

TWENTY-THREE LONG DAYS AND NIGHTS

Life in Combat, by Warren Mane, Sergeant in the 17th Armored Division

I have never asked for forgiveness from my Lord for my days as an Infantry Sergeant in combat, nor do I ever intend to do so, as I would willingly do the same things over and do nothing differently for my Country and Our Lord.

When you have seen first hand the atrocities of what the Germans did to the conquered countries and people of their own race, for no other reason than they were of a different religion and belief.

I prayed that my combat victims would not suffer, and that my method of killing, whether by knife, gun, or by directed fire from my mortars, would result in a clean kill, and the same would be true of his aim and fire. I truly believed that most of us on either side in the war did not wish to be there, but were so ordered by our beliefs and the Government we stood for, so may our God have mercy on us as we kill one another this day, as we have been indoctrinated with the belief that we are expendable, as all soldiers are from their first training.

I taught my men how to kill, whether by hand or weapon, and if I fell, who was to take my place. I always prayed that the Lord would give me the strength to be a proven leader, and correct in my judgment of my men, and ask no man to do what I could not, or had not done. My men proved the closeness between love and hate, for when they sensed both for me in combat.

Hate, as I ordered them forward with me across the open toward the enemy. Love, today, as they tell my wife and I that now they realize my responsibility and hard teaching kept them alive for today and showed them the way to overcome their odds in life to success today. By teaching them respect for their enemies, as he had his beliefs, as we had ours, and that was what we were there for, to decide whose beliefs would the world be patterned after, when years from this day, after we were gone and forgotten by many, as why we were there.

We were tried and tested many times in combat before the big fateful time came, when our turn was put to the supreme test of combat, when we would be completely surrounded by a superior force, and no way to get help with everyone standing fighting, cursing, praying, and attacking the huge tigre tanks of the enemy, with their rifle butts. It was here a tank company of another battalion came in to try to open a way out for us, but to no avail, as not one man got back to their battalion. When after the second day, after the smoke had cleared away, the tears all shed, the wounded carried away, the prisoners marched off to an unknown destination, leaving our buddies lay where they had fallen, as they were no longer afraid, or in pain, but in the loving hands of their Lord. May their leaving us be not in vain, but remembered through time. The count of the casualties of the Twelfth Armored, in this battle, was twelve hundred fifty-nine killed, wounded and captured.

In this battle, at the start, I was given a half platoon, or what was the remains of a platoon, as it amounted to about twenty men. My squad, and half of a machine gun squad, as they had lost their Sergeant prior to Herrlisheim. It was our objective to patrol the right flank and guard against any attack. We were about six hundred yards from our Company, who were in the village. We were under constant fire from snipers and mortar from the Germans, defending the rest of the village. We were all short on ammunition and with only twenty men, plus one machine gun, no bazookas, we could not repulse much of an attack. We did have maybe half a dozen rifle grenades, most had a rifle, I know I had a German rifle, as you could always replenish your ammo from a dead German soldier. At this time I heard tank mortars, from the wrong direction, as ours was from town. At this time I observed at least fifteen German Tigre tanks, supporting around six hundred troops, most in white camouflage, coming directly toward our position, a good thousand yards off. Sending my runner back to company headquarters, of the attack, and what was my few men and I to do in the face of these odds, we awaited his orders. Till the runner found the company commander, and he came to assess the situation, the lead enemy tanks had crossed the railroad tracks and were in my area, not over fifty yards from us. The company commander immediately ordered artillery on my position, missed the tanks, but made casualties of at least half my troops. He then called on six 43rd tankers, who made the mistake of meeting the tigers head on, which became complete suicide, as the Germans dispensed one round each into our Shermans, ending the life of both crew and tank. Our 75MM and 76MM would bounce off a tigre tank, but their 90MM's would pulverize our Sherman tanks. Even in our position, we felt sorry for our tankers, trying to help us, and losing their lives doing so. Then my Captain sent my runner back to me, stating we were on our own, that he could no longer give us any support, and that we could surrender. I told my ten men, of what the Captain's orders were, that he could give us no further support, and if they wished to surrender, they could, but I was going to try to make it back across the open, six hundred yards to the company area. It was here that four decided to surrender, but five of my men decided to go with me. There were no guarantees either way for us. We six made it back to the company area, through a hail of rifle and machine gun fire. How so many bullets could miss us is still incredible.

On our way into town, we had seen a medic lying in a garden, across the roadway, and I knew we were going to need his medical pack.

Taking my men to the company area, I told them I was going back after the medic's pack, but they should join the company, while I left toward the enemy. Never thinking how long it would be before we saw one another again. Dirks was never seen again. When I reached the medic, he was not injured, but was hiding between the rows, in the furrow, away from the firing. He had originally been sent to take care of my wounded, when the attack came. Helping him from the garden, behind a building, it was too late to rejoin my company then, as the first German attacking tanks had already bypassed us. Seeking a place to hide until dark, we went into a barn, and up into the hayloft, and covered ourselves. So fate again entered my rejoining the company.

The enemy force was too large, and backed with heavy tanks that could destroy a house with one single blast, either killing all inside or forcing them to surrender. Those hiding in basements were at the mercy of grenades and bazookas. Division Headquarters could not believe what was happening, as all intelligence information listed no tanks here, and only several hundred troops. Later we found out

that we were opposed by two Panzer Divisions and one Infantry Division recently brought there from Russia. Combat Command "A" was on its last legs, what was taking place, we were never taught could happen, as we were never taught defense.

I could not observe what was happening, from my place in the barn, to my Company. My own position was too precarious, as the Germans were in the process of backing a tank under the hayloft I was in, and this was presenting quite a problem for me joining my Company that night, or ever, but the hell we were about to go through, I did not envision.

