

ARMOR IN BATTLE

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A Tank Battalion Commander's Experience in Europe

Editor: The following pages provide insights from Brig. Gen. (ret.) Albin F. Irzyk, who served with the 4th Armored Division from 1942 until 1946. Irzyk served as the S-3, Executive Officer, and battalion commander of the 8th Tank Battalion. He saw extensive combat in Europe following the unit's arrival in Normandy until the war's end. These pages are an extract of an interview conducted with him by the editor in May 2014. General Irzyk's career also included service with the postwar U.S. Constabulary, training responsibilities at the Armor Center, and command of the 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment during the 1961 Berlin Crisis. In Vietnam he was responsible for the initial defense of Saigon during the Tet Offensive and later served as Assistant Division Commander-A in the 4th Infantry Division, responsible for the operations of the division. Principal decorations earned over the course of his career included the Silver Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters, the Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster, and the Distinguished Service Cross.

Interview with Brig. Gen. (ret.) Albin F. Irzyk, May 2014

- Q: When you arrived in Normandy was your battalion operating as a pure tank battalion or was it almost always a combined arms task force?
- A: In the 4th Armored Division, there were three combat commands. Each combat command generally had one tank battalion, one armored infantry battalion, and one artillery battalion, but the combat command was flexible. It was not like a regiment. Basically, a tank battalion and armored infantry battalion operated together, supported by an artillery battalion. In the case of the 8th Tank Battalion I would say that probably two thirds of the time we operated as a battalion and about a third of the time we had the armored infantry. They were always with us and my artillery battalion was always behind me. The artillery battalion commander was in a jeep, and he hovered close behind me. I could reach over to him, and say, "Hey, Pete [Lt. Col. Arthur C. Peterson, 22d Armored Field Artillery Battalion commander], I need this." As needed the tank battalion operated with all its companies out. For example, at Chaumont the 10th AIB [Armored Infantry Battalion] and 4th Armored—they rode our tanks into the battle. They jumped off the tanks, and they fought together. It was as the conditions required. There was no hard and fast rule. We were flexible.
- Q: When you did task organize, did the 8th Tank Battalion generally cross attach with the same unit?
- A: No. We changed. For a long time I had the 10th Armored Infantry. I had the 51st Infantry, and the 54th Infantry not so much [*Note: Possible reference to the 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion, which was part of the 4th Armored Division. The 54th Armored Infantry Battalion was organic to the 10th Armored Division*]. Basically, the 10th Armored Infantry, but I worked with the other two battalions. For example, I had the 53rd when I hit the concentration camp. I had the 51st during Lorraine. Mostly, I had the 10th, but I worked with all three of the armored infantry battalions and all three of the artillery battalions.
- Q: Did your battalion ever receive attachments of tank destroyers? If so, how were they integrated into the task forces?
- A: We had a fantastic destroyer battalion, the 704th. Elements of 704th were assigned to the combat commands. The backbone of the combat command is the tank battalion. The tank battalion commander is the guy who usually fights the combat command, and infantry and artillery support him. We also had tank destroyers. Sometimes a company of tank destroyers. They had a 90mm which was much more powerful and good help. In the Arracourt battle, it was the tank destroyers that did a fantastic battle.
- Q: Had your unit had any prior experience working with or training with tank destroyers?
- A: No. They came, and we worked with them. We didn't sit in a classroom.
- Q: During the drive across France and again later into Germany, was there a standard operating procedure at the combat command or task force level for the rapid elimination of resistance encountered?
- A: No standard operating procedure. Minute by minute things changed. We operated the way we were geared to operate. I keep talking about the imponderables of a battlefield. You never know what the other

guy is going to do. Like the coaches, he has the game plan and we have a game plan, but it doesn't last long, so you have to adjust by the minute. Whatever the situation required.

Q: During these operations across France and later into Germany can you describe the basic formation of the battalion task force as it advanced? Where, for example, was your command post, supporting artillery, maintenance, and supply elements? What did the organization look like?

A: Well, once again, I refer to my battalion commander, [Lt. Col. Edgar T.] Tom Conley. He was an older man. The Eighth tank battalion was created during this reorganization.

Note: This statement refers to the reorganization of the 4th Armored Division in September 1943. This reorganization eliminated regiments from the division and reduced the size of the overall formation. This change impacted all armored divisions except the 2d and 3rd Armored Divisions.

