

Excerpts from the Memoirs

of

# Werner Mork

“Aus Meiner Sicht (From My View)”

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Other selections from these memoirs in the original German text can be found  
on the website of the German Historical Museum:

[http://www.dhm.de/lemo/forum/kollektives\\_gedaechtnis/](http://www.dhm.de/lemo/forum/kollektives_gedaechtnis/)

Translation by Daniel H. Setzer

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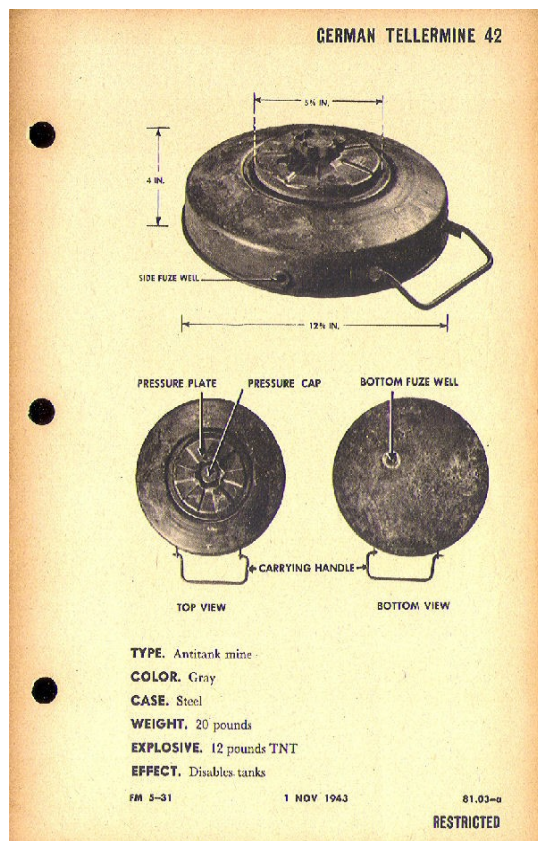
[Translator's Note: *Mork has narrowly escaped the advancing Russian army. To do so he and his comrades had to cross farmer's fields that were beginning to thaw after a wet Winter. Mork became mired in the mud. His 'comrades' kept running. He managed to get his mud-filled boots out of the muck and run barefooted across the cold, wet fields to rejoin them.*]

My entire body was drenched in sweat it was not only my feet that were soaking wet. It took a great deal of effort to clean my feet from the muck and to re-wrap them with not-entirely-clean foot-wrappings. It took quite a while before I was able to get my boots back on. It was a big job but I had to get it done as quickly as possible because I simply could not go on barefooted. The worst part was that the boots were full of mud. It had to dry before I could pick it out and the boots were painful to wear before it was dry enough to get it all out.

I was afraid that my barefoot run across the German homeland in the Winter of 1945 would have bad effects on my health, but nothing came of it, I didn't even get a cold. My fear overcame everything, it was stronger than any cold germs. This fear is what drove me across the fields, something that would have been unthinkable in other circumstances. The anxiety was engendered by a terrible feeling of being totally abandoned, completely alone without any help or support. Add to that the fear that the Russians would overrun me while I was so helpless and defenseless and that would be my end. Now that I had found this house and felt safe again, that bad feeling began to fade. It was replaced with a wonderful feeling of being alive that superseded the other less-pleasant thoughts, at least for the moment.

After my 'homecoming' and gradual recovery from my exertions I started to make myself at home in the little house we now occupied. We planned to spend the night in this house and then see what the morning would bring. The Russian tanks and troops did not advance any farther. Probably, they wanted to regroup, build up their strength and then move in force against the stronghold at Glogau. Or, perhaps, they would go 'left' in an arc around Glogau and continue their march toward the West. We didn't care one way or another. We just wanted to get a little rest that night and not be bothered.

The house we were in stood alone in the fields but it was part of a larger estate nearby. The Regimental Field Staff was quartered there. They had the task of setting up defenses to act as a series of blocks to the Russians moving toward Glogau. We Landser [Landser: common soldier, enlisted man] did not like hearing talk about defensive positions, they were never good things for ordinary soldiers. We got this information from a group of engineers that stopped by the house. They had been charged with building anti-tank defenses and to spike them with Teller mines. They made themselves comfortable in our house and went about the business of



*Anti-Tank Tellermines*

arming the mines. They were doing this right there in our house! We didn't think twice about it, why should we? They were experts just doing a routine job. They set up in the kitchen because it was warm and comfy there.

