

HOCKENHEIM, GERMANY

day 35

Pressing east, the 10th Armored Division traveled approximately eight miles from Speyer through Hockenheim on the evening of Friday, March 30.



Oddly very little resistance was encountered. Their destination was Bruchsal, Germany, sixteen miles to the south of Hockenheim.



Present day Hockenheim

As fate would have it, Melvin's tank was at the head of the column this day. Leads were often rotated so that no one group continu-

ously took the greater risk.

They had expected additional attacks as they forced the German army farther east. It was now several hours past dusk nearing 11:00 p.m. They were moving through a thickly forested area just outside and east of Hockenheim as they pushed south to Bruchsal. The unusually warm temperatures of the past two days had turned to abnormally cold conditions. It was a crisp, cloudless night with falling temperatures. Frost was beginning to form on exposed metal surfaces.

Heavy forest lay on both sides of a very narrow country lane. A low drainage area had been scooped out on each side of the road. Although the men were alert to any signs of the enemy, the woods seemed calm, relaxing almost, until deafening crashes and bursts of lightning engulfed the column of tanks. The smell of powder and phosphorous was instantaneously heavy. Being in the lead tank, Melvin couldn't discern initially just where the shells had landed or where the fire was coming from. Or, if any had found its intended target. All he knew was that shells were landing, and his tank was one of the targets. And, more were raining down so that suddenly this mostly serene forest became a thunderous tunnel of smoke and strobe-lights.

The driver in the lead threw the tank in reverse upon the commander's order. In the seat next to him, Melvin was peering through the narrow slot in

front of him ready to fire his .30 cal machine gun at the first sight of approaching enemy. He'd already released the safety mechanism from the breech and had the belt of .30 cal ammunition laid out. He also had opened the lid to the storage box welded on the ledge to the right of him. It contained additional belts of .30 cal ammunition. His training had served him well.

The column had fallen into an ambush. Was the attack coming from ahead by German Panzer tanks? Was it coming from German 88's perched high up on the hills to the side? The only thing apparent was that this primary route to Schweich had been anticipated by the Germans, and they were already sited into this spot in the forest. Watching. Waiting.

The tank immediately behind Melvin's had already been hit and was not only disabled but burning in the road. The drainage areas to the sides and the proximity of the trees to the road made reverse passage impossible. There was also no chance to move forward for cover.

Just then the world crashed in on Melvin and the rest of the crew. An armor piercing shell had found its mark on the right front side of the tank. Less than an arm's length from Melvin's position, a four-inch hole had been torn through the heavy armor plate of the tank, all in a flash of a second. A live shell had actually penetrated the right front side of their tank. For some unexplainable reason,

the shell failed to explode upon impact or even as it entered the tank. Fate? Faulty explosive? Or, divine intervention? It pierced the most heavily-armored area on his tank, breaking into thousands of shards of shrapnel bouncing off of all surfaces inside the tank. Shrapnel sank into anything softer than the hardened steel it was composed of, including human flesh.

The concussion of the impact and penetration alone momentarily disoriented all five crew members. Fire erupted inside the tank. Oil fumes from the engine, which carrying with them microscopic droplets of oil, were deposited on every surface inside the tank which caused the tank to transform immediately into a skillet. Dark, thick, acrid smoke from the wiring insulation made it impossible to see beyond a few inches.

Amazingly they had all survived the impact. Much more fortunate than the crew members inside the tank behind them. As their composure returned, their survival instinct kicked in. Escape! They had to get out before they were burned alive or before the heat of the fire reached the huge amounts of stored ammunition. They didn't want to be in that tin can when the firecracker went off!

The tank by now was being strafed from the front by German machine gun fire somewhere closeby. Phosphorous tracer bullets, fireballs in the cold darkness, came at them from the cover of the woods.

They had become the direct target. Some of the bullets overshot their intended destination. Others bounced off all parts of the tank with a ping and a whine as they ricocheted in all directions, each one creating a shower of sparks as it smashed into the thick hardened steel.

The tank commander opened the top hatch on the turret and climbed out through the darkness, tracer bullets barely missing him. Next out, the loader and the gunner hurriedly vaulted themselves up and out the hatch trying to stay as low and inconspicuous as possible. Melvin was close behind, feeling his way through the heavy smoke. Positioned in the co-driver/machine gunner's seat in the front of the tank, it was difficult under the best conditions to crawl out of the seat over the transmission and back to the turret in order to stand up and climb through the hatch. In the thick of battle, it was nearly impossible. But sometimes the impossible happens.