He was the first commander, and he knew nothing about tank operations. He was a conservative guy, and he knew it. When we were in England before the Normandy invasion, he called me in one day and said, "I've been thinking about how we're going to operate this tank battalion." It turned out he did it very unconventionally. He said "I'm going to form what I call an advance guard, and you're going to command it." I was the S3, the operations officer then. "You're going to command the advance guard, I will give you what we think you need. You'll lead the battalion, and I will reinforce you. This was probably the only time ever that we had this sort of thing. So I, in essence, fought the battalion. When we moved out, I would usually have a couple of platoons of light tanks, a tank company, and some recon. That is the way we went into combat, but we adjusted. Later, when I took the battalion, I fought the battalion as I thought it should have been done. There's no set way. Every commander organizes the battalion as he thinks it should be, and it has to change, depending on what the situation is. If we're moving rapidly, we get the lighter forces out in front. If we're held up, we put the tanks up. So we have to make adjustments by the minute.

Q: How did you generally employ your light tank company?

A: If we're moving rapidly and the enemy is scattered, we put the light tanks out. We usually had a troop of cavalry attached to us. So it would be the cavalry and the light tanks out front with the medium tanks behind them. During the battle of Chaumont, I had them on both flanks. Frequently, I used them on the flanks. It was the light tanks that were the first to overrun the concentration camp at Ohrdruf. I had the light tanks on the flanks and the ones on the left were the first ones into the concentration camp. Those are some examples of how I used the light tanks.

Q: I take it that if you had the opportunity, you would not have substituted the light tanks for another medium tank company?

A: I won't argue with the organization. I was very happy with the way we were organized. We were flexible.

Q: How was close air support coordinated with your battalion? Did you, for example, have a forward air control party with your battalion?

A: Yes, we did. In fact one of the early casualties was a major, a forward observer, outside of Lorient. This was in Brittany. We had just started the war. We had forward observers down with us, and these were skilled pilots. I don't think they enjoyed it, but they'd come down for a month. The beauty is that if I needed air, I as task force commander had to go to battalion command, who had to go to combat command. We had tank radios, but the range was not that great. I had an S3 track, and then had communications that could go back about 25 miles, so it could go back to combat command. Combat command had to go to division. But if the forward observer was there, he had a radio. He'd talk to his guys up in the air. We did not always have them, but we frequently had forward air observers. They saved our bacon more than once.

Q: What were your biggest maintenance challenges and your supply challenges?

A: World War II was a war of movement. The tank made World War II the war of movement. We were moving all the time. An example—you were talking about maintenance and food. In Lorraine, we attacked on November 8 and were finally stopped on December 6. During that time no kitchen trucks got anywhere near us. We had no hot meals except what we cooked with our Coleman burners for four weeks. We had not one minute of maintenance for four weeks. That's the reason I charge anyone that criticizes the Sherman tank. The Sherman had some shortcomings, but it was a fantastic tank to do the

job it was designed to do. The problem was getting what we needed from the infantry that couldn't negotiate this terrible terrain behind us. We had to survive by ourselves without too much of logistical support. There were times when we advanced and were stopped after fighting all day. We were low on ammunition, low on gasoline. We needed resupply. I would send my tanks back to escort the trucks up. Here are these guys who have fought all day long from first light. It's now dark, and they have to refuel. They have to wait until the kitchen trucks catch up with us. *[Note: In the 4th Armored Division, the kitchen trucks were often used to carry additional supplies.]*

When the kitchen trucks come up, they have to get close enough to the tank so they can refuel them and supply them with ammunition. So what happens when you're waiting for gasoline and ammunition? The gasoline comes up in 5-gallon cans. It takes about 15 of them to refuel after the day's operation. So each can is like a bucket brigade. It goes from the truck to a guy on the ground behind the tank. You lift it up to the guy on the tank. He has to unscrew it, pour five gallons in, and send it [the container] back. And this has to happen for about fifteen tanks. Now it's refueled. Now it comes time for ammunition. The shells are about two feet long. They come in a box. They're in fiber cases. They have to be taken out quietly—because the enemy is near—you have to pass up the shells. They have to be handled carefully, because if you dent the shells, you're going to have a jam. This goes on virtually all night.

Q: You feel very strongly about the Sherman tank. What were its best features? What were its worst?

