

help. We were made to run for hours, wearing gas masks, during the hottest time of the day. Over and over again we were shouted at by the trainers, “What, you want to fly and you don’t even know how to walk?” Many times I wished I were back at Wafios.

After my basic training, much to my disappointment, I was sent to school to be a radio operator, instead of becoming a pilot. I also learned how to land a plane in case of an emergency. By the time I completed my training the war had taken a turn for the worse.

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In 1945 I was 20 and a fully trained radio operator in the German Air Force. We flew mainly Junker 88s or Messerschmitt 110s. The enemy had destroyed most of our fuel supplies and consequently we were grounded.

At that point I was given the choice of joining the SS or the paratroopers. I decided to serve in the paratroopers and was again sent on a special course in the city of Stendal, which was known as a paratrooper training center.

After climbing a twenty-foot tower, we were hooked to a steel wire at the top. We then had to slide down it, at a speed equal to that of coming down in a parachute, and at some point we were released and fell to the ground. This way we learned how to fall, wearing full battle gear and without getting hurt. We were also taught how to fold a parachute and how to jump out of an airplane. Often I wondered if I had made the right choice, but I knew that I didn’t want to be part of

the SS.

By this time I had very mixed feelings about life in general. My young life seemed to have no purpose and there was a senseless war going on, with no end in sight.

Soon afterwards, I was commissioned to join the second paratrooper division. Our unit was dropped behind enemy lines near Nijmegen in the Netherlands, a hot spot on the western front. Our task was to stop the advancement of the American troops until our units had regrouped. This was to be my very first taste of facing an enemy in combat. We called it '*die Feuertaufe*' (the baptism with fire).

I was assigned to be the leader of a group of eight men. One of them was Walter, a seasoned paratrooper who had served for two years in combat on the Russian front. Walter was slightly smaller than me and very stocky. He had keen eyes and a lot of experience in warfare. He was my assistant and also my gunner.

The machine gun he carried was one of Germany's fastest, 250 rounds a second. He told me that it was the best-engineered weapon he had ever come across, except for one thing; the tolerances were too close. It jammed and malfunctioned whenever some dirt or sand got into the mechanism. It was a precision-built weapon, whereas the Russian guns were very ruggedly built. They were a lot slower than ours but, according to Walter, one could trail them through mud and grime and they would still go on shooting.

Even though I was Walter's superior in rank, I learned a lot from him and I was glad that I had him in my group. Whenever we had a chance we would talk together. He would say to me, "Karl, don't stick your neck out, believe me, it isn't worth it." One day he said, "I was a prisoner in Russian hands for a few days."

"You must be kidding me," I said, "So what happened? How did you get away?"

He explained that a Russian soldier was guarding him, four days after his capture. They were near a railroad station, waiting for a train to transport all the prisoners to Siberia. Most German prisoners were taken there.

As they were sitting on an embankment my friend Walter sensed that the German troops were very close. He saw an opportunity to

escape if he could distract the guard long enough to get some twenty yards away from him. After that he would have enough cover even if he was shot at. He made his mind up to give it a try and motioned to the guard that he would like a cigarette. The Russian soldiers were not issued cigarettes but they had loose tobacco in one of their trouser pockets. In another pocket they had paper with which to roll the tobacco into a cigarette. The guard put his rifle down beside him and concentrated on making a cigarette for Walter. My friend then jumped to his feet and ran for his life. Moments later he heard shots ring out. Some of them came very close but by then he had good ground cover and he reached the German side safely.

Walter had a very dry humor. Whenever we were huddled together as a group awaiting orders, he would tell us of his experiences in Russia in a joking kind of way.

This time things did not look good. Our troops had suffered heavy casualties, and the enemy had broken through our lines several times. Early one morning the Americans pushed forward through our lines again and I became separated from my company. We were suddenly under fire from very close range.

I threw myself down into what seemed to be a shallow ditch. However it turned out to be full of water. In fact my body was completely submerged. I had to keep my head sideways so that I could breathe. I knew that the American troops were close by so I had no choice but to lie there and wonder how I could get myself out. None of our people were around to help me and I was afraid. This could be the end of me or I could be taken prisoner at any time. There was nothing in the book on how to behave in a situation like this. All I knew was that if I was to be taken prisoner, under no circumstances was I to disclose any of our military positions, nor to which unit I belonged. It was drummed into us that, when interrogated, the only thing we were allowed to say was name, rank, and serial number.

