



I am 77 years old and in the process of writing my life story. This story is written mostly for my two sons and my grandchildren so they and future generations may know about the times in which I lived and some of the events that shaped my life.

For almost 60 years my life has been something of a storm and heavy emotional toll. But the many and diverse people throughout my life have made the course worthwhile. In this story, I hope to recapture people, times, and places and experiences in my life along with the family I was born into that I think might be interesting to someone else.

Because I have had an unusual life, I hope to leave some recording of where I've been and what I've done. I alone can validate how I lived because I am custodian of my story and that story is perishable. Sometimes I wish I could stand back and be more detached from this story. My memories have exacted a heavy toll on my own personal life and still do.

In this writing I am taking parts from my memoir so you can realize the anxiety, the fear, and the heartbreak that so many of us felt at the time. I am relying a great deal on personal memory. Although I pride myself on recall, I know others may remember events in other ways. I have found that out by conflicting stories I've read in so many histories of World War II. Of all my memories, there are two that cannot be disputed because I was there and almost 60 years later, they are as vivid as though they happened yesterday. I'm sure there is no such thing as ultimate forgetting. Traces once impressed upon one's memory are indestructible and often recalled.

It certainly is not my purpose to write neither a formal history of World War II nor, even my own tank division. Please let me relate one man's view on what it was like from the D-Day invasion at Utah Beach on the historical area of the Battle of Normandy.

I was born on March 11, 1925, during the great depression in the small town of Strawberry Point, Iowa. As poor as we were, I never felt poor because everyone I knew was in the same boat. My father made 50 cents an hour as a painter and even cut my hair till I was out of high school. I even remember one very well to do person keeping time on his mixing the paint and cleaning up time at the end of the day. This was deducted as non-productive time.

I am a second generation German. My grandfather fought in the Prussian Army in World War I. My grandparents met on the boat coming to America, to see if they could find a better life. They married shortly after arriving. Neither of them spoke any English. Consequently my father never spoke English until he was in his teens. They continued to take a German newspaper, go to German school and church. When conditions between the United States and Germany didn't improve, grandmother said, "We are now Americans. We will stop the newspaper in German and we will learn to read and write and speak English." And so it was. With very little schooling, my father became very proficient in English and totally lost his German accent.

We were a family of five living children consisting of four boys and a girl. One brother died at birth and my sister was the youngest. She was my dad's pride and joy after five boys in a row. As it turned out, all four boys would serve their country and respectively be represented by the AirForce, Marines, Army Engineers, and myself in the Army armored division.

Because of the hard times and no work, my oldest brother George joined the Army. They encouraged young men to do so for one year. A song was even written, "Good-bye Dear, I'll Be Back In A Year". As that year was about to end, and expecting him home for Christmas, Pearl Harbor was attacked. It would be five years before he was finally discharged from the Air Force.

I was a junior in high school when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7th 1941. In March of my senior year, I got my draft notice almost on the day I turned 18. I was allowed to finish my last couple months of school and graduate with my class. I graduated on a Sunday afternoon at 2:00 PM and two hours later I was on the bus heading to my induction center at Camp Dodge, Des Moines, Iowa. My dad and mother took me to the bus. I was so uneasy, I shook hands with my mother and kissed my dad good-bye. Little did I know I would never see him again. He died a very young man of cancer while I was overseas.

I arrived at Camp Dodge later that evening with several of my high school buddies. That evening we were issued our clothing, had a physical and assigned our barracks. I got to bed around 1:00 AM. At 4:00 AM I was awakened by the 1st Sergeant who informed me I was on K.P. He had to explain that K.P. meant kitchen police, better known as potato peeler.

A couple days later the same sergeant informed me that the commanding officer wanted to see me..."and don't forget to salute." Trembling, I knocked on his door and heard, "Come in." I walked to his desk and stopped, with heels together, I

gave him my best salute.... not a good one...having just learned how the day before. He said, "At ease Pvt. Fenchel. Your written exams indicate you qualify for OCS (Officer Candidate School). Any questions Pvt. Fenchel?" I stood there at attention all 5'7" of me (and that was with my boots on) and weighing in at 126 lbs. I informed him I just turned 18 and graduated from high school a couple of weeks ago. His response was "What's the problem?" My question was "What branch of service, Sir?" His answer, "Infantry". Now I wasn't as dumb as that knowing the turn-over rate of Infantry officers. I requested not to go to OCS. "What were you good at before joining the army?" "Sir, I was a good typist and I worked in a jewelry store after school." I was then given a clerical test, typed 55 words per minute for five minutes and was ear-marked for office duty. I was also given a watch-maker test which consisted of disassembling a watch and putting it back together. On this test they classified me as a skilled watch maker. I was sure I'd be sent to the Air Force. Instead, they sent me to Ft. Knox, Kentucky to learn how to drive Sherman tanks. I'm sure the guy that drove trucks for a living was sent to typing school or maybe a dental assistant.