A: In World War II we had an industrial miracle that will never be equaled. No one known will ever come close to doing what we did. When I joined the Army in 1940, the Army was 178,000. We were the sixteenth largest army in the world. That was 1940. Four years later, we've got thousands of ships, thousands of tanks. I still applaud the inventive genius of our country. They came up with the Sherman tank. First we had the Grant and Lee tank in Africa. The Grant had a short cannon, but it was on the sponson. The turret had a little weapon. This is the desert. We got the Shermans. Tremendous advance from then to the Sherman. I think our county was doing great. But back to the shortcomings, the Sherman had 75mm gun. It was a short barrel, low muzzle velocity. It was not comparable to other tanks that the Germans and the Russians had. It was a 75mm. But it was mobile. It was simple. We ran out of armored replacements early on. Infantry people came in. Never saw a tank. In four days, they were working crewmen. We had the 360-degree traverse, which gave us a tremendous advantage. Our gunners had that. It was a simple tank to maintain. I mentioned we went a whole month in the mud in the worst weather possible in Lorraine without one minute of maintenance—just first echelon maintenance that the crew could do. The shortcoming was our tracks were a little narrow. That's the reason we bogged down in the mud. The gun was short, but even then we corrected it. I had this tank until we got to Bastogne. About two or three days after we relieved the 101st [Airborne Division], I'm down to thirteen medium tanks, and I get a call from the radio from my maintenance officer. He says, "We've just gotten seven replacement tanks." I says, "Great." He says, "No, no. You got to come see them." So I went and saw them. That was the first time I saw the Easy 8 [M4A3E8]. Now since then we've moved to a 76mm gun with long barrel, higher muzzle velocity, and we had a wider track. A better Sherman tank. So for half of the war, I had the M4A3; for half of it, I had the M4A3E8, Easy Eight. Toward the end of the war, early March or early April, I was offered the 90mm, the Pershing tank. I said, "No, no. We didn't need that." We had the mobility. No tank could have done what it did: to go 161 miles from Lorraine to Bastogne on the approach march. That's the plusses and minuses of the Sherman. The minus was the gun, probably the narrowness of the tracks, and we had less armor. Tank developers have to have a great balance. The bigger the gun, you've got to have a bigger platform. To me the most highly overrated, highly misunderstood tank was the Tiger tank. It was a disaster. All it was was a roving pillbox. It had the best weapon of the war in the 88, but mechanically outsized, chewed up gasoline, and it was not a tank. No mobility.

Q: One quick question with the Easy 8. Did you have any issues with very distinct muzzle flashes when the 76mm fired?

A: No.

Q: Were there any significant field modifications to combat vehicles in your battalion?

A: I tried and abandoned it. The Germans had something called a Panzerfaust. A guy in a foxhole with a Panzerfaust could knock out a tank. The Panzerfaust was a fantastic weapon. It was their version of the bazooka. It had a bulbous projectile. It had a handle like a thick broom handle. When it was fired, it

latched on to the tank. It wobbled. It was not a high velocity weapon by any means. It latched onto the tank, and it would bore into the tank. It would be a big hole to start with, but it would get smaller. It would be pushing these fragments. They would disable a crew. In addition, they would disable a tank. One time during a brief period, I had my maintenance crew take concrete, additional armor, and all sorts of things. *[Note: This was a test of the use of additional armor as protection against shaped charge weapons. Concrete was fairly common, but its effectiveness was never confirmed.]* They fired the panzerfaust, and it still went through. I said the heck with this. During the time we were in France, at some point we put shrubbery around the tanks. But those are about the only modifications—virtually no modifications to the tank.