Our Combat Command, under Major Logan, seeing the impossibility of our situation, called on both all artillery and full air strikes on our positions. This they did as long as they had daylight. Our Division Headquarters could not envision what they had encountered in this small village, as there was supposed to be no opposition in the village, despite the fact that the 714th Tankers along with the 56th Infantry, had been forced to withdraw from the village, under heavy fire, just two days prior to our attack. Next morning, only voices of the Germans were heard, the Americans were taken away. You can't visualize what loneliness is, until you realize you are the only American left, and now you are truly a snowball in hell, and really on your own. This is not the time to panic, just because you are surrounded by Germans, all armed, no food, and we were not hungry anyway with ten inches of snow on the ground and a temperature of around ten degrees. About this time our forces woke up to the fact that there was an enemy force out there, and they started dropping everything on us from artillery, along with the P-47's strafing and bombing. I was beginning to think that someone out there, or up there, didn't like me. The Germans, on the other hand, were content to wait between the barrages and bombings, to go out and search for food; this brought on the fact we hadn't eaten for several days and our stomachs growled their resentment, until one wondered why the Germans below us did not hear the noise. Once a soldier chased a chicken in the loft, across, placing his knee in my face, but so intent on the chicken, he never distinguished the knee in my face. When the planes would bomb us, the bomb releases would screech as they were released, then the sudden whoosh, as the bomb fell, the explosion rocked the tile roof, and one bomb knocked the corner off the barn, exposing our left. I was sure the barn would burn that time. There was two fifty caliber patterns across the tile roof, from the P-47's strafing. Made you want to yell out, hey fellows, watch where you are dropping that stuff, or else someone is liable to get hurt around here and it might be me the next time. One thing for sure, it was pure hell to be on the receiving end of our artillery and planes, when they were mad.

Ten days of this, and the Germans got real busy. I believed they were getting ready to move out, but they knew that an attack was coming. Later I learned it was the 44th Infantry Division. They didn't help our morale by firing all those tracers throughout our loft. Hay isn't very much protection from a bullet, but again someone was looking out for us, as we had to stay put, with all the activity on the ground. The attack was repulsed, and now we were down to only several barrages a day, along with several bombing passes. Lots of near misses, it's been several weeks since we heard any American voices, besides our own. It is still impossible to believe someone hasn't come poking around, and found us. The war must be at a stalemate. Unknown to us, our Twelfth has moved on, has new replacements, has not forgotten Herrlisheim, but is sure no one is left.

I was able to get food, of a sorts, as they would leave one man on tank guard at night, below us. One was a soldier who wore wooden shoes. He made a lot of noise walking on the frozen snow and ice. When he would go in the house to wake up the next guard, I would come down and for the next two hours, search for anything to eat that the Germans had thrown out, such as bones, potato peels and bread. Pickings were slim, but this was the best of food to us. Sure was glad no dogs were loose. Water, we used snow off the roof. It never quenched our thirst, as every time I dozed off, I would imagine seeing moisture drops running down the side of a cocktail glass. You know you can't give up, as we had seen too much, to not live.

Finally on the twenty-first day, I believe, of our being held, unbeknown, a prisoner, the Germans suddenly pulled out and were gone in the evening. The following morning, the 36th Infantry Division came in. I was looking for a heavy artillery barrage, but the Germans decided to not defend the village further. Stumbling from the barn and out in the open away from the building which had been our home for these past hectic weeks, I must have made the G.I.s mad, when I asked, "Where the hell you men been so long?" They started hollering at me in German, made me put my hands on top of my head, I guess I wasn't very presentable. They acted like they wanted to shoot me, while I believe I could have kissed them. They wanted me to believe they were the first Americans there, and why was I there? I had trouble convincing them all those snow-covered bumps were American soldiers, and my buddies. I had to go through the same thing to get them to bring my buddy from the hayloft, as this was the first time he had walked in all the weeks in the loft. They took us to their headquarters for food, and while questioning us, brought out a full fifth of Three Feathers Whiskey. I had never tasted whiskey so good, either before or since. They brought us steak, mashed potatoes and green beans. I hated to set the whiskey down. My buddy never drank the whiskey, while the booze really woke up my taste buds. After starting to thaw out, our hands, feet and legs began hurting, so they took us to the medics, where they put us in a cell and locked us up, as no one believed we were Americans, and could still be alive through all that cold. My buddy, Hartman, got sick and went into compaction, as he never drank any whiskey, to get his taste buds stimulated. I later learned he was taken to Paris and then on to England. After several days of integration, I was taken to the 43rd Evacuation Hospital at Dijon, France.

It was at this time my wife was notified that I was still alive, and not K.I.A., as previously notified. She was staying with my Mother after we shipped out from Texas.

Both my feet, legs and hands were black from frostbite, and it was several months before walking and able to hold anything in my hands. I spent seven months in the Butner General Hospital at Butner, North Carolina.

Leaving Dijon, France, I went by ambulance to Marseille, France, then was loaded on the hospital ship "Westeria;" leaving there, we went to Naples, Italy. Then on to Algiers, and then across the Atlantic Ocean to Stark General, Charleston, South Carolina, and the last stop, Butner General Hospital, till I was discharged with 100% disability, which I kept for one year and at the end of ten years, was reduced to no disability.

Here, two months later, the man who had been with me for three weeks in Herrlisheim, became a patient in the same ward. His full name is Richard Hartman, of Headquarters Company, 17th Armored Infantry Battalion. We have met only once since the war, at an Association Reunion, of the Division in Rochester, N.Y.

In combat, one wonders when his turn is due, as one's buddies are taken alongside of him, and thus, he believes he is spared for some other task in this old world.

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By Warren Mane

Sergeant in A-17th