How We Became an American Family

a memoir

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War Memories that Refuse to Fade

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I write this account of my war experiences after forty-two years. Some recollections are very vivid. I'm certain that many experiences have disappeared with the passing years. The sequence of events will be difficult to follow in their proper order. I'm apt to remember something and go back. For this, I hope to be forgiven. I was thirty-three at the time, already an "old guy" amongst twenty- and twenty-three-year-olds. I am now seventy-five. I should have attempted this a lot earlier.

Part I

This is my story of C Company, 1st Platoon, 25th Tank Battalion, 14th Armored Division when I served in Staff Sergeant (SSG) Leonard Shelton's tank as cannoneer or loader. My dear army buddy was Corporal (CPL) Arthur Paul Garrett, the ablest gunner in Company C. He managed to destroy seven enemy tanks before they destroyed us. I, Meyer Levin, was his cannoneer.

I joined the company as a replacement after their heroic battle at Hatten Rittershoffen in January 1945. At Ft. Knox, I was trained to be a

tank mechanic and was placed with the maintenance platoon. It took no more than five days until an officer came looking for me. He told me to pack my gun and come with him. I was to replace the cannoneer wounded in the same tank that Paul Garrett was in. That very same night, with a flashlight in hand, Garrett took me out to the tank to show me what my duties would be. In ten minutes, I received instructions on how to fight in a tank for the first time. I had no tank training at Ft. Knox and eight weeks of tank mechanic school went down the drain.

It's now forty-two years later that I'm trying to recall the events that took place at that time. This will not be easy. Some scenes are still very vivid. Times and places are somewhat confusing.

It was in January 1945 and very cold. An officer got the bright idea for a night attack. It was dark, and visibility was very poor when we left the village. Every tank had to cross a small bridge. The German artillery tried to knock it out. Well, the enemy came close with every shot, but didn't hit the bridge. When it was our turn to cross, we were very tense. I don't know what my face looked like, but I did see SSG Shelton's face. Our tank commander turned very pale. I suppose mine did too. The night attack became a fiasco. The infantry we supported was caught in an open field and pinned down by mortar fire. They suffered a lot of casualties. That was my first encounter with mortars. "Swoosh! Bang!" There was hardly any warning.

We retreated back to town. In the morning, I saw our dead tied on stretchers and being brought back by choremen. We were still receiving mortar fire, and I learned from other men to dive under our tank when hearing the familiar "swoosh" sound.

The next picture that comes to my mind is my first day in actual battle. We advance in an open field. The tanks are fanned out, with five tanks in each platoon. We're not road bound, for the ground is not muddy. Both SSG Shelton's hatch and my hatch are open. We each have binoculars. Shelton is scanning the terrain right to center. I scan left to center. I see large fountains of black earth erupting between tanks, up ahead and on each side of us. There are sounds of explosions, and I suddenly realize that the enemy artillery is shelling us. On our

left, over the crest of a hill, two enemy tanks appear. SSG Shelton commands CPL Garrett to traverse left. He also orders me to load an armor-piercing shell. The shells are stacked beneath my floor in separate tubes, nose up. I have a shell puller that grips the nose and pulls it out of the tube. I slam the shell into the open breach of our 75-mm cannon. It's my first day on the job, and I'm being coached.

Garrett fires one round, and it's a bulls-eye. We see a hole in the gun shield of the enemy tank. He fires another round, and we see the gun barrel drop on a second enemy tank. When they come over the crest of the hill, their guns are not aimed at us. They are coming around to us, but CPL Garrett traverses left and gets to them first.

That day, my first day in combat, I loaded over forty rounds. It is a cold winter day, and when it's over, my body is so perspired that even my outer garments are soaked. I didn't do everything right. The empty shell casings are cluttering the floor of our turret. I had to learn to throw the spent casings out after each shot. I think I did, though, become a combat veteran in one day.

Part II

I'm not certain when this happened. I'm a new man in the outfit, and I'm in trouble with my tank commander, SSG Shelton. During a fast chase, going at top speed, we "throw a track." The tank is immobilized. The company keeps moving, and we're left alone. The tank track weighs a ton. It takes the five men in our crew to bring it together and connect it again. We expect an attack, but the Germans don't know we are there. The toolbox is welded on the back deck of the tank. We're finished and start throwing the tools into the box. I throw a tool, and there is a crash of glass. Shelton kept a bottle of wine he confiscated, and I break it. It's a bad start for a new man. He's very angry and would like to kill me for sure, but my buddies come to my defense in no uncertain terms. They blame him with very colorful language. He backs off, and we did become very good friends after all.

