

Eibergen, Holland

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It was a cold, gray morning when the second paratrooper division was ordered to dig in. No one was allowed to leave his position under any circumstances. Days before we had been encircled by the enemy and consequently our food supply was cut off. Shrubs in a densely wooded area camouflaged my part of the unit. We were all hungry, tired and cold. I was assigned to keep communications open with the battalion headquarters and to report new orders to our company lieutenant. Apart from the occasional grenade hits the night was fairly quiet. During a lull in the fighting we were able to collect our dead and the medics could take care of the wounded. The morale of our troops was very low.

At the first sign of twilight I made my way under the cover of two machine guns to the headquarters about a mile away. I was about half way there when I was seen by the enemy and shot at with grenade throwers. The grenades followed me as I ran. Some shots came very close as I was now in an area with very little cover. When I arrived at the headquarters I was told that we were surrounded, this time by a Canadian division. We had orders to withdraw via the only road still open, which was pointed out to me on my map. I was then informed that whatever happened I must deliver the message if we were to make it out. I reached my unit by a different route without being detected. Speed was important because we had to pull back under cover of night.

After returning to my unit I learned that our lieutenant had jumped onto one of the last of our tanks leaving the area, and deserted. I was

shocked. How could anyone do such a thing, especially when he was responsible for so many men. Since the lieutenant was no longer there, I reported to the second-in-command and informed him of the order to withdraw. After talking to him about the situation I realized that he had no idea what to do and also that he was a coward. I told him to give orders that everything anyone carried had to be secured so as to make as little noise as possible, and that under no circumstances would anyone be allowed to use a flashlight. Since I was the only one who knew the way out of the surrounded area he asked me to lead the company. Somehow I managed to find the way out without incident and we finally got clear. We were then regrouped as ordered in a wooded area outside the city of Eibergen in Holland.

By now the allied forces were advancing rapidly towards Germany. The morale among our troops was deteriorating visibly. We were not informed about the grave situation we were in, but everyone knew it could not go on much longer. There were inadequate supplies, hardly enough food to go around, and confusion among the leadership. For the last three weeks we had done nothing but huddle in holes, make a stand, retreat and regroup. Casualties were heavy. Sometimes we did not know who our enemies were; the British, Canadian, or American troops.

This time the 8th Canadian tank division was coming towards us. We were inadequately equipped for such a force. There was not one German tank and no air force to support us. I was group leader. I had a few rifles, one antitank gun and one machine gun. Most of my group consisted of young recruits who had been trained how to use a rifle in a three-week boot camp and then assigned to the front lines. My second-in-command, Walter, had more experience in warfare than any of us. Dug in next to me in his hole he said, "This is going to be a big one. I don't know how we are going to get out of it."

At about mid-morning, we heard the rumbling of approaching tanks. I had experienced this once before, during the night, when tanks with flame-throwers had attacked us. It was a frightening and horrifying experience to see men being burned to cinders in the trenches. This time it was daylight. Soon there were tanks as far as the eye could see. Apart from the unnerving sound of the motors everything was totally quiet.

Then someone fired the first antitank gun and all hell broke loose. Machine guns could be heard everywhere. To my surprise the Canadians were not shooting from inside their tanks but had their machine guns mounted on top of the tanks. They stood up in the open lid and fired at everything that moved.

What I witnessed is something I shall never forget. Very few of the tanks were destroyed, even when they were directly hit by an antitank gun, because the guns had to be fired from very close range to be effective. Most of the time they were fired from the shoulder and many of them missed. When the Canadians saw a man in a hole, after he had unsuccessfully fired his gun, they ran their tanks directly over the hole, turned the tank about on its own axis and practically churned the man to death underneath.

Within a very short time I saw dozens of young soldiers killed by machine gun fire. By midday our lines were overrun. Those who survived were either wounded or taken prisoner. Walter and I managed to escape by jumping into a nearby stream. One of the tanks spotted us and shot in our direction. But we were submerged in the stream up to our shoulders, hanging on to willow branches, and they lost us and did not pursue us any further.

That whole afternoon we hid in the willows. We could hear and see the Canadians moving into Eibergen. Walter and I decided to stay in hiding and try to get away during the night. We were cold and wet. As it was getting dark we approached the nearest farmhouse, hoping the people would be friendly. With my heart beating fast, I knocked on the front door. The door opened slowly and a very surprised man met us. I guess that he had expected to see Canadians.

For a few seconds no one spoke. Then Walter asked the man, "Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" Instead of answering he looked nervously around. Evidently he wanted to be sure that no one saw him talking to us. Then to our surprise he asked us in German to come into the house. He appeared to be alone.

We told the man that we would like him to provide shelter for us for the night and that we intended to leave in the middle of the night. He asked whether we knew that the Canadians had occupied the village. Walter assured him that we were aware of it and that we would be grateful for his help. After hesitating for a few moments he

said he would shelter us and then gave each of us a tin of homemade sausage and a small loaf of bread for food on the way. He said that he was going to let us hide in the loft above the barn and that he would leave the small barn door, facing the back, open for us to get away whenever we wished. We were immensely relieved.

Then a young boy came into the house, talking excitedly, possibly a neighbor. When he saw us he stopped abruptly. I felt a little uneasy as we made our way through the barn and up the ladder into the loft. Before we settled down to sleep we discussed our getaway plan in detail. It was decided that we would leave around midnight, make our way north along the coast, and then back into Germany. Since we were exhausted we fell asleep almost immediately.

The next thing I knew there was a knock on the door of the loft. We were both startled when we heard a voice saying, "Machen Sie auf, kommen Sie raus, Sie werden gut behandelt." (Open up and come out, you will be treated well.) In an instant, we were both wide awake, realizing it was daylight and we had missed our chance of getting away during the night. Walter whispered to me, "I don't think it was the farmer who gave us away. It must have been the boy." I nodded in agreement.

I opened the small door of the loft and saw a civilian man wearing an armband and carrying a German machine gun without the bolt. Walter reached angrily for his pistol but I persuaded him not to do anything foolish. As we were trained, I took out the bolt of my pistol and threw it away into the hay. Walter did the same with his rifle. Then we descended the ladder to the barn floor. We saw five Canadian soldiers, calling to us to come out with our hands up.