

GARMISCH-PARTENKIRCHEN, GERMANY

day 71

Saturday, May 5, CC B and the accompanying divisions moved thirteen miles north through the Alps to Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany.



Present day Garmisch-Partenkirchen

Once two distinct towns, Garmisch and Partenkirchen, separated by the Loisach River, they had grown in size becoming one indistinguishable city. Garmisch-Partenkirchen, located about eleven miles south of Oberammergau is perched at the base of the

Zugspitze, the highest of the German Alps at 7000 feet. The infamous 1936 winter Olympics where Adolph Hitler was to show off the superiority of the Arian Race were also held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

It was here that the 10th Armored Division was finally able to relax and enjoy a bit of free time. The weather had broken into early spring at the base of the Alps. Major General William Morris, commander of the 10th Armored Division arranged for a full dress parade in Garmisch on Wednesday, May 9, VE Day (Victory in Europe). The 7th Army command wanted the citizens of Germany to see the men and armor which had defeated their army, and many curious German citizens showed up for the review.

With all of the bad experiences during war, there also came the occasional humorous times. Prior to the parade, the armor, artillery, and trucks were given a quick wash to remove the battle mud. A sand bar had been located just north of Garmisch near the small berg of Farchant. Following is an example of what a twenty-year-old male will do with time to spare. Melvin was told to take a Sherman to the river's edge to clean it for the upcoming review. Arriving at the sand bar he slowly pulled the tank into the Loisach River up to its treads. The Sherman engines had proven themselves extremely reliable through the war years, and as

he began washing the tank Melvin wondered just how much water the engines could take on before drowning out. So he climbed up onto the back of the tank, opened the large hinged engine compartment doors and began pouring bucket after bucket of crystal clear water into the compartment.

With the engine nearly covered by water it still would not falter but continued to rumble with life. Failing to be able to drown out the engine this way only piqued his curiosity. He had another idea. He could drive the tank back onto the sandy bank, run parallel to the river, accelerate into the upper gears, then make a sharp turn to the left and plunge the big Sherman tank into the river.

The Sherman tank has a sloping wedge-like plate in front leading up to the driver's hatch. So as Melvin made that sharp left turn and plunged the heavy tank into the river, it sank so deeply and with such momentum that a huge wall of water

came rushing with force up the sloping plate slamming into Melvin's face and head which was pro-



truding outside of the hatch in order to have an unobstructed view as he drove.

Where did this water originate? The Alps. The river was flooded with melting ice water from the nearby mountains. The freezing cold wall of water slammed his head against the back of the thick steel hatch, knocking him half unconscious and taking his breath away. As he regained his senses, spitting out a mouthful of water and sand, he noticed an audience of soldiers and crewman relaxing along the riverbank having the laugh of a lifetime at his expense.

Sometime later during the occupation, Melvin had heard of an amateur boxing team being formed. Although he'd never boxed previously, this was an opportunity to do something to kill some spare time and leave the confines of Garmisch, since they were to meet a couple of times each week and drive about eleven miles north to Oberammergau. The first few weeks were enjoyable. He could hold his own in the boxing ring. He also had the opportunity to drive past the Opera House in Oberammergau where the centuries old annual Passion Play is performed. But soon came the boxing match with a former U.S. Golden Glove Champion. After having his clock thoroughly cleaned, he realized that maybe boxing wasn't what it was cracked up to be.

During the final year of the war, many improve-

ments were being made to the Sherman tank. New and more powerful engines were being designed to compete more effectively with the Panzer and Tiger class German tanks.



Oberammergau, Germany

In the last few weeks of the war, a limited number of new 46-ton low-silhouette M26 Pershing heavy tanks had been manufactured and made their way into Europe. Faster, more powerful than the M4 Sherman, the M26 mounted a 90mm long barrel high-velocity gun with a unique stabilizing system to allow high-



M26 Pershing Tank



M26 Pershing Tank

ly accurate firing of the gun while the tank was in motion.

It was one of these tanks, delivered into Austria, which had to be driven north through the Brenner Pass and into Garmisch to assist in the occupation. Melvin was ordered to accompany another driver and an officer into Austria to bring back one of several M26 Pershing tanks.

Taking a jeep, the three of them drove into Austria where the new tanks had arrived by rail. They climbed into the M26 and took their positions. The driver in his seat, Melvin in the co-drivers seat, and the commander in the turret. The trip back through the Alps on the narrow winding roads would be gut-wrenching. The brakes and therefore the steering was new, tight, and unpredictable. The unworn treads providing little traction made

driving on hard surfaces seem like skating on ice.

All along the route back through the Brenner Pass, the officer would bark steering orders to the driver. The orders did little good considering the newness of the tank itself. Even in the cold mountain air, beads of sweat could be seen forming on the commander's brow as the tank lurched and jerked perilously close to the edge of the road with each turn or curve up and down the dangerous mountain pass.

At the base of one such mountain, the road terminated at a "T." The driver descended a steep incline and attempted to stop and make a turn to the left. The attempt was unsuccessful. He pulled back on the stiff brakes with no response. The tank plowed through the crossroad, over the curb and headed straight for a ledge high over a river. He pulled back hard once again on the brakes, frantic by now to stop the tank before it plunged into the ravine ahead. Finally the treads locked up, and the tank came to a halt but not before the front came to rest hanging over the ledge like something from a Saturday morning cartoon.

After coming to a halt, the commander wiped away the rivulets of sweat, ordered the driver out of his position, and Melvin to take the steering levers. Melvin pulled the tank into reverse, spun the treads initially, then gained a purchase in the fresh soil and backed the tank away from the

ledge.

Finessing the brake levers and acceleration pedal Melvin navigated the narrow mountain roads sometimes successfully, sometimes coming dangerously close to the edge. Deep down in a valley between two ranges, a bridge spanned a wide mountain river. In typical Nazi fashion, a guardhouse had been placed in an elevated position on a concrete riser on one end of the bridge. In the recent past this guard house would have been occupied by armed German guards, but they had long since deserted. The Pershing tank had gained speed descending a long incline leading to the bridge. Melvin sped past the guard house (30 mph was the high end speed of a Pershing tank). The wide tank gouged heavy tread marks deep into the concrete riser as they entered the bridge.

Just then, entering on the opposite end of the bridge coming down a similar incline, came a jeep with two men, a driver and a Colonel in the passenger seat. The bridge was wide enough for two lanes of vehicle traffic but too narrow to allow a tank as wide as a Pershing and another vehicle to pass simultaneously.

Melvin had learned enough about the new tank that he knew applying equal brake pressure might slow the tank but could also lock the tread on one side and spin the tank on the concrete surface. The momentum of the 42-ton tank



would easily break through the retaining wall of the bridge. So the solution? He wasn't going to attempt to stop at all to allow the higher ranking vehicle the right of way as was customary and required.

The jeep continued to cross on its end, and the tank also kept coming. Finally, the Colonel realized the tank wasn't going to allow them the right of way. Finding himself facing a Pershing tank oncoming at 30 mph, he shouted some unheard words frantically to his jeep driver. The driver skidded his vehicle to a halt, threw it into reverse, wheels spinning, and with his head turned backward he reversed as fast as he possibly could, weaving from lane to lane until he was off the bridge and could back the jeep safely off the road. Melvin continued past the jeep without giving notice. Immediately after arriving at Garmisch, before the tank engines had even been

shut down, the commander threw off his helmet, jumped down from the tank without saying a word and quickly disappeared. Melvin never saw that particular tank commander again.