So, off to Ft. Knox for training. It was the first time I ever rode in a train. In fact I had never been out of the state of Iowa. Following my tank training it was on to Camp Bowie, Texas, where the 4th Armored was further organized and of which now included the 8th Tank Battalion to which I was attached and remained throughout the war. (In a tank battalion there are four companies and 17 tanks to a company. A,B, and C companies are the medium or heavy duty tanks with a 75mm cannon, two 30 caliber machine guns and one 50 caliber anti-aircraft gun. Company D is a light tank company operating in reconnaissance activity. It has two 30 caliber machine guns, a 50 caliber anti-aircraft gun and a 37 mm cannon. They move faster and act as out-posts, usually 5-6 miles in front of the main line of defense. Day reconnaissance is pushed until it makes contact, then radios back for the heavy tanks and artillery to move up and take over. Because they are lighter, only 17 tons, they move faster. In a bind they can be used to retrieve wounded, carry gas to the heavies, and transport infantry closer to the front line.

After our training at Camp Bowie, we were sent (in 22 trains) to Boston for shipment overseas. A few minutes on the train and ready to leave, I heard my name called out by an officer. He hands me a packet of papers with these instructions: "Pvt. Fenchel, there are 120 men on this train and you are in charge of them. We will be making several rest stops between here and Boston. You are responsible to see that 120 men are on the train on time, and report to me at every stop". Keep in mind, I'm only 18 and was never more than 60 miles from home. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a dial telephone. We rang 2 shorts and a long, or two longs and a short and reached our party line. If not calling a party line, you rang "central" and told her whom you wanted. "Oh, my, this is going to be a long war with lots of surprises. All I could think of under my breath was "You SOB, why did you pick me? One of Patton's famous lines:" Select leaders for accomplishment and not for affection." Or another of his famous lines: " An active mind cannot exist in an inactive boy." That officer sure as hell wasn't going to let my mind rest. I really wanted to say to him, "I'm dumb as hell and scared as hell, please give this responsibility to someone else." But all went well, reached Boston seven days later with 120 men and I felt good.

The first of 22 trains left the Lone Star State on December 11th and headed east with the Fourth Armored men. As the trains passed through a soldier's home state, and sometimes through his home town, the person would rub the steam off the windows and would point to a familiar building to see if he could see anyone he knew at the station. But the train at top speed just flashed through. For seven days trains took the tankers into a frigid Massachusetts winter at Camp Miles Standish near Boston. Numb by unaccustomed cold, the division hurried through last-minute inspections, ate Christmas turkey, and made their long distance phone calls home. "No mom, I can't tell you where I'm at or what I'm doing, but please don't worry about me". We sailed from Boston December 29th at 1300 and by night had made rendezvous with our convoy on the high seas. New Year's Day passed without celebration. Eleven days after leaving Boston, the division got its first glimpse at the Irish coast. The convoy rounded northern Ireland and headed south and east into the Bristol Channel to disembark in Wales and England.

In the port towns we saw the devastation of war for the first time. Shattered buildings and you knew the work of the Luftwaff. As we rode the small trains we could see the sky full of planes and we could see the anti-aircraft guns pointed skyward. It left little doubt you were in the European theatre of operations along with being in a strange country that spoke with the cockney accent.

We camped in three areas. My unit went to Chippenham, which turned out to be where General Patton would have his headquarters. Our fighting equipment had not arrived so we spent a great deal of time in classroom in Nissen huts and wooden barracks. Lots of out-door calisthenics to limber the cramped muscles from a month on the train and ship. I spent seven months in England training and getting ready for the D-Day invasion. I must say England was a great experience of endurance. We were housed in a horse stable, 4 men to a stall in bunk beds. Our blankets were made from horse hair and no sheets. I can still smell those blankets on those gloomy, rainy days. The stable was in a rectangle with one end open. The large courtyard was cobblestone. Our latrine was a building by itself. Unlike the 2-hole outhouse on the farm, it was a 10-hole outhouse with a five-gallon bucket hanging beneath each hole. Early every morning you could hear the clip-clop

hooves of the horses pulling a wagon with a large container and the honey buckets swinging on the side of the wagon. The latrine would be temporarily out of use for several minutes and resumed as usual as you heard the wagon pull away. I didn't hear many complaints. It was the best they had to offer for 120 men.

Soon after I reached England I heard from a hometown friend that she had just returned from my father's funeral. I didn't even know he had been sick...a family secret meant to protect me. I didn't receive the cablegram until two weeks after his funeral. It was the most devastating thing that ever happened in my life. My Dad was my best friend, my mentor and true inspiration to my life. His obvious love and respect for my mother was second to none. His honesty and integrity molded my life for eighteen years. He was so proud of having his sons represent their country... If only he had lived to see all four boys come home.

After the pain and some healing had taken place, I became very contentious. In fact my belligerence cost me my stripes on two occasions. My anger turned inward and I just wanted to go over, get the job done, and return to my home and mother. At that time I never realized how long and difficult it was going to be. It was as though every day of being on the line was for him and every chance I took was for him. It just almost destroyed my faith in God.