I was in the next room leaning up against the wall between the room and the kitchen when my hunger caught up with me. I had not had anything to eat since early morning. I didn't have any food with me, my kit was empty. Two other fellows and I went down into the basement to forage for something to eat. I found a jar of blueberry preserves. I snapped it up and stood there for a moment trying to decide if I should continue looking for more food or go upstairs chow down on the blueberries. Before I could come to a decision, the decision was taken out of my hands with great force. Suddenly there was a loud explosion and I was thrown against the wall on the other side of the cellar. I was covered in broken glass and blueberries. The concussion of air had sent me flying. Then there were terrible cries and commotion above with frantic calls for help and for medics.

What happened? One of the engineers arming the mines made a mistake causing the mine to go off and that set off all of the other armed mines in the kitchen. The house was a pile of rubble, only the cellar was intact. There were dead and wounded. The upstairs wall that I had been leaning against just a few moments ago did not exist anymore. Where I was standing you could see right through into the night. Had I not gone downstairs I would be in eternity now. The three of us in the cellar got away with only scrapes and bruises. Our scavenging expedition saved us from injury and death. Fate arranged it that my hunger sent me to the cellar and away from the kitchen wall. Once more my good luck held out.

The survivors and lightly wounded attempted to get the severely wounded out. Near the house were a few drivable vehicles that had brought the engineers here. We used them to get the wounded to the nearest field hospital. The engineers who survived the blast told us that the nearest hospital was back in Glogau. The road to the Glogau stronghold was clear for us to get into the city, but the way out was not so clear. It was not possible to leave the city once you were in it. Once the city was declared to be a stronghold it came under the command of the NSDAP Gauleiter and a Wehrmacht General. All soldiers in the city were designated as 'Stronghold Defenders,' and were not allowed to leave. The city was under absolute marshal law. Stragglers and displaced soldiers became part of the defenders. Also included were any soldiers in the hospitals who were to some degree fit for combat. The concept was extended to patients in the hospital with all but the most severe wounds. They, too, were reclassified as combat ready...at least on paper.

The opinions of the Landsers regarding the pros and cons of holing up in such strongholds were varied. Some thought it would be better to remain together in a town rather than to be out in an open field. Others believed, and this was the majority opinion, that it was better to have some freedom of movement rather than to be walled-up in a city. This majority did everything they could to quickly get



*Landsers with Tellermines*

out of the grasp of the stronghold commanders who were in the habit of kidnapping every 'hero' they could get their hands on. That was my goal just like the other Landser who came to the hospital with me. Chance came to our aid. We had only wanted to get the badly wounded victims of the mine explosion to the hospital then we wanted to get out. However, they insisted on registering each of us and giving us all examinations.

We did have injuries, there was no faking the bruises and scrapes, they were clearly visible. We were not taking them seriously, but hospital personnel saw us walking-wounded and as such they issued us the so-called Laufzettel [Laufzettel: Routing Slip] along with the order to leave the Glogau stronghold and to find the next field-hospital we could locate. No one knew where that might be. We were surprised at all this but the reason behind their actions was that from this moment the field hospital had no room for anyone except the severely wounded. There would be no transportation for them when the Russians closed the encirclement. This was expected to happen very soon. In contrast to the other orders, the walking-wounded were being ordered out of the city so that they could find their own way to another aid station. When we heard that we took to our heels and got out of the town. We didn't even wait to get food and provisions for the march. We just wanted out before a new order came down that would force us to stay.



*Feldgendarmerie (Military Police)*

So I attached the Laufzettel to my chest, documenting my status as walking-wounded, and I left the Glogau stronghold. I marched on with hardened clay in my boots single-mindedly toward the West. It was good I had the Laufzettel that designated me as wounded, because there were patrols by the Feldgendarmerie [Military Police] and especially from the 'mixed bands' ordered by Himmler made up of field troops of the Wehrmacht and members of the green police.

These new special divisions could use their power under the martial law decree to accuse anyone of desertion just out of pure suspicion. Himmler had ordered that in such cases the penalty would be death

by hanging from the closest tree or lamppost. This was in lieu of a more honorable death by firing squad. Great! There were even classifications of types of death, honorable or dishonorable, as though it would make any difference to the victims. Anyone who did not satisfy the patrols was done for, there was no chance of pardon as these comrades did their duty. This was not murder, no, this was a measure to maintain military discipline and order and to guard against the danger posed by desertion.

With my Laufzettel I was able to navigate my way through this land until I got to the next aid station where they treated my cuts and bruises. After a short exam I was declared to be OK, and 'poof' there went my beautiful Laufzettel. I was told to find some combat unit in the vicinity and to report for duty with them. I did, and the unit I found took me in immediately. No one mentioned my previous unit, it had dissolved, the rest of the soldiers had disbursed. They had been snatched up by other units and sent elsewhere.

