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Political Science
(1969-1985)



U. S. Army
WWII

My Most Memorable WWII Incidents

March 16, 1945. The Ruhr Campaign, Germany.

Then a private, I was a member of a six man Military Intelligence team attached to an Armored Reconnaissance Squadron part of the 13th Armored Division, part of General Patton's Third Army engaged in tightening the noose around German forces defending Germany's premier industrial region. Early that day, the colonel commanding the Squadron, a Westpointer, asked our team to investigate the murder of three tank crewmembers by one or more German soldiers. Their tank was about to emerge from a narrow railroad underpass when it was hit and disabled by a shoulder-held anti-tank weapon. The commander of the tank directly behind the disabled tank observed the three men jumping out of their burning vehicle and surrender. His tank was blocked in the narrow underpass and he was only able to direct limited machine gun fire towards the Germans. The Colonel had taken the murder very personally. We were informed that the three bodies were laid out on the side of the road where they had been killed, each with a bullet in the temple. Free at the moment, I left immediately to view the scene, by now in American hands.

After examining the bodies, from where I stood I could see the entrance to a basement, a likely place for Germans to hide, as US forces were about to overwhelm them. There I found discarded German gas masks, unused, still in their containers; I knew that inside each I would find leads to the owner's unit. Opening several containers I noted what I needed, and returned to the street to contemplate my next step. At that moment two German nurses approached on their bikes. As they came closer, one of them, pointing in the direction of the bodies, said something in German to her companion indicating that she was familiar with the incident. I asked them to stop. As politely as possible, I asked the nurse who seemed to know something what she was talking about and was told she had heard about the incident from an elderly German civilian down the street. She pointed to the house; I thanked her and left immediately to question the individual.

It turned out that he had been an eyewitness. From his house he had observed the assault on the tank, the return machine gun fire from the blocked vehicle behind, the murder of the three men after their surrender. He testified that the murder had been committed by the German officer in charge of the unit, describing him as a former Hitler Youth and Nazi fanatic. I also learned that the officer had been shot in the heel by the second tank's machine gun fire, had been taken to the informant's house, attended to by a German nurse--possibly the one I had just questioned-- and transported to a hospital some distance to the north. Best of all, he knew that the lieutenant had answered to the name of *"Bubi." "Leutnant Bubi. "* I now had the name of the suspect and his unit number.

The hospital, I was told, was run by nuns of a Catholic Order. By the rules, I now should have returned to the Squadron, secured assistance and my immediate CO's permission to proceed. But time was of the essence, the suspect could be moved or escape, and I decided to go after him then and there, technically going A.W.O.L. I was under the impression that the area in question had been abandoned by the Germans but possibly was not yet under firm American control. I covered US markings on my jeep with mud-- Germans were known to use US Jeeps--took off my US insignia and if intercepted was prepared to play the role of a German secret agent on a top secret mission.

I drove to one town, then to another and eventually, with the help of German civilians, located the hospital where I asked for the Mother Superior. I guessed, correctly I presume, that would be the title of the person in charge. I informed her that the hospital was at that moment under US control and that it would be in her and the hospital's best interest to cooperate with me. She confirmed that a Lieutenant Bubi was being treated for a heel wound. Risking serious problems on my way to heaven, I lied to the blessed lady. The German officer, I told her, was needed for questioning regarding an incident involving American forces. While he was an eyewitness he was not personally involved. He would be moved to an American army hospital, well taken care of and treated respectfully as a prisoner of war. If, on the other hand, she did not cooperate, she personally and her hospital would be subject to severe penalties under the articles of war. She cooperated. I told the lieutenant the same story; his testimony was needed regarding an incident in which he himself was not involved. We just needed his expertise and experience. His helping American military authorities would be greatly appreciated and his discharge and return home would be expedited. I was not in position, I said, to provide further details.

The return to Squadron HQ was uneventful. The front had shifted and the German salient had been wiped out. We heard artillery in the distance, planes flying overhead and I regaled him with my knowledge of German history and literature which I told him I had, along with my German language facility, acquired at College. (Actually, at that time, I was a mere German High School graduate and had no more than two freshman semesters of night school at NYU.)

Upon return to Squadron HQ, I asked an MP to guard the prisoner while I reported his identification and capture to the Squadron's Commanding Officer. That was my second violation of military protocol. By the rules I was obligated to turn the prisoner over to my commanding officer, letting him present the man to the Squadron CO. However, I could not see myself carting the prisoner all over the area while looking for my CO.

