

# Chapter Seven

## The Last Fighting: April 1945, Ruhr Region, Germany

The 275<sup>th</sup> Battalion was busy in April supporting the rapid movement of the infantry regiments in their maneuvers to surround the Ruhr industrial area. Many roads had to be swept for mines and cleared of debris, and bridges had to be constructed over the canals. Over the next two weeks the medical detachment moved the aid station every few days as the infantry battalions pushed the Germans into the shrinking Ruhr pocket.

I drove the same route, more or less, 69 years later. I stopped in Recklinghausen for a stroll into the town, sitting at a street-side café with a croissant and coffee, imagining the town as my father saw it. Large areas of the Ruhr had been flattened by the saturation bombing, so he likely saw mostly rubble as the engineers worked to clear roads for the troops and supply convoys. I hopped on one of the several autobahns in this heavily populated area, and drove down to the Ruhr River at Witten. This was where my father saw his last day of combat. As opposed to the northern Rhine with its broad floodplain, the Ruhr runs down a valley with steep bluffs on either side, making it easy for the Germans to inflict heavy casualties on the American troops along the river below.

An excerpt from the battalion's monthly journal describes the activity:

The 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was continuing its attack to the East; objective, the Zweig Canal. The 275<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion supported the advance. Company A was in close support of the 289<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, Company B in close support of the 290<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and Company C the 291<sup>st</sup>. Engineer support consisted chiefly in clearing road blocks, bridging and constructing culverts or bypasses over small streams and canals; removing mines from roads and marking and clearing intermittent minefields. . . .

Fortunately, the 291<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment was able to gain a small bridge-

head across the Zweig Canal in Datteln, during the night of 2 April. This bridgehead enabled Company C to construct a much needed causeway in that vicinity on the afternoon of 3 April. Construction was started at 1500 and by 2000, vehicles were crossing. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Jim's name appeared in the 275<sup>th</sup>'s Monthly Action Against Enemy Report for April, when he was awarded a Bronze Star for meritorious support of his battalion under combat conditions. In the midst of intense fighting, Jim's correspondence continued to downplay the details of his combat experience. Letters home to his parents tended to be weekly, rather than the daily routine Jim maintained with Liz. He was a bit more graphic with his mother than his wife.

*Somewhere in Germany [Brassert section of Marl]  
3 April 1945*

Dear Mom, . . .

You spoke in your letter about how much Liz seemed to like the Farm, so much so that you said it wouldn't surprise you at all if we ended up settling there. . . . That would be funny, wouldn't it, after all our talk about the far west. . . .

Our last operation was on a big river. I got closer to the war during it than I have so far. I moved the aid station up to give direct support. We were about a mile forward of the infantry aid station and had quite an exciting time. I was up all night three nights in a row, working as an engineer officer one of them. The morning of that night I got caught out on the exposed river bank with some other men when our smoke screen blew away and the enemy opened up with direct small arms fire. Everyone got away without a scratch, though. Two days later I was pinned down by mortar fire twice in twelve hours. The first time five shells lit within fifteen feet of my foxhole, one of them being only two feet from it. The second time I had no foxhole, the closest one hitting about twenty feet away. Some fun, but not even a scratch. A bomb also hit seventy feet from my aid station, which was in a bomb shelter. I have no desire to get any closer to the war, thank you. . . .

The fighting along the Ruhr liberated tens of thousands of slave laborers in the many factories there. Allied doctors and all the hospitals were inundated with terrible health issues, with local medical needs in addition to their own soldiers' injuries and illnesses, and were forced to restrict whom they could treat.

*Somewhere in Germany [Brassert section of Marl]*  
1 April, 1945

Dearest Liz:

. . . Happy Easter, sweetheart. I sure hope I'll be with you for the rest of them. I started to go to church, then didn't. I was also a thorough stinker. A German woman with a very sick 9 months old baby came in and asked me to see him. It sounded like diphtheria so I went to see him, tho we aren't supposed to treat them. The kid was very sick but I couldn't tell what he had and had nothing for further diagnosis or treatment. There are no doctors in this town and all civilian hospitals are full and we have orders to only take care of immediate life and death cases and not to transport anyone more to civilian hospitals. The damn Nazis have been taking the doctors with them here. Under the circumstances there was nothing I could do, tho the mother begged me to take her to one of the civilian hospitals and she'd make them take the baby. The trouble is that they have no diagnostic facilities now either and nothing would be gained. I still feel like a heel for not even trying, tho. I did call up every possible source of diphtheria antitoxin or culture as I think it's probably nasal diphtheria but may be pancreatic fibrosis, in which case hospital admission would be a waste of time. I've also had to inadequately treat a couple of other civilian emergencies. Needless to say tonight I feel I've done my bad deed for the day rather than my good. On the other hand, the Germans let seventy-eight babies starve to death in one of the Dutch cities the last week of their occupation, and a Russian mother came in last night for milk for her month old baby who hadn't had any for four days, but that's no excuse for us behaving the same way. There is an enormous amount of slave labor which is more frequent the further into Germany we get. They've really had a tough time of it, too. I found papers today proving that the owner of our house is a party member, so I don't feel at all bad about booting him out of it. . . .

The medical detachment with their aid station was able to stay much more comfortable than the infantry soldiers. They had the luxury of speculating on their future whenever the war should end. They had been told that most would be sent to the Pacific to fight Japan, but rumors were rampant about leave in the US on the way. They also knew that many medical officers would be needed in occupied Germany.

*Somewhere in Germany [Brassert section of Marl]*  
2 April, 1945

Dearest Liz:

. . . You were talking about me being more useful as part of the Army of