After all of these war years that I had spent first in France and then in Africa and Southern Europe, now I found myself defending the Fatherland in the East confronting the Russians. It looked like I was to be spared nothing. My knowledge of our enemies would be broadened to include the Russians. I would learn about them not only as a prisoner of war, but also as an opponent in combat with them at a time

when they had the German army on the run and showed clear superiority. I had to endure all of this with great fear and anxiety to the point where I was not sure if I wanted to go on. In this very unpleasant fashion I was able to get the big picture of Germany's war against pretty much the entire world. In this way I got to know our enemies a little better. It also gave me the opportunity to get a picture of other peoples and other lands, although this opportunity could have cost me my life. Now I was on the Eastern Front and did not know what would happen next or if there was some possibility that I might survive this disaster. Up to this point I had not really thought about being deployed to the East, but now here I was plunked down right in the middle of the final battle of the Greater German Reich. This battle would be fought against the true enemy of the world, Bolshevism. It was no longer a fight against Communism as an enemy of the German people, but as an enemy of the world populations.

On my way through the Silesian lands I also witnessed the boundless misery of the fleeing German refugees. I saw the want and despair of these poor people who literally overnight had to leave behind all of their goods and chattels to flee the approaching Russians. I experienced many, many treks that laboriously attempted to find their way to safety in the West. They were seeking safety for the children, women and old folk.

Some still had a horse and wagon, others struggled on foot. They made their way in bitter cold and snow, or through rain and storms over roads that were no longer roads. Daily they were attacked by Russian fighter planes who strafed them and dropped fragmentation bombs. Often the treks would be pushed aside by columns of German troops, rarely moving forward, almost always falling back. The roads were choked with shot-up vehicles, dead horses and dead people. The people were simply left where they lay, there was no way to carry them along or even to bury them. The refugees had no room on board for the dead, they were simply ballast and an impediment to the flight. Worse was the often brutal, common and shabby behavior of many German soldiers who acted violently against their own countrymen. There was no longer any question among the Germans of humanity, there was nothing left but inhumanity. It was a picture of misery and fear that these treks



*Silesian Germans on a trek*



*Joining the trek*

displayed, full of desperate people on a nearly hopeless journey. There were millions of people from Eastern Germany fleeing and so very many of them died in the boundless misery of the treks.

The misery that I saw on these treks left me shaken and stunned. It made clear to me the sort of inferno that the GRÖFAZ [Acronym for the "Greatest Field General of all Time," i.e. Hitler] had toppled us into. This unique and great leader, who was idolized by all Germans, even those suffering on the treks, was in reality a criminal who was allowing 'his people' die with absolute pointlessness. He was the guilty one responsible for the want, the misery, the inhumanity of the flight, for the loss of the ancestral homeland and our acquired lands. It was he that was responsible for the countless deaths of so many people and for the deaths yet to come for the

same pointless futility. This Führer, that I could now only see as a criminal, was still hunkered down in his headquarters making war and still wanting to be a great victor while letting his people pay the price for it. What I couldn't understand was how the great majority of these wretched creatures really believed that their flight would only be of short duration. Before long they would be able to return to their towns and villages and homes because the Wehrmacht would soon strike back with a devastating and decisive counter attack. These people still trusted the Wehrmacht, the Führer and the country's leaders in spite of their great want. That was the hope that they clung to. It was not only the refugees who hung on this false hope, but many soldiers did also, probably the majority, as I would soon find out.

This was the first time that Germans in the West and now in the East were experiencing war in all of its 'modern' terror on their own land. In 1870/71 and 1914/18 as from 1939 to 1944 the horrors of war played out on the foreign lands of the enemy. The bombing attacks on German cities were terrible and they did occur on our territory, but total war with all of its gruesome reality was just now making itself known. The Germans found out for the first time what it meant to be a fleeing refugee, running from an unreasonable enemy to an uncertain future. Flight meant leaving behind everything a family had earned and accumulated over a very long time.

