls kissing all of the soldiers. Not easy to understand those people. It may have been a temporary relief for them with their nerves a bit on edge. Anyhow, when, about a month later, we had a full dress parade, there were quite a few people lined up, but no cheering was done, in spite of all the signs the Resistance movement had posted. Considering these signs, even the turnout was poor.

We parked at some apartment houses where some of the regimental radio people had settled. They were in an apartment with a kitchen and also the people living in it, an artist and his wife, who were quite confused and didn't know what to make of it all. We didn't stay there too long, because the next day we were on our way along the Inn River, our mission was to link up with the Third army or Fifteenth Corps.

The above was written by I. J. Wilk in Innsbruck, Austria, during the occupation period by the 103rd Infantry Division. He had been placed in charge of the local post office-telephone and telegraph facilities, about May - July 1945.