- Q: One of the things you describe in your book *He Rode Up Front* for Patton, there's a scene in Normandy before you've entered combat where you are walking around trying to learn as much about the battlefield as possible. You describe a situation where you find several knocked out Shermans and a lone Panther. You have what amounts to an epiphany when you realize the white star on the Shermans was an aiming point. Did you have similar insights or lessons learned as you got into active combat operations?
- A: The period you describe was just before [Operation] Cobra. We were sitting and waiting for Cobra. After Cobra, we attacked. But during this period, there was nothing you could do. There was no training, nothing, no classrooms or anything. The men were on their own. So I decided to see what I could see, because the ground had been fought over. So I got in my jeep, and I spent three or four days roaming around the area. I visited the hedgerows which were an eye opener. The first dead Germans I saw were in a small tank that had been burned. I went up, opened the hatch, and they were sitting there like toast. Then I had this experience that you describe. I was roaming around and saw this knocked out Panther tank. I went to it, got up on the back, and low and behold I looked down the barrel and saw these five American tanks. Whoever the platoon leader was had zero training, because he did everything he should not have done. First of all the five tanks were in a row. We taught them to stagger the tanks and not to be at the same range. So if we had a German gunner, he's not going to go "boom, boom"—which he did then [rapid destruction of one tank after another]. If you spread your tanks in an irregular formation, the German gunner has to aim at each one separately, different range, different distance. But this platoon was advancing five in a row, and as big as you could possibly see was this white star [national identification painted on front hull on American tanks]. And there was the shot. All he [the German tank gunner] was "bang, bang, bang." It was like Coney Island. It there's a tank in the history books that shows no stars, that's mine. But if it shows stars, that's not mine. I went and talked to Tom Conley [the battalion commander], and he said okay [to remove the white stars from the battalion's tanks]. I don't know how many lives that saved, but we went in starless.
- Q: During the drive to Bastogne, what do you consider to have been the greatest obstacle: navigation with no or inadequate maps, weather and terrain, or German resistance, particularly at Chaumont?
- A: The Battle of the Bulge was unique. It was probably the greatest land battle our country has ever fought. One of the greatest land battles of all time, I think. But we had two enemies: one was the massive German attack, second was the weather. The weather was the worst in about a hundred years or ever in that area. Weather definitely was a major problem. It probably balanced out with the ferocity of the German fight. It was bitter cold. We got colder and colder until you could not get any colder. There was no place to go, no hot food, no hot room, no hot shower, the ground was frozen. It was just terrible. On the advance north, everything was adverse. The ceiling was zero, it was gray, bitter cold wind, frozen roads—conditions could not have been worse. Going to Bastogne, we had one map, and I didn't have it. My combat commander had it. We had been alerted. We were ready to go. That was after we got to a place called Singling, about eight miles from the German border. We had orders to attack through the infantry across the border into Germany into the Saarland. Directly east. We were going directly east when Patton turned his army ninety degrees to go to the north. All our maps were oriented to the east. I was called on the afternoon before I turned at midnight. This is the afternoon of the 18th December. I left my area on 0030 on 19 December. My combat commander said, "You're going north." Our maps were to the east. He had a Michelin map. That was the only map. We had absolutely no idea we'd be going north. That was one time where maps could have helped. I had no map. So he had to talk to me on the radio or drive with his jeep to help guide me to Bastogne.
- Q: Did your tanks use grousers during the Battle of the Bulge.
- A: For a brief period, but it was not worth the effort. They had marginal effect. Not effective.