If in 1933 or at the beginning of the war in 1939 anyone would have prophesied the incursion of enemy troops on German soil, they would have been treated as a traitor and sent to the nearest concentration camp. Since 1871 the German Reich was a great power that knew how to resist its enemies, both inside the country and outside the country, and keep all conflicts beyond its own borders. The country was completely protected by a strong army and navy and in the new Reich by a powerful Wehrmacht with three branches. War in our own land was unthinkable for the people of Germany and the idea of fleeing from invaders even more so. Now many Germans were feeling for themselves the privation and misery suffered by the people in Poland and Russia during the victorious days of the Wehrmacht's early successes. It was especially difficult for the people in Poland and Russia as they faced the void, without a country, house or home. But now the German people gave little thought to that, now they only worried about the calamity that threatened them from the Russian side, that Asiatic horde of sub-humans. They did not think about the source of this animosity, anyone who did would be labeled a Russian-lover, a Communist who deserved to be in a concentration camp, prison or even better the gallows. For most Germans their world was crumbling, but they could not free themselves from what up to now had been the very essence of their being and beliefs. It also happened that the good citizens were quick to recognize bad citizens and they were quick to report them to the closest office of the Party, Gestapo or the military. In most cases the 'bad citizens' paid for their behavior with their lives as almost happened to me.

Every day that the war raged, the amount of 'free territory' in the Reich got smaller. Germany shrank as the Allies in the West pressed toward the East and the once scorned Red Army in the East pressed toward the West. It would not be too long before this proud Germany would be a pathetic little region in the heart of Europe beset on all sides by those we had hoped to conquer.

But now the soldiers on the Eastern front began to see it as a special duty, in spite of the anger and hardships, to resist the Russian advances as long as possible until the Allied armies in the West were able to occupy the still free lands in the Reich. There was no longer any question of victory. In the East it was all about slowing the Russian advance toward the West. Surely today it seems odd that the war-weary soldiers in the East fought back so bitterly and refused to capitulate to a situation that was clearly hopeless, just to hinder the encroachment of the Russians. Besides this rationale there was a much more immediate reason for the German resistance. The German soldiers continually heard

stories and very often witnessed the results of atrocities committed by the Russian soldiers. This was not a product of propaganda, this was the horrible truth that we could witness when we managed a 'successful' counter attack. I, too, would not be spared this sight.

The revenge, that [Soviet journalist] Ilya Ehrenburg called on the Russian soldiers to exact, was an inhuman revenge that surpasses human understanding. That type of revenge engendered a counter-revenge that was terrible when the right situations arose. When the German soldiers saw for themselves what the Russians were doing it provoked a rage against all Russians without exception. It only strengthened the German soldier's will to fight on. This rage also made it possible for the military commanders to continue to issue the craziest orders and to continue to use and misuse the men as cannon fodder. I was subject to divided feelings a short while later when I discovered the bodies of raped women. That was a moment when I could have very well forgotten myself. I will have more to say about that later.



*Ilya Ehrenburg*

Next to Reichsidiot Himmler [Reichsheini Himmler], as we sneeringly referred to him, there was another general of the Wehrmacht, Ferdinand Schörner, who started out as a Generaloberst and then, just before the door closed, was promoted to General Feldmarschal. We called him "Bloodhound Schörner." Not only was he considered to be a "hardass," he was also an outspoken Nazi fanatic who stood fast and true to his Führer. He was an active officer in the Kaiser's army and after 1918 he

entered the Reichswehr to remain an active officer. In the new Wehrmacht he transformed himself into a convinced Nazi, imbued with the Nazi spirit and adamant in his faith in his Führer. During his time in Russia his name became feared, but even more so because of his time in Kurland [in west Latvia].



*General Ferdinand Schörner*

Hitler made him his commander in the "Eastern German Sector," which included Silesia and the Czech 'protectorate.' For Hitler, Schörner was about the only truly reliable commander he could count on. That is, next to Himmler, who was in charge of the Ersatzheer [Army training and weapons testing], and whose authority also extended to the northern area of the East front. By this time the Ersatzheer had been pretty much emptied out and there was nothing much left to command. There were only a few training and testing installations left with any soldiers to man them. The soldiers were mostly in foreign lands now, facing the enemy, the rest were total cripples in their barracks. The Reichsheini [Himmler] could not do much with those army

Bundesarchiv, BfW 183,120/170  
Foto: Schörner (6) / April 1941

bases, but he could still run riot with the bases in the East, at least until the Russians overran them. But for as long as he could exercise power, he did so with fear and horror. Above all he did so through his 'Special Units' that acted against alleged or suspected deserters, traitors and saboteurs. They acted not only against soldiers but also against civilians who were guilty of such crimes.

Under Himmler and Schörner a 'war without mercy' was launched against the Jewish-Bolshevik enemy. This was especially the case with Schörner who mentioned them frequently in his orders. Above all of this stood the newly established Standgerichte [drumhead court-martial] with the very real possibility of summary execution, even for the mere suspicion of desertion. Particularly active were the "Green Police Regiments." They supported Himmler without question and were true to their "Chief." After the war they did not want to hear about any of this and many became normal police officers in the German Republic. They did not want to hear about their actions against the partisans in the East or their behavior in the Ghettos. After 1945 they forgot everything about their deployment except that they always did their duty. This was a duty to which they remained true even when it came down to hanging German soldiers in Eastern Germany in 1945.