On March 18, 1945, we find ourselves in the town of Phaffenhofen, and we occupy the tallest building, a leather factory. A German soldier starts pounding us with 88-mm shells. He can see the upper floors, and

there's a mad scramble to the floors below. I keep stepping on the untied bootlaces of the man in front, SGT Ralph "Greasy" Novak. He pitches forward and almost breaks his neck. The 88s pound us all night. They came in with a scream I never want to hear again. They wreck the floors above us and below. We are under a constant rain of plaster and cement. Each scream and crash bores into my brain, and I feel I'm going mad. The next morning it's quiet. Someone makes up a poem that helps us laugh again. *"Wir kennen nicht schloffen in Phaffenhofen."* We can't sleep in Phaffenhofen.

An anti-tank gun from the left rear fires on the point tank of SGT Hamilton. The shell skims across the top of the turret and beheads PFC James Hampton. His body drops at Hamilton's feet. He is stunned. I see his face as he is going back to our rear. I see infantry casualties coming back on stretchers tied onto Jeeps. They are going back while we are pushing forward. How can I ever forget the look in the eyes of a GI whose jaw was blown away?

We cross the Lauter River and roll into Schweigenhofen. The enemy is expecting us. That night, we get a hail of "screaming meemies," our name for multiple rockets. They come out of the sky, and I get the impression that there are hundreds of insane women in wild disorder, flying at us. This goes on all night and is horrifying. One of our tanks, refitted with 60 rocket tubes, is immediately christened "Buck Rogers." Now they can listen to our "screaming meemies!" These rockets leave the tank in less than two minutes, and the Germans don't know what hit them. We fire them into a town occupied by the enemy and immediately ride into the town to find the German soldiers in a daze. They are freaked out. All we have to do is round them up.

The next morning, while climbing a ridge north of Kapsweyer, approaching the "Dragon's Teeth," our tank overturns due to a heavy artillery shell dropping near us. The "Dragon's Teeth" are rows of anti-tank, concrete pillars that stretch as far as we can see. They mark the boundary into Germany. I'm thrown on my back. It's pitch black inside the tank. The 75-mm shells slip halfway out of the tubes and are on my chest, pinning me down. I see a crescent of light above me. Combat boots are squirming out through this opening. I try to push the rounds

back into the tubes, but they keep slipping out. I try to get to that opening, but I can't extricate myself. Desperately, I begin to scatter them as best I can, knowing that with 35 lbs. of pressure on the nose, they will explode. I panic, and I don't care anymore. I hear Garrett shouting, "Levin is still in there! Get Levin out!" I reach the partly open hatch, and hands grab my shoulders and yank me out.

Our crew of five, T/5 John Prince, driver; PFC Irwin Busby, bow gunner; SSG Shelton, tank commander; CPL Arthur Paul Garrett, gunner; and I, PFC Meyer Levin, cannoneer, run for shelter to a dugout vacated by the infantry. Enemy shells fall every twenty feet, constantly. They throw earth that falls on us by the ton. We're getting covered with it. We huddle as close as five bodies can to present a smaller target. Soon our tank retriever arrives. Under heavy fire, they attach cables and right our tank. It's at least fifty yards away. We make plans to run for it one at a time. Each man has something to carry. I am the last and have to run with everyone's personal weapons. With five of these weapons slung over my shoulders, I try to cross this open ground. Artillery shells are landing constantly. With each incoming shell, I hit the ground, and after each eruption, I get up and run again. Somehow, things don't seem natural. My buddies in the tank are cheering me on and laughing loudly. When I finally ask them what that was all about, they say the way I ran, I looked like a "ruptured duck." It wasn't funny to me.

When we escaped the tank, the engine was still running, and gallons of gasoline were spilling over the side. It could have exploded at any second. Yet my men did not run until they pulled me out. I do forgive them for laughing, as one would forgive his own brothers.

We joined our company in a nearby town. We had to re-sandbag our tank. The supply truck arrived with five-gallon cans of gas. Can you picture each of us running the distance of a half block to the tank, with two gas cans, hitting the ground each time a shell came crashing into the streets? We were lucky. We felt invincible.

That night our engineers blew a hole in the "Dragon's Teeth," and although the Germans laid down a concentration of fire, we managed to get through. At last, we were in their Fatherland!