- Q: What type of reconnaissance assets did you generally have available to you as a battalion/task force commander?
- A: Most of the time in a tactical situation, you don't know what is out in front of you. Sometimes if it was safe, we'd have the forward observer fly overhead, or we had tactical air report what was out front. There's no intelligence, because things changed from minute to minute hour by hour. We had to meet what we faced and handle it from then on.
- Q: When you were task organized or operating as part of a task force, was there any mechanized cavalry assigned to you?
- A: Yes, we had an armored cavalry squadron, and we had a company of them attached. But reconnaissance is not the word. They were a light force helping us fight. Even they couldn't see out in front. They couldn't crawl anywhere.
- Q: How did you develop an understanding of where the enemy was, the terrain, the situational awareness?
- A: When they started shooting at us, we knew they were there. There was nothing we had overhead. We had no tactical air, no recon air. The Germans had reconnaissance air, but that was high level. We had no air telling us, but sometimes the fighters would report to us. Day by day by day we had no ground reconnaissance. We just had to take it as we met it.
- Q: So the armored cavalry was not finding things out in advance of the main body?
- A: No, they were helping us fight. The light tanks and the recon worked together, but they were fighting elements.
- Q: Not information collectors?
- A: No.
- Q: Who was responsible for making sure that reconnaissance or the operation of attached mechanized cavalry/armored cavalry was integrated with that of the battalion?
- A: This cavalry unit was assigned to the combat command. He operated under the combat commander, but frequently the units were with me. There was no advance arrangement.
- Q: You considered General Wood to be an exceptional leader. What made him so?
- A: General Wood had a feel for people. First of all, General Wood was a football player. He played varsity football for the University of Arkansas before he went to West Point. When he was at West Point, because he already had a college education, he was well ahead of the cadets. He tutored the cadets. He picked up the nickname "P" Wood for professor. He obviously had a great feel for people. As a leader, in my opinion, he had everything. When I got to Pine Camp, I asked about the division commander, who was General Wood. A lieutenant said, "Ah, I think he's weak." I asked why, and he said, "Well, he said 'God bless you men'." I mention the Tennessee maneuvers. He [General Wood] spoke up to Ben Lear [Lt. Gen. Ben Lear, Second Army commander] time and time again until people thought he was on the verge of being relieved—and he was. But he was backing his troops. The word got down to the troops. From that point on, they fell in love with General Wood. But it was not just a love affair. General Wood was a great trainer. I mentioned he required night classes, and General Wood was a man who visited his units. He was a division commander who went out and saw the men. There were some division commanders that command from a desk. He was out among them. When we were in the desert, he was in a tent. He was offered a special carrier. No. He lived like the men. I've got pictures of him showering in front of his tent. During a break in the war, he came and talked to the troops. This was after we had had quite a few engagements, and we had a quick break. He was there to tell us how great he thought we were. He actually wept said, "God bless you men." Beyond that he was a great tactician, and the tactics that we used across France were called Patton's tanks, but they John Wood's tanks. He was the one that was almost court martialed when we were ordered west to the Atlantic ports (Lorient). At that time Patton was just getting out of the doghouse. His army had just been reactivated. He wasn't going to scream. It was John Wood who went on a limb and screamed at the senior commanders, "You guys are doing it the wrong way. The enemy is to the east, not to the west." He was a very outspoken guy. The troops loved him. They used to say, "I saluted him before he saluted me." He had everything a leader could have in my opinion. He had the admiration and love of his troops. They fought for him. The Fourth Armored Division continued without him in command from November until the end of the war.

General Gaffey succeeded him. General Gaffey later served at Fort Knox. Gaffey Hall is named for him. He agreed that the division was never his. It was always John Wood's. At the conventions after the war, people never forgot John Wood. He was a unique commander.

Q: Did the relief of General Wood adversely impact the performance of the 4th Armored Division, even if only temporarily?

A: It did almost immediately.

Q: How was that impact felt at your level?

A: Things happened that would not have happened if Wood had been in command. The battle of Singling was probably the low point of the 4th Armored Division's career. It shouldn't have happened. At that time we had a tremendous change in command. We had a change in the division commander. We had a new general come in, an infantryman by the name of Earnest [Brigadier General Herbert L. Earnest, Combat Command A]. We had four battalion commanders that changed within a period of four days, but the greatest impact was Wood going and Gaffey coming.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about your experience with the 8th Tank Battalion in Lorraine?

A: There were two periods in Lorraine. Early on in the September era, but the real tough fighting was in November. As you probably know, the 4th Armored Division and the 8th Tank Battalion they say ran out of gas. We didn't run out of gas, but the gas was diverted to Montgomery. Patton was stopped. For the whole month of October, Patton, the greatest offensive weapon we had, was sitting. So we sat in Lorraine, in the mud, the horrible weather. The rain broke all records. We had pup tents in the fields. We had to take the pup tents down, because the mud was so deep that the tent pegs wouldn't hold. We had to find farms, homes, barns—we went into French homes to get into cover. That was October.

While that was happening, the Germans knew where we were coming, and they prepared for us. They had a month to prepare for us. So obviously they picked the best defensive positions. On November 8, finally, after this long, long time sitting, we launched our attack. Now, the weather is ferocious. It's bitter cold, ceiling zero, cold wind. The worst thing is the mud. History books have said that Patton's forces hit mud. They don't know what the mud was. The mud was like clay. If you put your foot in the mud and lifted your foot out, it clogged around your foot. So the tanks basically were immobilized. There was certain places where they could move cross country in the fields and other places they couldn't. So we were largely confined to the roads. The Germans knew that, so they blew craters in the roads, and they mined the roads. That's where their antitank guns were zeroed—on the roads. It was a matter of slug, slug, slug. We depended greatly on our artillery. We used our tank fire when possible, but we were largely restricted to the road. When we could, we left the roads. Occasionally this happened. If we were up against a town, the outlying ground around the town was drier than the fields, so we could get around the towns. It was four or four and a half miles a day.