In the new outfit that they plunked me down into, they did not know quite what to do with me. I had no combat training or experience and this made me more of a liability than an asset. I, too, had no real desire to be an infantryman, but they had to do something with me, so they assigned me to the company brigade where the couriers, intelligence and other support troops were. The guys in the orderly room thought I would find some use there in the new company where we were all completely unknown to one another.

It was now February 1945. On February 8<sup>th</sup> the Russians launched an attack from the bridgehead, that had now been reinforced, near Steinau an der Oder. By the 10<sup>th</sup> they had taken Liegnitz. The Glogau stronghold had been encircled and would be slowly worn down. The Russians spared themselves a direct attack. This 'fortress' was not important enough. This was in contrast to the opinion of the German leadership whose delusion would still cost many lives in this city even as it failed to stop the Russian advance.

My new outfit was recently filled out with stragglers and other displaced soldiers. Our previous reserve position was now changed to a front line position. On our insertion into this sector of the front line they let us know that on the next morning at 5 AM we were to undertake a counter attack. We would be expected to do our duty unconditionally. Along with that order was a corresponding Order of the Day from "Bloodhound" Schörner wherein he made it crystal clear as to what he expected from our 'unconditional duty.' He did not forget also to mention the Standgerichte.

We were told that in the course of this counter attack there would be no prisoners taken. They could not be taken to the rear, there was no longer any means of doing so. As our company commander said, for us the Russians and now Polish troops we were facing are considered to be better dead than alive, we had no uses for them alive. With that everything was clear, the last word said. All we had to do was mount a successful counter attack, nothing more.

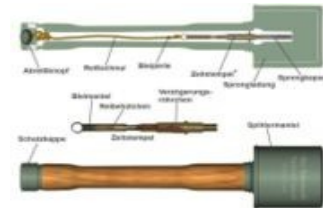


*Eier (egg) Handgranade*

We Grenadiers, as infantrymen have been called for some time, were now outfitted with the best equipment. It included a generous amount of rifle rounds, but above all we were issued a lot of hand grenades,



Stielhandgranaten and the dear, little, cute egg hand grenades. The experienced Landser stuck the Stielhandgranaten in the tops of their jackboots if they had them, if not, they were simply stuck in their belts. The egg hand grenades were hung on our belts and everything else was stuffed in the pockets of our uniforms. We really were well equipped with a great number of death dealing weapons. We were so loaded with explosives that we were sure to bring death and destruction to the enemy lines, if we could reach them and come face to face with them. None of us felt good about being festooned with such dangerous things on our bodies. They could do damage to us, particularly to the not unimportant body part that no man relishes losing and that might some day once again be needed! I was very uncomfortable about all of the dangerous things I would have to carry on me in the morning attack at 5 AM.



*Stielhandgranate*

I should also add that I had never been a part of an attack like this before and knew nothing about how to go about it. That sort of thing didn't matter anymore. The only important thing was that soldiers were on hand to make the attack, and that the attack would be made regardless of whether they knew what they were doing or not. All I knew was that I was supposed to stay close to the company chief in case he needed to use me as a courier. I wasn't happy about the assignment, but there was nothing I could do about it.

Just before 5 AM the next morning a surprisingly heavy artillery barrage began that also included fire from heavy grenade launchers. The intense fire surprised us, we did not think there were that many heavy weapons left. Before the barrage began our squad leader give us the details of our objectives. The attack would take place over a broad front. The goal was to push the Russians back. The troops facing us were in a salient and our mission was to drive them back and straighten the German front line. We were to use every means possible to stop "Ivan" here if not force him to fall back. That is why the attack was to be so massive with so much support from the heavy guns.



*Landser on the East Front*

*Note the hand grenades stuffed in belts and boots.*

As the barrage continued we were ordered to move out. The grenadiers were given the signal and we began the advance toward the Russian positions that lay in a wooded area. Between us and them was a wide empty field that we had to cross. We were hoping that the murderous fire from our artillery and grenade launchers would have cleared the enemy out of this open area. It happened that we were able to cross without hardly any resistance. Either the Russians were no longer there, or they were waiting for us to enter the protection of the woods to give us a hot welcome. There was some desultory rifle and machine gun fire, but very little defensive fire from the Russians. This surprised us all.