A week later I was called to Headquarters and was informed that the Squadron Commander had recommended me for the Bronze Star. However, the Major General commanding the Division of which the Squadron was a part would not sign the citation. A stickler for protocol, the general

specifically objected to a private going directly to headquarters instead to his immediate commanding officer. The citation therefore was to go to the latter. To his credit, having had no part in the operation, the lieutenant refused unless I too was awarded the medal. Thus both of us received Bronze Stars "For Meritorious Achievement In Ground Operations Against The Enemy." (I enclose a copy of my citation).

May 7, 1945, Simbach at the Austrian-German Border.

We were moving south, about to cross the border to engage the Sixth SS Panzer Division, which had come up from the southeast. Three of us, in our jeep, were heading for the town hall to assist the Third Army representative accepting the town's surrender. As usual, the Squadron was far ahead of the main US force, the streets were deserted and there always was the chance of some fanatic taking a potshot at us as we raced through the town to our assignment. We were just about to turn a corner when a German civilian woman stopped us. "Halt, halt," she called out. We stopped. "Da ist ein Verruckter um die Ecke in seinem Panzer," she explained. "Er had geschworen dass er die ersten Amerikaner die um die Ecke kommen zur Ho1le schickt."(Stop, stop, there is a madman around the corner in his tank. He has sworn to send to hell the first Americans coming around that corner.)

We asked for details. She told us that the tank was disabled but the gun was not. The lone occupant of the tank was a holder of one of Nazidom's highest medal, the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves. We thanked her, turned around and preceded to our assignment using a different approach passing the information on to the first US tank we encountered.

The war ended in our sector the following day. We could well have been among the last casualties of the war in Europe. There were a few other tasks awaiting us. But the moment I had a free hour, I returned to the scene where a German woman had saved the lives of three Americans. I asked around, describing the lady and learned that she lived where she had stopped us. A professional photographer, she had a small photo shop. Her name? **Frau Gruber**. Ignoring the non-fraternization order, I looked her up. I rang the doorbell; she opened the door and recognized me immediately. I said that I had come to thank her on my and my team members' behalf for saving our lives. I embraced her and gave her a kiss ... on the cheek.

She took a few steps back looked at me, adjusted my helmet slightly and said, " I would like to take your photograph." [*The accompanying photo is the result]. She asked me to come back in a day; she will have the photo and negatives ready. Returning, I was handed a 24"x 20" photo rolled up inside a cardboard container plus several smaller copies and several negatives. She asked whether I would allow her to display the enlarged photo in her shop window. I agreed. A day or so later, the driver for the Division Commander saw the photo in the window, told the General, and Frau Gruber was asked to photograph the General as well.

The enlarged photo was kept rolled-up in the container for fifty years. In 1995 Marian and I decided to have it framed and hung on the wall. If there ever was something to remember. As one could expect, the paper refused to straighten out. I took it to Brockport's photo wizard, Jim Dusen, who did not disappoint me. Miraculously the paper was straightened and the framed photo now hangs in my study. [See copy of photograph on first page above.]

HEADQUARTERS 13TH ARMORED DIVISION
APO 263 U. S. ARMY

C I T A T I *0 N*

For Award' of The

BRONZE STAR MEDAL

HENRY L. BRETTON, 42 052 915, Private, Military Intelligence Service, Military Intelligence Interrogation Team 535 G, for meritorious achievement in connection with military operations against an enemy of the United States on 16 April 1945 at Hilden, Germany. When Private Bretton learned of a war crime, he proceeded to the scene of the act and interrogated pertinent witnesses. Information ascertained led him through enemy territory to Dusseldorf, Germany, from which place he traced the criminal to Montabur, Germany. After intensive and skillful questioning, the facts of the crime and the Identity of the murderer were revealed. Private Bretton's high devotion to duty is in keeping with the finest traditions of the Armed Forces. Entered military service from New Haven, Connecticut.

JOHN MILLIKIN
Major General, U. S. Army
Commanding

Two World War II Mysteries, or SNAFUs, Cleared Up.
By
Henry L Bretton

How a single short sentence in a book read sixty-five years after a series of SNAFUs towards the end of the war in Europe, cleared up for me two mysteries involving two Generals and the US Military Intelligence team of which I am proud to have been a member.

It was early 1945, when six of us, including two officers, just arrived from the US, reported for duty at our Paris HQ. After a few formalities, we were asked to step outside into a beautiful garden. Soon a Major appeared to ask a simple question. Did we wish to remain together as a team? Our unanimous response was affirmative. In that case the Major informed us without missing a beat, we had to volunteer for parachute duty. Accepting the invitation we were directed to report for parachute training at a base in northern France. Upon arrival at the base, after being issued parachute battle dress, we were informed that our orders had been changed. No parachuting.

Instead we were to report for unspecified action to an Allied command post, near the town of Wesel.

