COMBAT,

Bare Existence & Roller Coaster Emotions

From the time you join your outfit, in my case the 635th Tank Destroyers, you learn your assignment to attack at "H" hour. When committed to combat, you learn quite soon that your buddies depend on you to know your job, regardless of the emotional stress you are under. You exist to survive, attack, fend off counter attacks and secure your flanks. Your knowledge of what is happening is comprised of what you are experiencing. You know very little of what is going even 100 or 200 feet on your left or right, only straight ahead.

Sometimes, we came under a severe mortar attack and were held in our position for 6 to 8 hours. As the enemy had us zeroed in, a move of 15 feet away from our protection and whomp. We who heard the whomp of the incoming mortar were fortunate; we had moved back to safety in time. These mortar attacks reemphasized our constant fear; they were very different from incoming shells from 88 mm cannons, being shot at by machine guns or strafed by planes. A good example of this is when we crossed the Remagen Bridge. We were not sure if it would collapse as we crossed it. In this case, our usual distance between tanks didn't exist. We crossed bumper-to-bumper, which exposed us to devastating attacks by shelling; by then, it was not a real problem from planes, as the war was winding down.

During my 74 days of front line duty, I became well versed in hurry up and wait and a change in orders (some in direct conflict with preceding orders) causing confusion. We quickly learned to eat and sleep, whenever possible, even if there was only an hour in break before going on guard. The ordinary functions of life, such as meal times, sleep time, etc., were totally different compared to civilian life. When we got in a mine field, we were scared: we'd think if we go back, maybe we will trigger a mine missed by the tanks or if we go ahead,

we will almost certainly trip a mine.

Sleeping conditions varied. We might sleep on the ground or in a foxhole, dug and then abandoned by a move out order, with water or snow in it; it was nearly impossible to scrape out a small indentation in the frozen ground. Many times an overcoat, over our field jackets and a bedroll or blanket is all we had for a bed. After moving all day in a gentle shower, heavy rain or snow, we felt lucky to be able to secure a dry place to sleep. I did end up with frostbite on my hands and feet. To this day, I am still aware of it, but I was fortunate not to lose any part of my hands or feet.

Another interesting fact, we ate when we could, but never as a group. We would grab a "D" bar to eat. I only tasted one once, just a part of it and I never tried to eat another. A "D"bar was a heavily concentrated chocolate bar. A "K" ration was pretty good, a "10 in 1 ration" food for 10 men in one box; "C" rations were also good. (These were a big improvement over the "C" rations we had had in basic training.) If we weren't moving, we would sit on the ground, a tank or whatever there was, but never as a group. This was an ingrained habit to scatter around for safety and for a little time to ourselves. We also liberated food from where we stopped and became very good at policing up the area or scrounging.

Whenever we stopped, we would shake down any and all buildings and have one person set up an outpost. Then we would all dig foxholes unless we were the fortunate ones to have found a house or barn. We let our buddies know where we were settling in and went to sleep.

During this time, I was scared. However, I always thought that if these old buddies could do what they had to, so could I. We became very dependent on each other. While bonding is a much-used word now, I am not sure what word we would have used to describe

our feeling for each other.

We fought in cold, miserable conditions and looked forward to daylight but we were not sure why. Whether the day was foggy or misty, a steady rain, a heavy rain or snow, nothing stopped us from our objective. I believe we developed what would now be called tunnel vision. We were focused on the spot ahead, possibly knowing what was going on 100 to 200 feet to our right or left.

When we liberated our first group of DP's (displaced persons), we got a lift. We also felt it was worthwhile to set free some GIs who had been POW's. Once we opened up a concentration camp. There I had an entirely different feeling. My thoughts were not Christian thoughts about the next enemies that we would capture. Fortunately, these thoughts were partially buried by the time we ended up capturing the next enemies.

We lived in a constant fear and wondered why some things happened. Very rarely did we feel joy or exuberation. [redacted]

When we were on guard duty, we would be able to see first light and then daybreak, and maybe even that night's sunset. We could watch nightfall into total darkness if there was no moon that night. Those were moments to reflect on and be thankful another day had passed without any of us having been injured. I seldom thought about getting an injury, as I was sure that nothing would ever happen to me.