Desperately I tried to come up with a plan to get myself out of this mess. I was getting cold. It was springtime, so the water was freezing and the air was misty. The wind blew from the direction of the enemy troops. Every time I attempted to move I was shot at from two different locations. Consequently, I was forced to lie in the same spot for several hours. The enemy was so close that I could hear them

talking. I recognized their voices as American. Since they knew I was there I expected them to come and take me prisoner. However, nothing happened. I wished that they would come and get me out of this hole. Maybe they were not sure themselves what they saw.

One single grenade would have finished me off. I was close enough for them to reach me with one. I thought of my family at home. My brother Walter would have tried his best to rescue me. When we were boys he used to get me out of all sorts of sticky situations. But this was war and who knew where he was. I was alone and helpless.

To judge by the position of the sun it was late afternoon. I hoped that by nightfall I would be able to get away because I could not lie like this for much longer. Every bone in my body was aching. I was tempted to put my hands up into the air and shout, "Schießt nicht. Ich komme raus." ("Don't shoot. I am coming out.") However I decided against it. Their guns must have been pointed at me. If I suddenly raised my head up someone might pull the trigger.

The minutes felt like hours. Though I had not had anything to eat for almost two days, I did not feel hungry. And anyway, my iron ration, (a small can of dry biscuits) was out of reach. After lying in the icy cold water for almost a day my body was stiff and I was shivering. I had to tell myself that I would be all right once it got dark. Some inner voice told me to hold out and not give up.

As it got dark I tried to move forward. After I had painfully crawled about 10 feet forward, shots rang out again. Since I was now near a large tree the bullets ricocheted above me. I stopped moving and the shooting stopped too. I couldn't figure out what they saw every time I moved. Then I realized that I was carrying a gas mask on my back, and that is what they saw moving above the ditch.

Before long it was completely dark. Luckily the water was a little shallower where I was lying and the ditch was somewhat wider. This enabled me to turn a little sideways and remove my gas mask without being shot at. I also had to leave behind everything I was carrying except for the 30-caliber Luger in my top pocket. The mud that covered me hindered me from doing almost anything.

Everything was now very quiet. The silence around me almost drove me insane. All night I wondered what would happen next. When daylight came I heard the voices again from about fifty yards away.

My body was so numb that I could hardly move any of my limbs and it was becoming increasingly difficult for me to control my thoughts.

The sun came up through the trees to herald the morning and the warm rays felt good on one side of my exposed face. My whole body must have been very exhausted, because I was beginning to doze off occasionally. I had to fight with myself to keep a clear mind. During the past days and weeks I had spent a lot of time in difficult situations, but this was different. All through the day I had nightmares on and off. I tried to assess my situation, but my mind did not function properly.

As night fell again, I made up my mind that I was going to get out of this ditch no matter what happened. To stay in the mud and water would have been suicide. If I were shot at, at least I would have a slim chance of getting away. Besides, I didn't care any more whether I lived or died.

Covered in mud and with frozen limbs, I didn't know how I was even going to stand up, much less to run, but the noises had stopped again so I edged myself inch by inch out over the rim of the ditch. I was still lying on the ground and my heart was pounding furiously. Somehow I managed to get up; then I started moving as best I could in the direction where I thought the German troops were. The mud, which was half frozen to my body, and the pain in my joints made it very difficult for me to put one foot in front of the other.

After I had been going for about 20 minutes I was suddenly shot at with trace ammunition from ahead of me. As I had been trained, I took shelter behind a tree and shouted, "Schießt nicht. Ich bin Deutscher," ("Don't shoot. I am German.") The shooting stopped. Everything was quiet. Again I shouted, "Don't shoot. I am German." All I could hear was my heartbeat, which gave me the assurance that I was still alive. After a while a voice in German ordered me to put my hands up and come forward. By this time I was on the verge of exhaustion, but I had to make those last 20 yards.

When I got up to the German troops I collapsed. How long I was out I don't know, but after I came round I was given a hot drink and treated like a prisoner, searched and questioned. Then I realized that my dog tag and everything that would identify me was missing. After I had managed to convince them who I was they gave me dry clothes and food. That night, besides having nightmares about being taken

prisoner, I slept like a baby. Two days later I was reassigned to my company.