As he was beginning his ascent into the nightmare



*German 88mm
anti-aircraft/anti-tank artillery*

outside, he heard the driver calling for help. The concussion created by the impact of the shell, and consequential shrapnel, had crushed and torn at his right leg. He was unable to get out of the burning tank to safety. The fire engulfing the inside was growing hotter by the second.

Melvin began to climb out through the hatch, but the cries continued. Many people have a single defining moment in their lives, an opportunity to become much greater than they have ever been or will ever be again. Just two months past his twentieth birthday, Melvin mustered the strength and courage to override the powerful instinct of self-preservation. He could not let the plea for help go unanswered. He dropped back into the burning tank and felt his way back through the lapping fire and thick smoke to the driver's seat. He pulled the driver out of his seat and over the transmission, up through the turret. Then he helped the driver out of the top hatch into the cold air filled with bullets still being hurled at the tank.

By now, the enemy had noticed the other three men escaping through the turret. They began to concentrate their fire towards the top of the Sherman tank. With bullets at times only inches from the hatch, Melvin and the driver had to snake their way out of the hatch and down the back of the turret. Dropping painfully to the frozen ground below.

Shells were exploding all around what was left

of the column of tanks in brilliant flashes of light. Melvin began a half-crawl, half-run out of the torrent of bullets toward the safety of the rest of his division. But once again he heard the pleas of the driver who didn't want to be left there alone. And for the second time, Melvin returned, this time into the hail of bullets and crashing shells. He lay face-down and managed to pull the driver up onto his own back own back in an attempt to haul him out of the woods. But the pain was too severe for the injured driver to endure. They were barely able to clear the tank, let alone the hail of fire and bullets. The driver continued his plea not to be left alone.

So with the burning tanks to their rear, dead soldiers lying where they had been shot or trapped by exploding shells, and the enemy quickly advancing within machine gun range, Melvin rolled himself and his driver off the side of the road and into one of the shallow drainages. The forest was just feet beyond them. There they lay at around 11:00 p.m. on a cold Saturday night, March 30. Temperatures were falling well below freezing.

In what seemed only minutes, German infantry advanced to claim the forest again. The remainder of the U.S. division had withdrawn from the forest under the surprise attack. Melvin and the driver still lay there. Several tanks were burning, and occasionally, there was an ordinance explosion from inside. German patrols occupied the woods and constantly

made their way back and forth from one end of the woods to the other looking for stragglers. At times they would stop and inspect the dead and dying soldiers scattered around the line of armored vehicles. Many times Melvin and the driver heard the German words "Stellen Sie sicher, dass er tot ist." "Make sure he is dead." At other times the patrols would simply pass the dead by.

Each time Melvin made an attempt to crawl out of the woods, it would be met with the same resistance and plea by the driver. So they lay along side the road together in the cold night, assuming the same position, trying to avoid detection. They exhaled slowly, if at all, in order to conceal their warm moist breath from the cold dry winter air. They tried to keep from creating a mist of white vapor which would signal their location and expose their lives.

Luck would hold. They were never approached by any German soldiers as so many of the dead and dying had been. Germans passed by only yards away. The night brought long agonizing hours of lying in the dark on frozen ground, waiting, wondering what would happen next.

By daybreak their bodies had spent hours in torture from the stress and strain of maintaining the same position, stiff with cold, extremities frozen. But the tables were about to turn. The remnants of the 10th Armored re-grouped along the edge of the forest, and in a release of fury, simultaneously

emptied their gun magazines and round after round of artillery into the forest. Strafing with their .30 cal and .50 cal machine gun fire, the hot steel flew only feet above the ground. Armor-piercing artillery was fired low, in a direct line. High explosives were fired with timed fuses set in order to deliver their load deep into the forest before exploding. No enemy would be left standing in the forest after this hail of fire.

Once again bullets and shells became deadly for Melvin and the driver, this time from friendly fire. Bark, limbs, even whole trees fell about them. Lead smashed into the burnt out tanks ricocheting in every direction. Some lodged into the ground perilously close. They kept their heads low and somewhat protected by pressing hard into the low drainage area where they had been lying.

This was the moment that the two men thought would come. They instinctively knew that retreat had never been an option for the 10th Armored Division. In order to fulfill the mission, the division had no choice but to retake these woods. The only way to do that was by return fire. Their plan was to overpower the enemy with superior amounts of explosives and sustained artillery. The Germans had to be pushed back or annihilated. Melvin knew he must keep his composure through this horrendous storm of earthshaking explosions and flame.

Less than an hour later it was over. A hole as large

as a man's fist had been made in an old oak tree an arm's length away and about two feet off the ground from where the men lay. It had probably been made by an armor-piercing shell from one of the very same type of tanks that Melvin and the crew had escaped from just hours earlier. For the second time in less than twenty four hours, Melvin had come within feet of losing his life to a shelling. Once by German hands. Once by U.S. forces. It was now just a matter of moments before his fellow soldiers would advance and reclaim these woods for the last time.