Water and food were supposed to be re-supplied daily, but this did not occur causing us to be very stingy about usage. Water was used mainly for drinking and, on occasion, to brush our teeth or rinse our face. It was never used to clean eating utensils. Perhaps that is why we were either constipated or had diarrhea. As for washing our clothes, we pretty much forgot about it. I only washed my clothes a couple of times. Once, my clothes were not dry before I

put them in my duffle bag. I ended up with mildew all over my clothes and had to wash them with gasoline.

The 635th Tank Destroyer Battalion, to which I was assigned in February of 1945, was one of two Tank Destroyer Battalions to land on the beach June 6th, 1944, D-Day. They landed at Omaha Beach, the other battalion at Utah Beach. C Company landed the 6th of June 1944. The first attempt was chaos. They went back to regroup and successfully got on the beach. By that time, the water was pink or red from the blood of injured GIs. The GIs were scattered, some ended up joining the Infantry soldiers or Field Artillery. This said a lot for the individual soldier. They attacked with strange companions, people that they had never trained with or even seen before. This was observed on all three beaches. Individuals, getting 5, 6 or even as many as 15 GIs together, went forward through very rough conditions for 5 to 6 days. No one was sure that the invasion would be successful. June 7th, 1944, A Co. or B Co. landed and on June 9th, the 3rd Co. landed. Around June 20th, Headquarters and Recon came ashore. There was a book written by the War Department on the first 6 days. The 635th was mentioned 3 or 4 times. They went onto the Hedge Rows, which was a devastating experience for any who participated. Then came the breakthrough at St. Lo and the wild run through France with Patton's Army until they ran out of supplies, gas, etc. A tank does not move without gas. It was a slow time until they were thrown into Hurtgen Forest where they fought as Infantry. The forest was thick with big trees. Shells burst in the treetops causing many men to be injured as much by wood splinters as by shrapnel. In the evening, they would attack and if they captured 75 yards, a couple of men were sent out on outpost and the balance would withdraw 25 yards. By the next evening, they were sometimes 25 yards from where they had started the night before. The U.S. lost a division every 6 weeks during the

protracted battle at Hurtgen. They burrowed in foxholes, filled with water or ice and cut logs, to protect themselves from shrapnel and wood splinters. I know it is hard to believe, but they were happy when they were pulled out and sent toward Bastoyne with Patton's Army. I joined the outfit shortly after the German breakthrough at the Ardennes had been stopped. We had to fight a long time before we got back to where the breakthrough occurred at the Ardennes Forest Area.

I joined my outfit in February around noon; and after a couple hours, we were attacked by the German infantry. (We broke off the attack.) In early evening we attacked and found ourselves in a minefield. I was scared. Believe me, I listened very carefully to how we were going to extract ourselves from this situation.

As I moved through the replacement system to the front I saw troops marching back towards Belgium or France. They were bedraggled, worn out, exhausted men. At the time, I did not understand how frontline duty could affect anyone. U.S. troops were advancing, the Germans retreating, the Bulge behind, so I couldn't understand.

We ended at Aachen, went through some houses where battles had been furious. The houses had common walls; so we could enter one house, go through to the next. Signs of fighting were on each floor and in the basement there were signs of the intense fighting, a hole in the wall and into the next house. We left Aachen, crossed the plains toward Cologne, one or two tanks at a time. The Germans had us under observation, so we were subject to incoming 88 mm shells or mortar fire. I watched as our planes dropped aluminum phosphate firebombs on the city. We then advanced toward the Ruhr dams, where we were detached from the 4th Calvary 1st Div 1st Army and transferred to the 71st Infantry Division, 7th Army in France.

I was not happy at first, as the 71st was a green outfit, new to combat. As we advanced to the front, there were many examples of their being very nervous. I have always been thankful I joined a line outfit that had men with a lot of combat experience.

We were attached to General Walker's Ghost Corps, or 20th Corps, where we were engaged with the enemy for 38 days straight. We moved night and day in combat, at other times we dropped back a short distance, and went parallel to front. As we rode in our tanks, we had live shells in the chamber of our rifles with the safety off, slept in the tanks or else walked just ahead one on each side of the tank and to the front at night. When a unit was stalled, we went in to help. Once we were pulled back, told we were to go on reserve, eat, sleep, and clean weapons or ourselves. Less than two hours later, I was asleep. Suddenly we were called together for a full field pack inspection in one hour. Some new officer chewed us out for unsoldierly appearance. After he turned his back, a yell went out, "If you return we'll kill you." We were sent toward the front within 40 minutes.