On this promenade over the field to the woods I was feeling very uncomfortable, because I found myself to be alone. I had missed connecting up with the company commander and my squad was elsewhere in the area. When I got to the edge of the woods, I decided to free myself of the load of murderous weapons I was carrying. I started dumping these ugly things that I didn't want to use anyway. I had to be very careful in doing this because it wouldn't be good to be observed in the act by someone who had a different point of view than I.

Now I felt lighter and more free. With my carbine in hand I went on in the direction that my company had gone. I could tell the way because now to my right and left I could see a few German soldiers.

Suddenly I had a big surprise. I was standing by the entrance of a Russian position that had been dug into the earth in the woods. A Russian soldier abruptly popped out of the entrance with a machine pistol in his hand. I was totally shocked by his sudden appearance, he was not only surprised, but equally shocked by my sudden appearance. We both had the same terrible feeling that things were going to pop and the only question was which one of us would start shooting first. We were both young guys and we both had the same fear and we knew that this fear could lead to bad consequences. Both of us were alone on a distant field, and perhaps were both separated from our units. And of the two of us, neither had a desire to play the 'brave hero.'

Some tense seconds went by as we held our weapons at the ready in our hands knowing that something could happen at any moment. I was the one who tipped the balance not to shoot. I let the barrel of my carbine drop toward the ground letting him know that I was not going to fire. Then I made a hand gesture indicating that he should take off and disappear. The face of the Russian which had been tense with fear relaxed, as did mine. A little smile came to his lips and he said something that sounded like, "Madka," which must mean "Mother" and he added to it the words, "Nix schießen!" [No shooting] I responded with a smile and repeated, "Nix schießen!"

The young Russian doffed his fur cap to me, the German soldier, and quickly made off in the direction of his comrades. He did not take his pistol with him. He laid it on the ground in front of me to let me know that he was not going to try to take a shot at me once he got some distance away. I picked up the pistol and kept it with me for a while as a trophy, until it became too risky to have such a trophy in one's possession.

Was this event something extraordinary? Or, was it an expression of cowardice on both sides. In terms of the soldier's code it was certainly cowardice on both sides, and it would have gotten both of us in a great deal of trouble if we had been observed. But this event was simply a matter of two people facing one another who mutually decided not to kill the other. We exhibited respect and esteem and regard for the life of the other. Any one who wants to characterize it as cowardice may do so, but for me it was a glimmer of humanity in the middle of a war. That we were both scared is a very human reaction and we should not be ashamed of it. I am in any case proud of our behavior, more so than I would be to follow a stupid order. I was proud then and remain so today of the fact that I never killed another man,

that I never extinguished a life or even 'only' wounded another person. I would never have the chance to boast about such 'heroic deeds' as is the usual custom after a war is over. I have no man's life on my conscience.

The Russian soldier was gone, none of my comrades saw anything and I managed to find my company. They had dug in to regroup and to begin the assault in earnest and push the Russians back. Or, so thought our commanders. We were feeling uneasy about the lack of resistance on the part of the Russians that our captain said were opposite us. Could the Russians have retreated without putting up a fight? That did not seem likely and we were getting the feeling that things were still going to get hot and heavy. This uneasy feeling soon proved justified.



*Russian M-42 Anti-Tank Gun*

Suddenly, mad firing broke out in front of us coming from the much feared 5-cm. Pak shooting directly at us. They were firing these anti-tank cannons directly at us soldiers, there were no tanks to be seen. The guns were loaded with fragmentation rounds. The effect of these fragmentation rounds was horrible, but the use of the Pak on the Eastern front with direct firing was considered by both sides to be very efficient.

The Russians had let our initial counter-attack play itself out so that they could lay into us with the full force their anti-tank cannons. We had fallen into a trap, which just snapped shut. In addition to the Pak 's we also came under fire from grenade launchers of all calibers, in particular with the dreaded 'tree killers' [Baumkrepierern] that rained shrapnel down on us. Without proper cover there was no protection from the 'tree killers.' We were helpless in the face of the massive fire, the counter-attack was over before it really began. There was nothing for it but to get back to our original position, if we could still make it. In all of the noise and confusion I suddenly heard a terrifying cry from the man next to me. He had taken a bad hit from shrapnel. It was so bad that his left arm was only hanging to his body by a thread of sinew.

I did what I could to help him and wrapped his wound with an emergency bandage. Then I tried to carry this screaming torso out of the line of fire and to some dressing station that must be nearby. It was up to me to get this severely wounded man to a medic and I had to do it in full sight and in shooting range of the enemy. It was a wonder that both of us didn't get shot up. They did not zero in on us. It must have been torture for the wounded man to be transported. I took his good arm over my shoulder and tried to carry him this way. It was very difficult. At the dressing station I watched as they severed his arm from his body with one quick cut. I had to get back. It was only then that I realized what the medics were telling me. It was pointless for me to have carried him back, he was dead. I had not even noticed that he was unconscious as I carried him.