At that point, I had the advance guard, leading the 8th Tank Battalion. As we were advancing, we reached this town, beyond which was another town called Marthille. That would be our next objective. They talked about Patton having a great sixth sense, a great battle sense. Well I don't know what it was, but that day I made a decision. I don't know why I did it, but I did it. We kept slogging down the road, but this time I got to this town. I looked down the road. Here was high ground [gestures on the left]. It was wooded, and from the woods, the ground sloped down into the town. Over here was a creek [gestures on the right]. A small creek, but in November it was a raging creek. I knew that if we left the road, we couldn't go to the right, because that would be trying to cross the creek. If we went to the left, here was this high ground. If I'm hit, I can't go up the ground—I'm trapped. It would be looking down at me from the high ground, and I couldn't go to the right. I was more or less stymied along the road. This was not good. I also knew that the higher ground was drier ground. I decided then I'm not going down the road. I'll see if I can go around. I used the ridge to my advantage to get to Marthille. Well, the Germans must have known this. They must have gathered up from various sources this supply of antitank guns. They spent a lot of time, because this was November, and they were beautifully camouflaged. They had gotten enough underbrush so that they really beautifully camouflaged these guns. There was no evidence of guns when we were going up. We had the light tanks leading, and they're mobile. We did reconnaissance by fire. We used .30 caliber. The light tanks were firing their coaxes, because they thought something was suspicious. They were firing. When you hit something solid, it flashes. Suddenly, we got flashes, so we knew we got something there. One of the light tanks, with its

37mm popped one of these suspicious places. Brush and all came down, and there was an antitank gun. So they started popping all over the place. The minute they saw this antitank gun, we had a medium tank come, and they shot 75mm rounds. While we were doing this, a bunch of Germans from Marthille came running up the hill. They had crews with the guns, but they were obviously the reserve crews, perhaps on their rest time. They were rushing up, and they were a fantastic target. In 45 minutes, I think we got the largest bag of antitank guns. We got over twenty antitank guns, about eight of them were eighty-eights, but we got them before they got us. And what I thought of—here was battery of antitank guns and my battalion going down this road. They would have waited until my lead element got to Marthille, which was about two-and-a-half kilometers. They could have destroyed my task force. That was one of the high points of the fighting in Lorraine.

We continued on, we made a sharp turn to the right, and we went to a place called Dieuze. We took the road that ran directly east and continued this fight town after town. There were bitter fights. We got to a place called Mittersheim. It had a big dam. When we were nearing Mittersheim, we thought that perhaps they would blow the locks and flood it. The 8th overran Mittersheim, so they never blew the locks. We were able to keep advancing. This continued until early December.

In early December we had a tremendous turnover in leaders. We had two armored infantry battalion commanders, lieutenant colonels, wounded the same day. They were evacuated. The 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion lost their commander, and I took over the 8th Tank Battalion. General Wood was relieved. General Earnest came in [Combat Command A] and General Gaffey took General Wood's place. I took over the battalion while we were in action, which was unusual. I was well enough known, so I just hopped in the tank and continued the action that day.

The next morning I was told to—we were still heading east—turn to the left and seize a town called Voellerdingen, capture the bridge over the Eichel River, and establish a bridgehead across the Eichel River. Then I was to go north. The next morning I turned left off the main road I was on that led to Domfessel, which was CCA's objective. I was north of it at Voellerdingen. When I turned off the road at Voellerdingen, I turned left and made a sharp turn. As I did so, six German tanks came out of the woods. Our gunners spotted them before they fired. They hit two of them and disabled them. The other four withdrew, and we never saw them again. When I turned to look to Voellerdingen, all I could see were two steeples, the crosses of two steeples. That told me that they were way, way down, maybe in the valley along the river. Obviously, I'm going to have to go down into the town. It's getting late in the afternoon now; it's soon going to be dark. If I get down with my tanks in the town, I might be trapped.