Melvin was transported back to Hockenheim to an aid station. Singed hair and eyebrows, frost-bitten hands and feet, every muscle and nerve exhausted, he slept for nearly thirty-six hours straight. Medical personnel would wake him periodically as a precaution.

Melvin rejoined the division and was reassigned to a new tank and crew. He would be awarded a Bronze Star Medal for valor. Prior to leaving the aid station where Melvin was recuperating, he was told to report to company headquarters the following day to receive his commendation along with several other 10th Armored Tigers.

As the time approached, the arriving men were lined up abreast and then brought to attention. A colonel would face each soldier. An aide would hand a small black box to the colonel who would remove the narrow red and blue striped ribbon bar from

within and pin it on the chest of the soldier before him. He'd then respectfully hand the small box containing the medal itself to the soldier and give a quick snap of a salute to the medal earner. With one step back, he'd position himself in front of the next soldier and repeat the process on down the line

All were present that day except for one, Melvin. He'd made the decision not to show and receive his medal that day. After all, he was "just" doing his duty as many humble soldiers of the era would still say today. He had "just" dropped back into a burning medium tank to help a wounded fellow soldier escape that same burning tank and what would have meant certain death. He had "just" put that fellow soldier on his back and tried to get them both back to safety. He had "just" stayed with his wounded fellow soldier behind German lines at his plea instead of deserting him there alone to be captured or worse. He had "just" done what anyone else would have done.

Maybe he had just done what he felt was his duty, his responsibility, and didn't feel he deserved any special recognition for those actions. But this was no glorified scene from a movie. This was real. This was war!

Melvin's medal was sent home to Starlight, Indiana, to his mother. Until he returned home after the war, he had no idea that the Bronze Star Medal was there waiting for his return.

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Note:

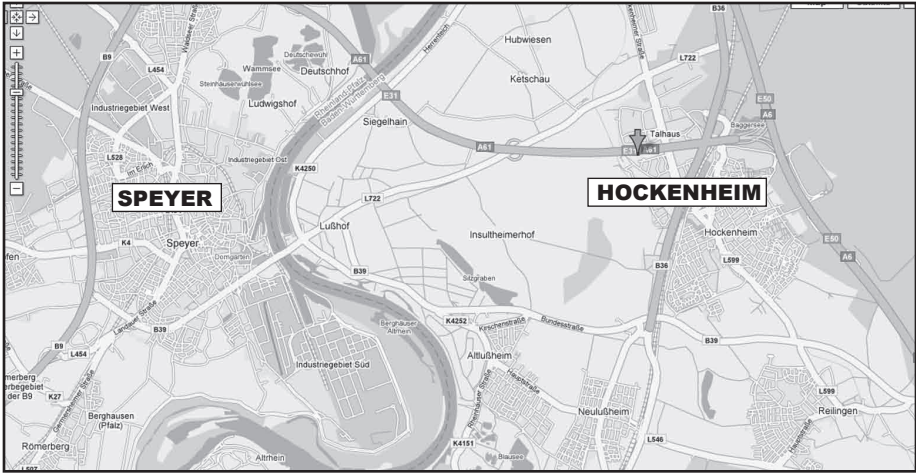
Following is an excerpt from a book by military historian Donald E. Graves, author of “*A Canadian Regiment at War*”, 1998, p.104

“Armored fighting vehicles in the Second World War fell victim to anti-tank mines and projectiles fired from anti-tank guns. Most of the latter relied upon kinetic energy to penetrate a tank’s armor. As such, the velocity of the shot was of crucial importance, and methods were evolved throughout the war to raise a projectile’s muzzle velocity, some by modifying the projectile rounds, some by modifying the gun. When a tank was hit by any of the variety of armor-piercing rounds, much of the kinetic energy of the shot would be converted to heat upon penetration, raising the internal temperature of the tank. Aside from striking crew members, the projectile would frequently ignite the fuel and ammunition carried inside the tank, causing it to catch fire, or “brew up.” The crew had, on average, about 15 seconds to get out once hit. The destruction of their tank did not remove them from battle, however, as it was common practice on both sides to fire at tank crews who evacuated shot-up vehicles.”

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While the Hockenheim, Germany area has most certainly been de-forested in the past 60 years it is impossible to be certain just where Melvin's tank was struck. However, considering written accounts of division movements, I believe it could possibly have been in the vicinity marked with a white circle on the map below.





Map of Hockenheim and surrounding area

