

"WRONG TURN, SIR!"

Prologue: "The Race and Break-through to the Rhine River" - March 15, 1945. Quoted from the "History of the 376th Infantry Regiment Historical Committee printed by Carl Weddigen in Wuppertal-Barmen, Germany, December, 1946.

"With more than its traditional lionine ferocity, the month of March, 1945 stirred the Western Front into frantic action. Following General Eisenhower's plan to destroy the Wehrmacht west of the Rhine, the full force of American, British and French armies was unleashed to sound the overture for the "G-tterd-mmerung" of Nazi might. No single Allied Unit can claim to have played the outstanding role in the race to the Rhine. It was a co-ordinated effort of all ground and air Forces; even the Navy followed along with its craft ready to navigate the Rhine. But the part played by the 376th Infantry Regiment in this drive is in itself like the story of an entire major campaign.

"To realize the importance of the Third Army drive, of which the 376th Infantry was on several occasions the southern spearhead, we must look at the entire Western Front as it stood early in March. The First Canadian Army had begun the attack on February 8th; the American First and Ninth Armies had followed on February 23rd. With the beginning of the second week in March they stood poised on the West Bank of the Rhine for 135 miles from the Moselle River north to Nijmegen and the First Army had a well-established bridgehead at Remagen. But on the south, facing the American Third and Seventh and the French First Armies, stood the still powerful German First and Seventh Armies, manning formidable defenses, including natural mountain fortresses.

"Undoubtedly, more of the Forces in the north could at that time have jumped the Rhine and thrust an armored spearhead into the heart of the Reich. But such an action was not in line with General Eisenhower's strategy. A break-through would have been dangerous because of the strong German forces on its southern flank. So the spotlight fell on the American Third and Seventh Armies. It was their task to destroy the enemy within the Saar-Rhine-Moselle Triangle. To accomplish this a co-ordinated two-army attack was launched early in March.

"At this time the 376th was comfortably ensconced in its enlarged bridgehead on the east bank of the Saar River just south of Trier. The troublesome infiltration into the bridgehead area by the 6th SS Mountain Division had been repulsed. There was nothing to do but improve the defensive positions along the Regimental line in case of counter-attack, send out a few patrols -- and await the cue for the Regiment to take its part in the great offensive."

It is a veritable truth that the "best laid plans of mice and men" often go awry, the Military and heat of battle notwithstanding. Such was the experience of one young 21-yr. old Lieutenant who in retrospect, finds an element of humor among the many horrendous memories of combat best forgotten, as he relates the following incident to his family.

"There was a lull on the battlefield. This meant there was time for the men to clean their weapons in preparation for another push toward the Rhine River, our ultimate goal being the large town of Ludwigshafen.

"I received word to report to Battalion Headquarters to meet with Lt. Col. Benjamin E. Thurston, 3rd Battalion Commander, early in the afternoon of March 15, 1945. The Col. informed me that Company I and my Platoon would spearhead a night attack on the town of Grimburg. I gulped and was going to ask: 'Why me?' for the other Officers in our Company were OCS (Officers Candidate School) Graduates and I, who had received a Battle-Field Commission many months ago, felt unqualified. However, on thinking it over I figured I had more experience in the field than the other Officers, as they were all recent replacements. So -- what the heck -- let's go for it!

The Regiment S-2 Captain informed me of the strength of the Grimburg garrison as being 'Oh, I don't know -- maybe 500, 1,000 or more.'

"Great! I then asked for and received a number of maps to study which included topographical maps, supposedly to give me a better picture of our attack route and the area up to and surrounding Grimburg. After a few hours of absorbing and attempting to memorize as much detail as possible, the Col. informed me: 'By the way, Lt., we will have a platoon of light tanks from Company D of the 778th Tank Battalion as support.' Again I gulped -- and was about to protest for everyone knows that tanks can be heard thundering along for miles! And this was to be a sneak attack? I thought: 'Oh, sure, let the Krauts know we're coming!' But the Col. anticipated my protest and ordered me to: 'Button up, Lt.! Orders are orders. I'll be about 100 yards behind your Lead Platoon and we'll cross the I.P. (Initial Point) at 2000 hours.'

"My heart sank as I envisioned the tanks 'telegraphing' our attack. My knees shook as I went back to report to my Company C.O. (Commanding Officer) to brief him and the Platoon leaders on the coming attack. They all exploded in unison: 'TANKS!' Censorship will not allow me to quote other opinions! All agreed that hardly could this be a surprise attack with the lumbering tanks in support!

"The men were issued extra ammunition, K rations to last a week, and told to rest until Zero Hour. I could not relax for this was the first time my Platoon would lead a night attack. We had, in the past, led daylight attacks, but never under the cover of darkness.

"At 2000 hours, on the evening of March 15th, Third Battalion, with Company I and my Platoon as point, set out on foot to take the first objective, the town of Grimburg. It was a clear, cool night. The faint starlight was supplemented by 'artificial moonlight' from an anti-aircraft search light battalion somewhere off to the south. Walking alongside the tanks, with two scouts ahead of me, the attack began. The rest of the Battalion with Company M followed and in the rear of the column came the two mules which Col. Thurston had acquired (confiscated) to carry mortar ammunition and extra radio batteries. Col. Thurston was a West Point Graduate and a firm believer in radio contact at all times. For increased mobility the heavy machine-gun sections of Company M left their heavy water-cooled machine-guns behind and carried only light machine-guns.