The whole of the south of England became one gigantic military camp with huge pools of ordinance equipment and tanks. After months of pre-invasion activity and learning how to waterproof our tanks and what to do if our tank was hit, we finally got the message from Eisenhower. To Fourth Armored troops came this message in part: "Soldiers, sailors and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force, you are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you." The speech continued. By now reality was staring me in the face and I was scared. How well I remember one phase of General Patton's speech. "Now, every one of you look at the man on your right. Now look at the man on your left. One of you three will not be going home." The speech was a gut talk. He had a unique ability regarding profanity. Every few words were sprinkled with profanity. Even in prayer when he spoke to God, the profanity didn't change. After the first few times of hearing General Patton swear, his profanity did not seem to be disrespectful of God.

The battle for the liberation of Normandy, a prelude to the liberation of Europe, was at a high price in loss of life and devastation of so many, many towns. This, of course, was a considerable loss of life to innocent people. There were five beaches: Utah and Omaha, American; Gold and Sword, the British; and Juno, Canadian.

We left at mid-night to cross the English Channel. We moved in with the tide and waited till morning, when the tide went out, to prepare to land. The five landings started at 6:00 AM, and then one every 15 minutes. At dawn on Tuesday, June 6, 1944, an immense armada of 7,000 ships of all types was closing in on the shores of Normandy. On board more than 300,000 men crossed the channel through furious seas, many men seasick, and despite all this they were ready to go in. Prior to our landing at 1:00AM 15,000 paratroopers from the 82nd and 101st airborne division were dropped above and around the town of St. Lo. What courageous men to drop into a town and hold ground until the ground forces were able to go ashore. We stayed in the hold of the ship and waited for our instructions to mount up. All this time the Navy guns were blasting and planes dropping bombs.

Prior to our disembarking we were given our instructions, which were to follow the tank ahead of us until we reached our rendezvous area. "Then leave your tank and dig your slit trench. (This is a long shallow trench to get your body below ground level.) Lie on your back and put your steel helmet over your face." The thinking was you had a better chance of survival if hit by shrapnel in the front rather than in your back. We were told to "button up"...meaning, "close and lock your hatch." As we started down the ramp, into the water, I decided to open my hatch (even though I was told not to).) Salt water surged to our turret as we plunged ahead.

Needless to say, I wasn't a very popular crew member for some time! In the meantime the paratroopers and infantry would hold their ground taken before the actual invasion, while the bombers from England destroyed the first towns inland. We watched the mightiest display of air power up to that time. From morning until late afternoon 3,000 heavy, medium and fighter-bombers dumped their loads. Wave after wave of big bombers flew from England and then returned again and again with a new load. The ground vibrated underfoot like an earthquake that wouldn't stop. Departing planes fired smoke flares to mark the targets for the next waves to target in on.

After the bombing it became Patton's relentless drive across Europe. Did we lose a lot of men? Of course, but it was always Patton's philosophy, "the faster we move, the less men and equipment we will lose." General Patton did not know and would not accept any halfway measures. "No soldier could be half-way ready to kill the enemy." He wanted "troops fully trained physically and mentally alert to kill." A quote directly from his book, General Patton's Principles For Life and Leadership may better explain my point. "We are going to move and move fast!" I remember these words from his final speech in England.

"We are not going to dig fox holes and wait for the enemy. We are going to use their fox holes and just keep pushing." Was he always right? Not always, because sometimes there was failure that cost us the most wonderful manhood in America.

In his autobiography, "War as I knew it," he makes a statement in the last paragraph of his book to substantiate his thinking for being criticized by higher command for moving too fast on occasion. "Throughout the campaign in Europe, I know of no error I made. My operations were, to me, strictly satisfactory. In every case, practically throughout the campaign, I was under wraps from the higher command. This may have been a good thing, as perhaps I am too impetuous. However, I do not believe I was, and feel that had I been permitted to go all out, the war would have ended sooner and more lives would have been saved."

Returning to D-Day, the 4th Armored held the small sector between the 83rd Infantry Division on the east and the 90th Infantry Division on the west. The plan called for the doughs (infantry) to pinch off the 4th Armored Zone. Then the Armored would spring through. Eager to move on in offensive fighting, for which they had been trained, men clamored from foxholes and slit trenches into their tanks. Passing through the 90th and 83rd Infantry Divisions, the Fourth Armored drove ahead regardless of mines and roadblocks.