Very few of our unit made it back to our starting positions. We did not reach our goal, but nevertheless we suffered heavy losses. We lay there now awaiting further orders. Everyone was in a crappy mood. One outcome of the attack was that I was made a courier. I was ordered to go to regimental HQ and to stand by for an assignment. Couriers were very important now because there were hardly any functioning phone lines left, more were shot up than functioning. I had no idea where the regiment staff were, but there were couriers coming from there and they needed to return so I went with them. The way back was not without an element of danger because of the constant fire from grenade

launchers.

We would take cover, wait for a pause in the firing then make a run for it until the next salvo. We found the staff in a farm house. No sooner had we arrived than we had to duck for cover in the cellar. The Russians were laying down an intense barrage using guns of all calibers. This could only mean that in a very short time they were going to attack. The woods and the fields we had just crossed would be impassible now.

In the cellar we were all queasy. No one knew what would or could happen next. There were perhaps 8 to 10 Landser in the cellar, all couriers. All knew that when the order came they would have to go outside. They also knew that they would be in great peril under fire in the barrage and in the possible Soviet infantry attack. There is a phrase in Landser jargon that is vulgar, but very much to the point. We were scared shitless [der Arsch mit Grundeis ging]. Me too.

Among the group was a staff-sergeant, and, thus, already an 'old soldier.' His uniform was covered with decorations. He displayed Iron Crosses both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> class, Infantry Medal for Bravery, Combat Wounded Badge, Close Combat Clasp and on the arm were tank stripes for each tank he had single-handedly destroyed. For such an industrious guy it was surprising that he was only a staff-sergeant, he should have been more. There must have been a reason for that. Perhaps he was one of those who grew truculent in their long years of service. I was like that and it could be that this highly decorated comrade was the same sort of guy as me. You will soon find out how wrong I was in that assessment.

## **Drumhead Court-Marshal Threatens**

The Landser in this cellar were all strangers to one another. They talked among themselves and the theme, as usual, was this damned, shitty war. This is a very normal theme for soldiers when they get together. I might also mention that in our current situation, women were no longer the topic of conversation. The topic of war was forced upon us by events. We were all fed up with it and conversation always turned on when would the war end, when would we get out of this shithole, when would we get home and what would it be like when we got back.

The central question was when would it be over and what would it be like in Germany with us as the vanquished going home to a Reich that probably wouldn't exist any more. On the surface it was bizarre that in our current situation, with a deafening artillery barrage roaring outside and the sound of exploding grenades, that we would be cowering in a cellar thinking about the post-war Germany. It was bizarre and counter-intuitive because in this exact moment our very lives were at stake and could be ended in an instant. None of us could imagine getting out of that cellar alive and we made peace with ourselves knowing that only a miracle could save us. We couldn't think of what kind of miracle it would take to help us out.

I took it in my head to share my thoughts on what the future of the Reich should be. I expressed my opinion that the only possible form of government for a new Germany would be Democracy. I brought to bear all of the facts I had learned from my friend Claus Brauer in Halberstadt. [See "Recuperation in Halberstadt" on this web site.] I sang the praises of British Democracy as a model for the needed transformation of our government after the war. In my naivete I thought it would be all right to express myself. I did not think about how these opinions might not be acceptable at this particular time, or that they might also be considered high treason, especially when I held our enemy, England, up as a positive example. After the Russians, the British were our worst enemies. I did not think that in this cellar among us little Landser, who, like me, were totally fed up with the war, that they might have

thoughts and opinions that were not in line with mine. I spoke with great passion and it started a little discussion, which I welcomed. It was good that the men were talking about the issues that affected us all. I proudly offered more facts that I had learned from Claus. We were among our own kind here, there was no talk of the evil Nazis, it was just us, simple Landser who sat here without knowing what was going to happen to us in the next few seconds. The mood in the cellar livened up, in spite of the ongoing barrage, with this enthusiastic talk about Democracy.

No one noticed that the decorated staff-sergeant had slipped out of the cellar. After a while he came back. He walked straight up to me and said that he had an order to give me. I was to immediately go above and report to the Executive Officer, an Oberleutnant who was waiting upstairs.

I asked him what was going on. He just smirked, gave me a dirty look and told me that I would soon find out. I reported properly with my name and rank, figuring that I was about to be given an assignment.