"Entering the heavy woods, we encountered road blocks caused by the Germans when they neatly severed fifteen three-to-four foot in diameter pine trees over one hundred feet tall, dropping them over the road and making it impossible for the tanks to continue. I said a silent prayer, thankful that we could proceed with the attack without the noisy support tanks. (Don't misunderstand me. We in the Infantry were very grateful for tank support in the proper time and place.)

"As we were on 'radio silence' I then sent my runner back to the Col., asking him to come forward with further instructions. It took almost 1½ to 2 hours for the Col. to receive word from the Division Commander, to proceed on foot with the attack on Grimburg. The tanks were to catch up as soon as the engineers had cleared the trees from the road.

"After conferring with the Col., it was decided to leave the main road and head cross-country using logging trails to Grimburg to make up for lost time as a result of the road-blocks.

"Taking to footpaths through the dense woods of the Black Forest, we and the mules proceeded without armored support. I brought along two maps and one of them did show some of the logging trails but not the footpaths. The lead scout had trouble finding the proper trails because of the darkness in the dense forest, especially when there was a fork in the trail. He would then retrace his steps to my position.

"In order to maintain complete black-out conditions, I took my raincoat out of my backpack which the scouts then would hold over me while I lay on the ground to study my map and compass, using my flashlight (with the red emblem from a package of Lucky Strike cigarettes inside the lens to diffuse the glow) and would so attempt to pick out the right path.

"The route meandered over hills and across streams and three more times I had to refer to my map under cover of my raincoat. In places the dense foliage completely shut out any moon or starlight. My scouts often were only a few feet ahead of me and in some places our men had to hold onto one another's belts to maintain contact.

"After groping along for some time we suddenly came to a stream only to find that the water was flowing in the wrong direction! Even though we had been trudging up and down steep hills, this surely didn't look right. So -- under the raincoat again! My suspicions were right -- we were going down when we should have been going up! Oh, Oh! We were going away from Grimburg! Well, the heck with the maps -- from here on in I would rely only on my compass.

"We started to retrace our steps and as I approached the Col. he asked what was happening. I hesitantly whispered quietly: 'Wrong turn, Sir!' He didn't say a word, thank God. There were over 4,000 men strung out along this trail and now we had to turn them all around and backtrack. The black night was filled with griping, grouching and grumbling comments like: "Another Army snafu!". (By the way, the sanitary version of this term which was coined in WWII means 'Situation normal -- all fouled up.) Of course the troops were bewildered and full of complaints, when suddenly I heard someone whisper "Silence, Soldier!" It was the Col. -- and now he was right behind me!

"This wrong turn cost us a loss of over two hours in marching time but we found where we had made error, then continued on very carefully for we knew we would run into German outpost stations all around the town of Grimburg.

"The Col. now dropped back to be with the main body and it took another 1½ hours before we suddenly came into a clearing -- and there was the town! I sent my runner back to report to the Col. who then deployed the main body of men around the town while "I" Company moved in, searching every house.

"The 'sneak attack' had taken the Germans completely off guard. No alert orders had been given to the sentries because local German Commanders hadn't the faintest idea that there were any American troops within miles. As the outposts were rounded up, their only apparent emotion was that of complete astonishment. Company I searched each house, rounding up the town's garrison, all of whom were found in their beds, either sleeping or being entertained by the local FraHleins. Apparently, more anxious than their soldier-protectors, the citizens of Grimburg were all awake, assembled in the most strongly reinforced cellars.

"By 0300 hours the town was completely cleared. A perimeter defense was set up and those troops not actually manning the outposts found suitable barns and sheds and settled down for some much needed sleep.

"Col. Thurston sent a runner asking me to report to him. Oh, oh, I thought, I'm in trouble. Imagine my surprise when he shook my hand and hugged me so strongly that my helmet flew off my head. With the words: 'Lt., a job well done!' he smiled and winked at me. This coming from a West Pointer really pleased me as I had always admired this man as a true leader of men. He also told me that because not a shot was fired, and not one life was lost on either side, he was especially proud of me. One of the Platoons actually had been fired upon by a sentry, and our boys returned the fire, wounding him. However, this all took place AFTER the town had been taken.

"Col. Thurston made sure I received a commendation though I was embarrassed for I felt the Lord was looking over me and all those men that night. Had it not been for the German roadblock earlier that evening -- and the 'wrong turn' -- we would have hit the town around 2200 hours by using the main road, with armored tank support, rather than after midnight when all was calm and peaceful.

Epilogue:

In December, 1994, Rolly received with his annual Christmas card from Col. Ray Singer, the news that Col. Thurston, at age 93, was living in Seattle. As surely as "B" follows "A", we thought it a golden opportunity to visit him briefly during our visit to Portland in May with relatives. They graciously agreed to take us to Seattle where we enjoyed a brief but wonderful visit with this gallant gentleman. The most touching moment for me was when, on saying our goodbyes, Col. Thurston put his hand on my shoulder, looked directly into my eyes and quietly said, "I hope you realize what a very fine soldier this man was!" An historical moment. -- TGKV