I went through Duren & Julich. In one of the towns only one side of one building was standing, in the other, two sides of a building. Both towns, or what was left, were burning, smoldering ruins.

Near the war's end, we opened or liberated a Jewish Concentration Camp #12 Gunskirchen. This was a bad experience for me. After we left the concentration camp, several things occurred. We were ambushed by the Germans with an 88 mm cannon, but they would surrender only to someone of higher rank. Being swift afoot because we were in mortal danger, we said we had to bring up a high-ranking officer. Actually the fellow was a private but we treated him as an officer. Then as we proceeded toward Linz, the next day we saw soldiers coming out or the woods. First a few, then more and more. These were Hungarian

soldiers, the S.S. German soldiers who had forced them to fight against the Allies had left that night. The Hungarians refused to give up their weapons, for they out-numbered us by the thousands and were intent on revenge against the Germans by looting on the way back home.

The 635th Tank Destroyers met the Russians at Linz, Austria. We were the furthest east of all U.S. troops.

I must mention the effects of combat on our physical and mental condition. I will give an actual experience we had in Germany. We were surrounded by S.S. troopers for three days and nights. Our tanks did not fight side by side and only a few of us were surrounded for the three days and nights. Some others from my company were caught for 3/4th of a day. When we realized we were surrounded our tanks set up a perimeter of outpost. We were on guard 30 minutes, then off for 60 minutes. This schedule and the tension on us was very difficult and added to our mental and physical exhaustion. When we finally broke out, all of us were totally exhausted; body and mind. Fortunately, we served under General Patton's 3rd Army and also General Walkers XX Corps. These Generals Believed when an enemy is withdrawing we keep on attacking. We learned that there is always a little extra effort one can and will make with a determined leader. Even when we were dragging, we could force ourselves. Our adrenaline was pumping overtime at such moments.

We were near a farmhouse where an older German woman was living. I had my first potato soup at her house when she invited us in to eat. This woman, in spite of the incoming and outgoing shells, butchered any of her animals that had been killed or wounded. Each morning this woman was up collecting any branches that had fallen during the night. They were mostly small branches, to use in her stove. The stove had a water compartment so she

always had hot water. We admired her tenacity and determination to maintain as normal a living pattern as possible in spite of the havoc around her.

A subject not brought up or mentioned very often is personal hygiene. As I have said, water was in short supply. We used it primarily for drinking, occasionally for brushing teeth and a splash across the face. Our eating utensils, etc. were not washed. In the almost three months at the front, I believe I had two or three baths. At those times we heated water and, one by one, we piled into the tub, soaped, rinsed, got out and the next fellow got into the same water. This was still better than our grimy, smelly bodies before we bathed. Our clothes were another matter; dirty, grimy, smelly, yuck!

Probably fellows back forty, or so miles, dug slit trenches for toilets; at the front we didn't have that luxury. When we had to go, we went wherever we were. I recall one time I had to go, off with my web belt that had my canteen, knife and cartridge clips, then off with my jacket, down with my trousers and the long johns. I had already shoveled out the snow and I squatted. Just as my happy bottom hit way too much snow, I heard voices. A couple of German women came down a path, I had my rifle stuck beside me in the snow bank so they departed fast. My bottom took a while to warm up. The above just emphasizes how different life was from the life we had known while growing up, no privacy at any time or any place.

Our clothing was adequate most of the time. Since we were outdoors 85% of the time, we became accustomed to feeling a tad cold. The only complaint in this area was our hands. We were issued cotton gloves, which got wet too frequently. Since we had no rubbers or galoshes, our feet got wet as well.

We were reduced to the bare necessities to allow us to fight and survive. Surprisingly, I never got sick during this time. We maintained our respect for each other, a minimum amount

of manners and our dignity. And we lived to fight another day.

To my friends,

Here is a continuing letter on my war experiences. I gave the original copy to my friend, Earl; and asked what his thoughts were.

"Do you want an honest critique?"

"Yes." He gave me a lot of credit for getting my thoughts down ~~on~~ paper.

"But, do you ever re-read what you write?"

"No."

"You should re-read and correct, and expand for better understanding by the reader.

My sister, Leslie, corrected my tenses and spelling. She posed many questions to explain more clearly what was written.

Bob