I turned to Pete Peterson [Lt. Col. Arthur C. Peterson, commanding 22d Armored Field Artillery Battalion], who was right behind me, the artillery commander. I said, "Pete, could I have your battalion fire a concentration before I go into the town?" He said, "Sure, just a minute." He got on the radio. He said, "If you can wait forty-five minutes, I can get a TOT." This is time on target. This is where he brings in corps artillery. So forty-five minutes is a long time, because it's beginning to get late in the afternoon. Often getting something like this takes time, so it takes longer than they estimate. So I had to gamble—either Pete's battalion with 105s or I could wait and hopefully get the TOT. I said, "Okay, Pete. Let's go with the TOT." Sure enough this was one time they were right on time. In forty minutes they shot the TOT on Voellerdingen.

So my tanks rolled down into town, and it was quiet. When we got into town. I turned slightly left. There in front of me was this huge concrete embankment with rails on it. An active train still rolled on it. I'm trapped. I turned and we kept moving along the side, and there it was—the embankment. I thought I'd be trapped. Suddenly I reached a spot where there was an underpass. Now we can get through. My tanks turned, and when they turned, they were getting flanking fire from the Germans on the other side. This was a tricky thing, because if either them or us hit the bank, and crumpled the banks, we were stopped anyway. My gunners shot right through that underpass and overcame whatever was firing at them. It got quiet. Now it's dark. We turned and rolled through the underpass. We got to the Eichel River, which was a raging river. Everything was swift and cold. We got across the bridge. We secured our bridgehead. It was very, very muddy over there, but we crossed and accomplished our mission.

As an aside, I went back there recently in '09. We were over there visiting. There was a woman in the building that overlooked the bridge. She came out to see what the fuss was. She learned that I was the commander of the force. She invited us into her home. She was twelve or thirteen years old at the time of the fight. She said she and her father watched as the Germans prepared to dynamite the underpass. When

they sensed the Americans were getting close, her mother and father invited the Germans to come into their home. They gave them Schnapps, and got them drunk. They hauled them out to the back. They put sheets on the hay, and put them to sleep. The father went out and cut all the wires, so that when we went through the pass, nothing happened. So this old farmer saved our bacon. I would never have known that if we had not visited. My wife wrote it up for a magazine. It was called “Mysterious Ways,” and they published it.

Anyway, the next morning I sent my B Company out in front. They hit resistance from some woods, but that didn’t bother me. You can only fire from the edge of the woods. Whatever was there, people with rifles and machine guns, the tanks took care of them. We reached a place called Schmittviller at noon. At that time, my combat commander said not to move, because CCA had not been able to cross the river at Domfessel. CCA at that time had the 35th Tank Battalion operating. The 37th Tank Battalion was in reserve behind. CCA at that time had two tank battalions, the 35th and the 37th. The 35th and its armored infantry had the job of getting across the river at Domfessel. That morning they were still fighting to get across. So my combat commander said not to move until we know that they can catch up, because I was sticking out here by myself. I sat there all day. Nothing happened. That night I went back to my combat commander, and he said we would move out in the morning.

Obviously, he didn’t know what was happening, because apparently during the day while we were sitting, someone made a decision. I don’t know who it was. We had a new division commander, Gaffey, and a new combat commander, Earnest. I don’t know who, but someone made a decision that the 35th had had enough. They pulled up the 37th. Now it’s getting late in the day, and their job was to seize a place called Bining. My mission was a town north of Singling, which never came into play. [Gestures showing parallel route/mission of 8th and 37th Tank Battalions] Singling was not a mission. My mission was beyond Singling. To get to Bining, they [37th Tank Battalion] had a red top, fast speed road. I had no road whatsoever. My route was cross country, and I was on a little bit of a ridge. It was muddy, but not too muddy. I went to Schmittviller. From Schmittviller to Singling it was all cross country; no road. Well, the next morning, I get up at first light. I start moving down from Schmittviller—the ground slopes down—and there were American vehicles. I couldn’t believe it.

I finally came down and saw 37th Tank Battalion. What must have happened and what did happen is that Abrams [Lt. Col. Creighton Abrams, 37th Tank Battalion commander] came up, saw that the day was getting late, probably convinced whoever got him there to let him go. He made a bold shot without infantry, without artillery heading for Bining, which was only about five or six miles along this red top road. He must have hit a nest of guns, because he couldn’t get to Bining. So he switched over. I think he decided that the best way to get Bining was to outflank it, but he came into my axis of advance. I can’t understand communications, because obviously my combat commander had not been notified. I certainly didn’t know. When he moved into Singling, it had no value whatsoever. It was a little place. It had Maginot Line buildings, but it was not tactically or strategically valuable in any way. Abrams wanted to outflank, but when he got to Singling, he had his nose hit. He lost C Company, either from fire or mud. That’s where we were in the morning. He had sent a force, an armored infantry company and a tank company into Singling.