Racing Fourth Armored columns littered the roads with burning vehicles and German bodies. Prisoners were taken by the hundreds. Just column after column of disarmed prisoners marched back, without an American guard, to the Prisoner of War enclosures. They were even led by their own non-coms. They knew they had seen the last of the war and survival was on their side. Disorganized and terrified by the fast advance of the Fourth Armored's merciless drive, the Nazis began wholesale flight. This became known as "the St. Lo Breakthrough" and the "Rat Race" was on. The reconnaissance tanks along with armored infantrymen were out in front until they met resistance too hot to handle, and then they would call for the artillery, spotter planes, and heavy tanks. Enemy lines were broken or the 4th Armored went around them. When we went through a town it was a blaze of fire, all guns firing. There was no such thing as rest. These first couple weeks of combat were so dehumanizing. To mention a few that have stayed with me all my life:

In a period of a week in France while passing through a small village, I saw an older man digging a grave. We walked over and on the ground were his wife and his teenage daughter. We asked if we could help him lift the bodies. He refused us. We saw him place straw on the floor of the grave. He placed his wife down, covered her with straw and then placed his daughter in and covered her with straw.

In the next town we saw several Frenchmen digging a trench. They were collaborators. I asked the tank commander what they were doing. His response: " they are digging their own graves." On the same day in another section of town we saw a crowd in the street. They were marching women naked in front of the crowd. They had collaborated with the Germans. They each had tar and feathers placed on each breast and in the crotch area. In spite of the fact, I just could not forgive the French for such inhumanity.

There were so many, many life and death situations, you look back and wonder how you were able to keep your stressed mind clear enough to go on. Yet I was only nineteen and feeling immortal. On one occasion soon after landing, and late in the day, while moving through the smoke and rubble, a woman appeared with a baby in her arms. She literally threw herself against the front of my tank, causing me to bring it to a complete halt. She was screaming to do something for her baby. I instinctively jumped from the tank to remove her when I saw the baby she was holding. I called for a medic and I heard someone yell, "Get your ass in that tank. This is a war." An officer did appear and convinced the woman that her baby was dead. One arm had been blown off from the machine-gun firing we did into the basement windows. This is where she and the baby had sought shelter.

On another occasion, moving through an open field under fire I saw so many men on the ground, one in particular crying for help. The assistant driver pulled to a stop. I ran to his side and yelled for a medic. Two medics appeared at once. They rolled him over and then ran to the next wounded. I yelled and they shouted back, "He will never make it." That was how I was introduced to the triage. They had to prioritize and they knew, yes, they knew! I turned back to him, "What can I do for you?" His answer, "Light me a cigarette." I didn't smoke so I reached inside his coat pocket and found them. I lit his cigarette and put it to his lips. He took a couple of long drags and it was all over. It's amazing how oblivious you become, with shells bursting around you and you have a life in your hands.

Our company said they wouldn't shave until Patton called for a rest. After 82 days on the line and without a break, the beards get pretty long. When we finally pulled out of the trench foot country (It rained day after day), it was for refitting and filling out our tank crews with new recruits and restocking our ammunition and cleaning our weapons. We were told we would have a few days rest. We found places to seek shelter and clean our guns, shave our beards and possibly write a letter home.

I was in the process of writing my letter to mom, when our 1st Sgt. entered our area of shelter and said, "Pack your duffle bags and get ready to roll. One man go to the kitchen and take any food you can get. I grabbed a couple of loaves of bread and 20 pounds of raisins. (I always did like raisins!) The rest of you put the machine guns back on your tanks and gas them and be ready to roll in two hours. The Germans have broken through our line in Bastogne and Eisenhower has ordered General Patton's 4th Armored to immediately head north." It was December 18th, 1944, and Patton answered, "We will be there by Christmas". Bastogne was at the end of a 150-mile "fire call" run to smash back the German winter offensive in the Ardennes breakthrough in Belgium and Luxembourg.

Shortly before midnight our combat command got its march route from the army. The entire division was moving in the worst weather possible. Freezing rain made the roads very slippery. (That is the difference between driving a car and driving a tank in which you must shift the entire tank tread to move the tank from right to left.) This soon changed to snow. All you could see was the "green cats eye" blackout lights of the tank ahead of you. When your eyes could take the strain no longer, you would indicate for the assistant driver to take over the dual controls. On one occasion my tank went into a slide and hit the tank in front of mine. Driving continuously, night and day, we made it to Chaumont just 16 miles from Bastogne.

We moved into an open field position with a forest on our right and a ridge just ahead of us. Trucks of gas, with five-gallon cans moved in and dropped off several at each tank. The machine guns on the tanks kept a steady fire into the woods most of the night. Early morning was so cold I climbed out of my tank and filled my little stove with gas. I felt it would give off enough heat to keep my feet from freezing. I rested as best I could in my driver's seat. After a short time my stove burned out and my feet started to go numb.

As it started to break day, it had become unusually quiet...the lull before the storm. Our tanks were very cold and we were told to start them and warm the engines and get ready to roll. We opened our K-rations and tried to get some food in our stomachs. As it became a little lighter, all hell broke loose. The entire top of the ridge seemed to move in front of us and started to move our way. The Germans had stayed all night out of sight behind the ridge waiting for daybreak when they knew the tank crews would be fixing something to eat while others gassed up their tanks. The machinegun fire and their big guns were just completely covering us sweeping the field with fire. I managed to crawl into my driver's seat with machine gun bullets ricocheting off my tank. All of a sudden I was being covered with blood. I looked up and saw my tank commander hanging almost down to my hatch. I knew instantly he was dead because he had been shot in the face. Two of our crew never even got inside the tank. Tanks were being hit and exploding all around me. My only salvation was to get out of that tank.