But that wasn't the case. The Oberleutnant asked me my age, how long I had been in the army and whether I was married and had children. Then he asked me if it was true that I had been speaking defeatism, that I had held England up as a model for Germany, or if I saw the defeat of Germany as a possibility. That would be demoralizing talk and an informant had denounced me. He used the term 'denounce' explicitly and I knew by that that it was "Comrade Staff-Sergeant" who made the denunciation. If all of that was correct, then it would be high treason and I could guess at the disposition it would deserve. I was in a very tight spot indeed. If only I had kept my big mouth shut. I couldn't deny anything, there were too many witnesses in the cellar. The only chance I had was to try to soften what I had said by making out that it really meant something else. My tactic was totally transparent and instantly apparent to the Oberleutnant.

Now he started to formally chew me out. He called me a stupid asshole, and he was not wrong there. Here was the war in its last days (those were his words) and I, like a complete fool, talk myself into a noose. Didn't I know that there were Standrechte [Drumhead Courts-Marshal] out there, and that everyone had a duty to report defeatist talk, and anyone who overheard such talk had to report it immediately to the military police for a court-marshal right on the spot? I, Private First Class Mork, was a total idiot that put not only myself, but also him, the Oberleutnant into a really shitty situation. I should have kept my big trap shut this close to the end of the war. Even the Oberleutnant was no longer convinced of victory, and now he had to saddle me with a death sentence because I was so damned stupid.

After his anger subsided somewhat, he came over to me and said to me very calmly and quietly that he knew what was expected of him. He went on to say very quietly that he was going to give me one and only one last chance. It would almost certainly not work out very good for me, but it was still a chance. This chance was also a possible out for him to avoid doing what he was explicitly required to do. He would leave the room for a few seconds. On his desk were marching orders that did not yet have a name filled in. The orders were for someone to go to the motorpool in Spremberg, pick up a vehicle and bring it back to the regiment, if such a thing were still even possible. If, when he came back in the room, the marching orders were still on the desk and the dim-witted Private First Class were still standing there then he would he would have no choice but to turn me over to the MP's.

I could not believe that another Landser had betrayed me and that I now had to deal with the worst possible situation. On the one hand was the dead certainty that I would go before a court-marshal but the other choice was equally deadly. I would have to leave the house and go out into a raging artillery

barrage that you wouldn't send a dog into. But there was no other choice but to take the Oberleutnant up on the last chance. I snatched up the marching orders as soon as he left the room then dashed outside. I did not have to go back to the cellar for anything, I had taken my full kit with me when I reported upstairs including carbine, gas mask, rations and in full uniform. It would not have been good to go back down there where my 'good comrade' lay and surely awaited my end.

It took a great deal of effort to force myself to go outside into the barrage of artillery, grenades and rockets and cross the open ground toward the rear. The only way to do it was to use the technique that I hated so much when we had to do it while training as a new recruit. I had to crawl on my belly between the bursts of grenades, gaining a little bit of ground between each salvo. There was no cover in this flat farmland. It was a special torture to have to stay flat and crawl toward what I hoped would be a road that would make my progress easier. I really wanted to get through the artillery barrage before the Russian infantry started their attack. I had the luck to find a road and had the even better good fortune to hitch a ride on an ambulance that passed by. I have used the word 'miracle' before and it may be trite, but this really and truly was a miracle. I had gotten to safety and I had survived the threatened court-martial and the artillery fire. I got out alive. My accuser did not achieve his goal, and I had to be extremely grateful for the actions of the Oberleutnant. He saved my life and I hope and wish that he too got through the war with his life.

The fanatics were still there, even just before the end. The staff-sergeant knew exactly what would happen to me if he reported me for demoralizing talk. He knew it would be a death sentence. This 'Comrade' was certainly not a Nazi fanatic, he was a normal, simple human being who had distinguished himself as a 'go-getter' and I was a traitor who had been found out. For him death and killing in war had become so commonplace that the death of a traitor was quite acceptable, it was a just punishment for an evil-doer, and that is what I was in his eyes. Through my behavior I betrayed all of his ideals, perhaps also his military pride, but most certainly his patriotism identity as a German. Traitors needed to be taken down a peg and hanged on the nearest tree limb. There were still plenty such fanatics toward the end of the war and even in the POW camps after the war. I would not be spared that experience either.

As I recovered from all this to some extent, one thing was crystal clear to me. Under no circumstances could I go back to that same outfit. Not only for my own safety, but also for the safety of the Oberleutnant. I did not know if this good comrade was part of the regimental staff, or only on temporary assignment.

[To be continued...]