The moment I got there, I had to see the commander. So my tank went up to his tank. I got out, jumped up on his tank. A brand new commander of the 51st Armored Infantry was there—he came up with me. We were both on the back deck. At that time I think Abrams was being blasted by Earnest, who was saying, “What are you doing in Singling? Your mission is Bining?” He had lost these people in the morning. He was told that the town in front was clear. I later learned that it was not clear. It was a totally confusing thing, but he [Lt. Col. Abrams] was totally overwrought, and that’s when he blasted me. He said, “Get going! It’s your battle.” But he’s in my axis of advance. He came over from his and apparently didn’t notify anyone. It was a mess. Singling, I say is the lowest point of the 4th Armored Division’s career. We never would have heard about Singling if these young lieutenants had not later decided to write about a small unit action. Their whole article is about the actions of the armored infantry and tanks in the town. It was the result of massive changes in command, maybe lack of communication, lack of coordination. It was a mess.

Note: The article referenced was a publication compiled by the U.S. Army’s Historical Section in 1946 that included a detailed description of the tactical engagement in Singling. Today, it is CMH Pub 100-14, and it is available online at <http://www.history.army.mil/books/wwii/smallunit/smallunit-fn.htm>.

Q: So Singling and the events surrounding it were definitely not the norm for the 4th Armored Division.

A: That's right.

Q: Up to Singling and perhaps beyond Singling could the fighting be characterized by bad weather, restrictive terrain, and a series of movements from one town to another?

A: Yes. All of that. We talk about the horrible weather at Bastogne, but the weather during our November slug through Lorraine was horrendous. I've described how bad it was for the tanks. The infantry—they were the ones who had to slog through this stuff. They carried on their backs a horseshoe roll with a blanket and a shelter half. They had K Rations. Their kitchen trucks couldn't get to them any better than my kitchen trucks could get to me. They had the rifle, they had an entrenching tool, and they slogged in soaking wet, thin jackets. It was horrible. It was the weather, the ground, the atmosphere, and in the case of the 4th Armored Division, tremendous changes in leadership. Because of changes in leadership, lack of communication and miscommunication—a lot of factors fell into place to keep something good from happening.

Q: What was the morale like for the soldiers?

A: I mentioned that we went a whole month without a hot meal. Not a minute of maintenance. No hot meals. These guys had been slogging it out since November 8th. The men were tired, but they still battled away. We didn't sleep much. Infantry—you can learn to sleep standing up. I learned to sleep on a horse. The infantry would sit there and shake. If they tried to dig a foxhole, they would dig out the earth and up would come the water.

Q: The armored infantry had halftracks. How well did they operate in the mud?

A: It was harder for them even than the tanks, so they had to stick pretty much to the roads. Halftracks were often times just approach vehicles. They would dismount, and many, many times we had infantry on the tanks. They went forward with us. When we hit something, they would jump off. If they moved, they usually moved on the tanks. We used the halftracks when there was no firing—no artillery and no machine gun fire.

Q: What advice would you give today for new platoon leaders and company commanders?

A: The first thing is get to know your men. They're the ones who are going to make or break that outfit. They've been schooled—now, it's a test of leadership. In the case of a company commander, he's got to get to know his first sergeant

Editor: General Irzyk's comments reflect the flexibility and combat power of an armored battalion that routinely operated as a combined arms team—or had ready access to combined arms assets. His description of the fast pace of operations, particularly during the drive across France, underscores the importance of combat power. With events changing rapidly, it proved difficult to get a clear understanding of German dispositions before actually engaging hostile forces. Hence, reconnaissance assets often served as a forward security element that supported combat operations by the battalion. At the division level, command and control of multiple, fast moving battalion task forces required coordination, communication, and careful monitoring of all actions. In their absence, maneuvering the independently moving task forces could generate problems, characterized by the impact of widespread command changes in early December and the confused operations near Singling. However, a significant feature reflected in the experiences captured here is the importance of soldier morale, effective leadership, intimate knowledge of the assets found in the combined arms teams, and tactical competence.