When I jumped I felt no legs under me because my feet were frozen. I stumbled to the back of the tank for protection from machine gun fire. That instant a German 88 shell hit the tank, drove completely through the one gas tank, and past my head. The 50-gallon tank of gas exploded into flames. I tore off my coat and started to stumble away from the tank. Machine gun bullets were grazing past my legs piercing the snow and throwing dirt into my eyes. My only hope was to return to the burning tank for cover. As I approached it the other 50-gallon gas tank exploded and the tank was a ball of fire. While in the process of stumbling away from the rear of the tank and flames, everything went blank. A high explosive shell landed beside me, and the concussion catapulted me into the air. When I hit the ground I was momentarily knocked out. When I came too, I thought I had lost my legs because everywhere I looked there was blood on the snow. I pulled myself to a drainage ditch beside the road, which had become a bumper-to-bumper colossal, frenzied, mess of vehicles ranging from jeeps, artillery, ambulances, tanks and half-tracks in full retreat from the German onslaught. A gas truck, with four men in a two-man cab, saw me waving at them. The driver yelled, "We can't get you in the cab, but we will hold you against the truck" With outstretched hands of two men, they held me against the truck. I was vomiting all the way and my hands were starting to freeze till I had lost feeling in them. I yelled to drop me in front of any house. The driver slowed down and they released me.

I crawled to the door and pounding on the door, I shouted, "Americano, Americano" The door opened and the family literally dragged me inside and upstairs to the attic. They gave me blankets to wrap my feet and my entire self. This was on the 22nd of December 1944. I wasn't able to eat the food they offered me. What I didn't know was that the home was a combination house with a pub in the front of the house. This was quite common in Europe. All the next day I looked out of a very small window and watched German tanks, anti-tank guns and soldiers moving on the streets. Chaumont actually exchanged hands three times as I lay huddled in blankets on that attic floor. It was now the 24th of December, Christmas Eve. German SS troops had been dropping in for beer all day and by nightfall they were singing and shouting their offensive victory at Chaumont. I couldn't leave the attic because occupying troops were one day German and the next day the town was under seize again. The Germans had captured so many of our tanks and supplies so that our tanks were interspersed among German equipment. In the early hours of the evening of December 24th everything hushed....except for footsteps ascending the attic stairs. I was positive this was my last Christmas...SS troops don't take prisoners. And what would become of this family hiding me? But when the attic door opened, a teen-age girl whispered in broken English, "We asked the German soldiers to let us celebrate Christmas Eve and they agreed to leave the house." I cautiously went with her to

join her family for supper. Supper consisted of black bread, sweet butter, and headcheese, (this being the pieces of meat salvaged from hog heads and prepared with gelatin base). I speak no German, but they learned my card game, Pitch. We played together (a small Belgian family and an exhausted American soldier) till the wee hours of the dawn of Christmas Day. Christmas of 1944 was quite memorable.

On December 25th the Bastogne perimeter was ominously quiet, the Germans were working on a new strategy and were shifting their combat units. All this time General McAuliffe trapped with the 101st Airborne was still hoping for relief. They were out of ammunition. McAuliffe finally contacted Patton and said, "By-pass these little towns". Our combat command fought all day to gain just a short distance to finally recapture Chaumont, but again was repulsed by powerful German infantry forces. The Germans fought stubbornly and relentlessly before surrendering, and only when they ran out of ammunition.

Looking through my attic window I began to notice more and more American tanks on the street. I recognized English-speaking officers, so I worked my way to the steps outside. I had no coat or gloves or steel helmet. My hair and beard were pretty much gone from the flash fire of my tank when the 2nd 50-gallon gas tank blew up. Everything was in sporadic movement. I then noticed one light reconnaissance tank with just the driver in it. Yes it was my tank commander with a different tank. I yelled his name, "Knipe", and he brought the tank to a halt. I said, "Where is the rest of the crew?" knowing the tank commander had been killed. He said, "We are the crew. Get your ass in the driver's seat and I'll take the turret." And so it was for the next few days until we got some young recruit replacements. Bastogne was liberated along with the 101st Airborne. The last stretch to Bastogne was without a doubt the hardest 16 miles the 4th armored ever fought through. From 22 December 1944, until 9 January 1945, our division battled elements of nine German divisions and two brigades. In smashing on to Bastogne and defending the corridor, the 3rd Army casualties were 4,796 killed, 22,109 wounded and 5,319 missing. The Germans estimated casualties were 32,000 killed, 88,600 wounded, and 23,218 prisoners taken. The battle of the Bulge covered a 40-mile front. This campaign was the heaviest, most concentrated and bloodiest of all the battles in the European War of WWII along with suffering its highest losses.