On a day early in February, courtesy of British Commandos establishing a bridgehead during the night, we proceeded to cross the iconic German river, the Rhine. Even if British Commandos played a part, nothing suggested to us that we were not still under American command. We did not have to swim across. Thanks to a suddenly materializing detachment of the US Coast Guard we crossed on a swiftly constructed pontoon bridge. There the next SNAFU awaited us. After no more than four hours on the eastern side of the river, before we could interrogate our first prisoners, we learned that our orders had once again been changed. We were ordered to return to our Paris HQ. There we learned that we had now been transferred to the Third Army under Gen. Patton. Unbeknownst to us, the Wesel crossing of the Rhine was a top-secret operation, code name "Varsity". The operation was so secret in fact that even after the war, maps showing Allied Rhine crossings, did not show our crossing. I was left wondering for years where I had crossed the Rhine.

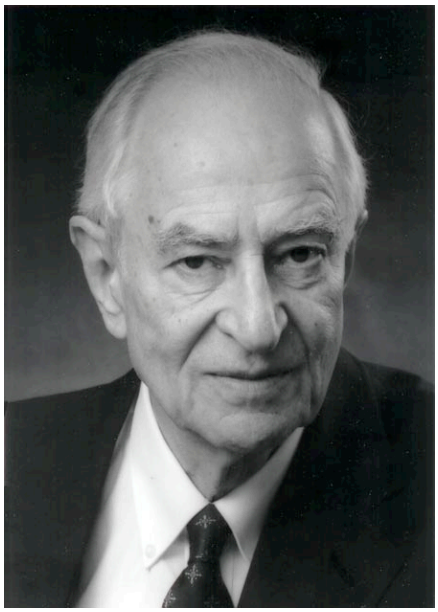
Ordered to report a.s.a.p. to Gen. Patton, we raced, in two jeeps, from Paris through southeastern France into Germany. As Patton's Third Army had progressed faster than planned, we were never certain whether the area near the town or village we drove through had been entirely cleared of German troops. I learned later that some had not. No unpleasant incidents, we reached Patton near the German town of Kassel in what seemed to us in record time. It turned out the General did not see it that way. Our CO, a First Lieutenant, found the General standing on a raised platform, about to address his troops. Permission to approach the General granted, the Lt. saluted smartly and reported our arrival. The General's response was shock. "Where have you (expletive) guys been?" he thundered in his well-known temperamental style. "If you had come another (expletive) day later, you would have missed the (expletive) war"!!

It turned out that his Third Army's unplanned rapid progress against the enemy had produced a shortage of maps, urgently calling for Military Intelligence, the eyes and ears of advancing armies. He probably was informed about Operation Varsity and knew where we were located at the time we had been re-assigned to his force. Thus he could not understand why a trip half a day's distance had taken nearly twice as long. Alas, he accepted us and attached to an Armored Reconnaissance Squadron we took part in several battles under his command before the war ended in Europe. I earned the Bronze Star for one exploit during the Battle of the Ruhr.

One night, shortly after Christmas, 2010, sixty-five years after our wartime experience on the Rhine, I proceeded to enjoy my bedtime reading, a book about the Office of Strategic Services (OSS.)* I was in for a surprise. One single sentence on p.243, dealing with "Operation Varsity" virtually lit up. There I read:

"Varsity was the airborne phase of General Montgomery's crossing of the Rhine at Wesel."

There it was. We <u>did</u> cross the Rhine at Wesel, part of a British operation under the command of Field Marshall Montgomery. Now at long last cleared up, in one short sentence, were the particulars of the Wesel crossing and the reasons for General Patton's irate reception of our team. This was the first and only mention of the crossing of the Rhine at Wesel that had come to my attention over the years. Apparently, our crossing via pontoon bridge was part of an operation to create a landing area for Allied gliders and parachutists on the eastern side of the Rhine. It was the area into which we had originally been destined to parachute when we first reported to Paris Headquarters.



General Patton and Field Marshall Montgomery were bitter rivals. General Patton regarded Montgomery, commander of a disastrous operation in the Netherlands, grossly overrated, differing with his British colleague on virtually every proposed strategy or tactic to bring the war in Europe to an end. Presumably, when Patton learned that an urgently needed American Military Intelligence team had been assigned to his British rival, he demanded that General Eisenhower, the commander of Allied forces in Europe, order the immediate transfer of the team to his command. Then when the team did not reach him as expected - - as he saw it - - he blew up.

*Immediately after the war in Europe ended, I was transferred from Military Intelligence (MIS) to become an agent in the Secret Intelligence section of OSS. Hence my interest in that book "**O**peratives, **S**pies, and **S**aboteurs. The Unknown Story of World War II's OSS."