Most accounts of the Second World War in northwest Europe deal at great length with the last major German offensive ...the breakthrough at Bastogne... the Battle of the Ardennes. In fact, the remaining months of the war were not an anti-climax of the entire war. The worst of the fighting was yet to be fought. The final battle for the Rhineland, and then crossing the Rhine itself, were two of the most desperately fought campaigns of all time.

The Germans were now faced with defending their fatherland and it was here the Germans fought with all the courage and deep determination they could possibly muster. With the threat of death by Hitler, of those who failed him, the very last measure of relentless resistance was twisted and wrung out of the Wehrmacht. The most ruthless SS troops were holding the defenses. January of 1945 will always be remembered for its bitter cold and extensive fighting in bringing Germany to an unconditional surrender.

From Bastogne we headed north toward Koblenz and by then the battle of the Ardennes was into its final stages. The pattern of another Third Army operation was being drawn. The Rhineland was next for Patton's armor. The Fourth Armored, as usual, would be involved.

January 10th, 1945, found the Fourth Armored attacking northeast out of Bastogne with the 101st Airborne. It was incredibly cold and even the infantry men were bunching together. By that I mean, they would share their blankets and huddle together for body warmth in order to sleep. They would use just about anything for a shelter. It was no wonder we lost so many men with frozen feet. Many of them had amputations of toes and feet because they couldn't re-establish circulation when they reached the hospital. On one occasion we pulled into a town just as it was turning dark. The weather was bitter cold with wind and blinding snow. We found a barn that was full of cattle bedded down for the night. They had become quite docile and used to the noise of gunfire and artillery shells pounding. The barn was built into a hillside providing some warmth along with the body heat of the animals. Very carefully, the men started putting bedrolls between the sleeping cattle to capture a little of that warmth. I told our gunner, "They can all lie in cow manure if they want to, but I'm going overhead and take the hay. Snell and I crawled up in the loft. We took off our shoes to hold against our chests to keep the shoes warm. We covered ourselves with both our bedrolls, and lay there like lovers to take advantage of our body heat. I remarked, "I sure hate those shells passing over our barn." Snell replied, "How many times have I told you not to worry about the whistle of those shells. They are moving faster than sound and have found their mark by the time you hear it. Go to sleep. You never had it so good." I had known that and was about to doze off, when an artillery shell hit the roof and removed the best portion of it. The mad scramble to grab our bedrolls and shoes and literally drop to the lower level must have been a funny sight to those below. We never heard the end of it. "Hey, Fenchel, always look for a barn with hay, it's so much warmer", plus.. "How dumb can you get?" That winter actually went on record as one of the coldest winters ever.

In spite of very heavy enemy fire, an unexpected order halted the division. Skillfully the Fourth Armored slipped back out of contact with the enemy. What is going on? We were puzzled when tankers were told to remove their Fourth Armored patches. The radios were silenced and bumper markings were painted out. The whole division moved south in secrecy. Yes, we were on another "fire call".

It was at this point I managed to requisition a mattress from some of the rubble. It was 4" thick and would fit a single-size bed. I rolled it up, secured it with string, and tied it to the back deck of the tank. It was rather large and I had it just a few days. While on the move we were ordered to halt and pull our tanks off the road onto the shoulder. This was my greatest fear because of land mines. If you would hit one, the floor of the tank would be blown up and you would be minus a body part or more. I sat with one leg under me on my seat, but needed the other leg to activate the gas pedal. Then they radioed ahead, "Patton is moving to the front." We had camouflaged our tanks, mudded out our identification markings so as to hide from the enemy. And here comes Patton, with pearl-handled pistols, standing up in his polished jeep, one hand on the windshield with his glaring helmet and 4-stars standing out like diamonds. He is talking and giving orders all the way. Pure showmanship. And so much for hiding our identity.

As he passed my tank he looked my way. In a couple of minutes he relayed a radio message back: "I don't know who is hauling that rolled up mattress on the back of a tank, but get rid of the God-damned thing. We aren't a bunch of gypsies just passing through town."

Next we were on the dash to Luxembourg some 60 miles south. The cold was severe and the roads icy and traffic-choked. We drove day and night to assemble south of Luxembourg City. Although on alert, Fourth Armored enjoyed the first rest since December 18th. Luxembourg hospitality was warm but our stay was short-lived. Now the Fourth Armored would be leading to the historic Rhineland and on to Worms, the home of Martin Luther. The 8th tank battalion was out in front again. The Fourth Armored was on the Rhine, but all the bridges had been blown. American troops could not cross and neither could tens of thousands of German troops who had been trapped themselves on the wrong side of the river by blowing the bridges. It was the last great natural line of defense. Fleeing German soldiers tried to cross the Rhine that night and the next morning only to be picked off with machine guns and rifles. Their makeshift rafts were blown out of the water by tank guns. Broken planks and riddled rowboats with dead men at the oars drifted downstream. Destruction of the German armies west of the Rhine was complete. The Third and Seventh German armies were wrecked.

Until now I was writing my mother letters regularly. I always tried to put her mind at ease to reduce the worry. But now the time had come when I thought it wasn't fair. After all my close calls I was beginning to think there was a pretty good chance I wouldn't be going home. "Dear Mom, it has been pretty rough over here. The cold is my biggest problem. The war will soon be over and you will have all four of us home again. Just hang in there, like we are all doing for you. " She just had to know there was always that chance I could be hurt or even killed. I took the letter over to our company commander, Lt. Kaminsky. "Lt., it's important this letter is mailed. He said, "Fenchel, I'll just put it with one I just wrote my wife and baby. I'm glad you have a mother to write to. Just before my mother died, she sent me some pictures of her, my wife and two-year-old baby girl. I have never seen our baby." He also said, "Notice the dress the baby is wearing. You were with me when I bought that dress." I then did remember the occasion and the town. I shared some family pictures with him. "They will be on the first truck I see moving to rear echelon." We stood and discussed about everything we could about our families. By now they were moving tanks into position to cross the Rhine. The generators were creating the smoke screen to block out the bridge.

Now comes the Rhine crossing. A pontoon bridge, built in sections in the backwaters was moved into position in a matter of hours. German planes were coming in at treetop level trying to blow the pontoon bridge. The engineers set up a smoke fog to cover the bridge. Every time a plane came into sight all anti-aircraft guns were on it. It reminded me of the Fourth of July.

I was the 2nd tank in our company to cross. We were given instructions to approach the ramp leading onto the treads one tank at a time: "There is a German anti-tank gun that has the reading on this bridge. We haven't located it as yet. When you hear it fire, one tank take off and when that tank is across, then the 2nd tank make your run. If your tank is hit, you have 10 seconds to get out of it, jump into the water, and swim ashore." I did not know how to swim which did present a real mental problem. The first tank to cross was our company commander, Lt. Kaminsky. He reached the other side and just as I moved my tank onto the bridge, an 88 shell from this mysterious gun hit the bridge, and took out one whole section. Lt. Kaminsky radioed back and said, "I'm all alone over here". You could feel the anxiety and fear in his voice. We told him the engineers are on their way to float in a new section. We told him to stay in his tank and we will cover him with fire until we can get the engineers to repair it. Keep in mind it was night and the Rhine River was very fast moving. Our whole company had every machine gun in action and this continued until Lt. Kaminsky radioed back and said, "A troop train has just moved into the station and there are "German soldiers all over the place. Now they are unloading some anti-tank guns." We kept him talking until his voice stopped. And then we heard, "We just took a hit", and then the explosion and a ball of fire arose. It took the lives of that entire crew. Everyone lost...the crew, Kaminsky, his wife, his baby and our company.

During the night they located the German gun that took the bridge out and in short order, destroyed it. In the smoke and darkness of the night, the engineers were able to construct another section and float it out into the swift current to finalize the repair. Guess who was the first tank in the morning to cross? I hit the ramp and onto the bridge treads minus my pulse. The tread way undulated like a big tired serpent as the weight of my tank pushed the floats into the water. I felt so alone on that bridge with nothing but rushing water beneath me and the drifting smoke from the artificial fog, created by the generators. It cut off the sky and sight of the bridge both in front and in behind me. As my tank hit solid ground a military police yelled, "Keep rolling!" All this time German planes were making their blind sweep over us. Suddenly one of the tank anti-aircraft guns scored and the plane burst into flames so intense you could see the whole bridge momentarily, as the plane plunged into the water. Eighteen hours later at 0300 all 2,500 vehicles of the division were over the Rhine on one pontoon bridge or another. The following day after crossing the Rhine, we were working the streets of Worms where vicious fighting had been taking place. The order came down, "one man out of your tank supports the infantry." I jumped out, turning the driving over to the assistant driver. With my sub-machine gun I was walking from door to door in the final clean up, stepping around equipment and over dead German bodies. As I stepped over this one German soldier's body, I noticed an open letter and some pictures lying beside him. I reached down and picked them up. Yes, it was the letter I had written my mother and the pictures of Lt. Kaminski's mother, wife and baby. He just never caught the truck going to rear echelon. I still have them. Oh, the irony of combat.

The Fourth Armored used the March days to smash deep into Germany's vitals from Bitburg to Hersfeld. We were taking prisoners at the rate of 1,000 a day. During the month of March the Fourth Armored had been farther east than any other outfit on the western front.

On April 1st we crossed the Werra River bypassing Eisenback to the north and thus avoiding the autobahn and the main roads. On the way to Gotha, the tanks overran a Wehrmacht Panzer tank school and two huge airfields concealed in the dense woods. Gotha surrendered at 1030 April 4th. Prior to Gotha surrendering, in the early hours of the morning, the 8th Tank Battalion drove south. A detached unit of five reconnaissance tanks was sent out to observe the area immediately to our front. While sitting still and looking through my binoculars, I noticed several soldiers running in a ditch. I said, "If we are the forward echelon, who in the hell are they?" We noticed them cross the road. The tank commander yelled, "Kick her in the ass". This, of course, meant full speed ahead. As we moved from our field position onto the road we soon heard the machine gun and small arms fire. We then came upon some large steel gates that were locked. The command came down, "Ram them!" We were liberating the Ohrdruf Concentration Camp, the first German concentration camp encountered in Germany.

Soon, men were coming out of the woods. They were survivors who had hidden in the woods. They told us how SS troops had murdered and burned 4,000 inmates since December. Immediately in front of us bodies were sprawled on the ground. Here we saw for the first time the ghastly scene and grisly evidence. Most of them had been killed by a pistol shot to the head. Several were in the final stages of dying after being machine-gunned. These were prisoners too weak from hunger and sickness to make the forced march 42 miles to Buchenwald. German soldiers were trying to evacuate the camp just days before. In the throat or head of each corpse was a hole left by a pistol bullet. The wasted bodies could not have had much blood, but the ground was soaked.

We dismounted from our tanks and started looking around. From those who could talk, we learned that 10,000 men had lived and slaved at Ohrdruf. In the days prior to our entering, the SS had marched the prisoners to other camps known as death marches, or killed them outright when they couldn't march any more. One man in a striped uniform greeted us inside to give us a tour of the camp. A Polish prisoner came up to him and in full sight of the American soldiers, hit him with a piece of lumber and stabbed him to death. The dead man was actually a guard parading as a prisoner. I believe it was this April 4th that Generals Eisenhower, Bradley and Patton were brought to the camp by jeep after flying into Gotha in order to see the first liberated German concentration camp discovered during World War II. General Eisenhower demanded that we round up the Ohrdruf citizens led by the town mayor and his wife to view the killing field. After some period of time the generals returned to their headquarters to organize several units to tour this camp.

I walked about the camp completely numb as I moved from building to building. I saw the hanging ramp where they could drop the plank just enough for them to strangle from piano wire around their necks. Opening the door to a shed I saw corpses sprinkled with lime piled like cordwood. I saw the whipping block where prisoners were stretched out and beaten. Most of them never survived the beatings. It just had to be the most appalling sight I had seen throughout the war.

From this point on there was still bitter fighting though Germany was crumbling fast under the continuous allied blows. We were now entering Czechoslovakia and the Germans were still fighting with young SS troops and very young boys 12-14 years old. Old men were given one panzerfaust (bazooka) and told to get one tank. Many were not even in uniform. It was just a matter of time until the war would be over. There was nothing left of the German army but the song, "Lili Marleen"

which had been forbidden to sing or play during Hitler's regime. While in Czechoslovakia we heard the rumors that we would be gearing up to go to Japan. With the announcement of the point system and the swift coming of V-J Day, Fourth Armored veterans did not have long to wait. One third of the division with more than 85 points were on their way home. As the point system dropped to 55, virtually all the old timers had left. I was home in time for Thanksgiving dinner, 1945. I was an old-timer....age 20.

I had served the better part of three years and still 20 years old. I decided to take advantage of the GI bill and enrolled in college and subsequently Dental school, and additional four years. I didn't talk about the war for forty years. I don't think my mom ever heard a combat story. I didn't discuss it all through my many years of college. I didn't discuss it during the years I practiced dentistry. I always had enough going on in my life, I just didn't care to talk about it. It was after I retired from forty years of practice that the memory bank kicked in and everything came back as though it was yesterday Information locked inside my subconscious mind started to leak out in the form of dreams and nightmares. I went back to work part-time, but that didn't solve the problem. War is like a sentence placed on you, and you carry it all your life. It's difficult to shake.

But I had several opportunities to gain some perspective and closure to this sentence. In 1987 while in Amsterdam, I went through the Ann Frank House and then the Archives in Amsterdam to review WWII records, especially the Ohrdruf concentration camp. Also, in the summer of 2000, I located my training camp quarters at Chippenham, England and found the space transformed from my horse quarters to a vibrant office building for an agricultural college similar to our community colleges. That same summer I revisited the Normandy Beaches at Omaha and Utah Beach, and was even presented a medal at the Utah Beach Museum.

Just this past summer, our trip to Germany included a remarkable visit to Ohrdruf and the former concentration camp area, now occupied as a German Army training facility. Their command post really laid down a red carpet, showing me around the facility and the town for several hours. They even enlarged the 3X5 photo of me and my tank at age 19 for their archives. Excursions through Buchenwald and Dachau really brought the concentration camps to reality. I must say the German people are especially trying to publicize these horrors with a strong message that this kind of hate and atrocity should never be repeated.

All this has helped me to accept the reality I saw as a boy of eighteen and coming out a seasoned veteran before my 21st birthday. I should be so grateful.