I must go back to Steinfeld. We pulled into the town at dusk. That night was a nightmare. Enemy fire was very heavy. Buildings were burning all around us. Walls were collapsing. Tanks were milling around to escape these walls. We were buttoned up in our tank. German patrols were also in the streets. We were afraid of them climbing onto the tank and throwing hand grenades through an open hatch. They were close! Their rapid-firing machine guns were spraying our tank. Whenever a round exploded in the street, there would be a flash where I could see our infantrymen through small prism windows. They were running from one burning building to a safer one. They seemed to be flying through the air with each bomb blast. How can anyone ever forget a night like that? This lasted all night. In spite of it, or because the mind can't take anymore, I dozed off on the ice-cold steel floor of the tank. I could see my mother and father's smiling faces looking down at me. And I felt so comforted. What a dream! Yet it felt so real.

Just before we cross the Rhine River at Worms and move into Hitler's domain, we attack the town of Schaidt. Our 1st Platoon, under the command of Lieutenant Chrisman, is the key platoon to the whole attack. We destroy six dug-in tanks, countless pillboxes, anti-tank gun emplacements, and capture one hundred prisoners. The impregnable "Siegfried Line," the vaunted Westwall, has been smashed. The white flags are everywhere. Elements of the Free French Army pour through the next day. These are fighting men to behold. Their officers are the "Goums" of North Africa. They are Arabs with carved scars on their faces. They look fierce and have a reputation to match. It is said that in North Africa, they would crawl through the lines at night and feel for combat boots. If it were the enemy, they would knife them. Anyhow, they come in with tables, chairs, washing machines, and even refrigerators tied on the backs of their tanks. Their infantrymen were carrying chickens and ducks in each hand. They would come up to us and try to take our wristwatches. They stayed on our left flank for a long time.

Part III

On April 19, on the road to Gloggelsbruk, a Mark VI Tiger Tank firing 88-mm shells had the crossroad "zeroed" in, firing at every tank and

missing. Suddenly, the tank in front of us stopped. It was hit, we were hit, as was the tank in the back. They were burning, and their ammo was exploding inside. I saw a few attempts by men to open their hatches, and that was it. No one got out. Our tank received a shot, and I pictured the "Green Giant" hitting us with a massive sledgehammer. The rivets inside the tank tore loose and, for a split second, zinged every which way. One hit Garrett in the forehead. He grabbed his head and cried that his head came off. SSG Shelton hit him on the head with his hand mike and yelled at him, "Here's your goddamn head!" This snapped Garrett out of his panic, and he was very angry at Shelton, and he said so. We had to laugh, but actually, we were happy that he was alive. The slight wound did send a stream of blood down his face. The impact moved the turret enough to block the hatches of Prince and Busby. That's when they panicked. My hatch was free. I jumped out and saw that our 75-mm gun barrel was sheared off, including part of the gun shield. I yelled at them to move their turret a bit, and their hatches were now free to open. Now we were in a wooded area because, when we were hit, John Prince drove the tank off the highway into a deep ravine. In a few minutes, he came running and shouting that the woods were full of "Krouts." That's when we buttoned down our hatches. From that day on, we referred to that event in the history of the 25th Tank Battalion as 88 Junction.

Meyer in the army, June 1945

Evidently, the Germans crossed the road and were now in the forest firing away at us. Garrett laid a line of 30-caliber machine gun fire about three feet off the ground. I fed belt after belt of ammo until the bark of the trees around us was shot away, and just

white wood showed. There was no question that the enemy would be all around us in no time at all. Suddenly, there was a tapping on our tank, and when I looked out, there were seven of our black infantrymen asking, "Where are the Krouts?" These were brave men, and into the woods they went. It didn't take long. They came out of the woods with prisoners who were wearing American helmets. They flushed them out and marched them off, all in a day's work.

Now there was another menace. The Germans knew we were there and started shelling airbursts. We could see the black puffs of smoke in the sky, and shell fragments were raining down on the tank. Suddenly, dark storm clouds covered the sky. The rain came down in torrents. Visibility was very bad, and that served to our advantage. This was our chance to get the hell out of there. John Prince drove along the gully knocking down trees as we climbed back onto the road further up. They did not see us. It was hours later and already night when we joined our company in Gloggelsbruk.

We now had a disabled tank and had to wait for a replacement. Our five-man crew was broken up, never to be together again. Everyone, in time, served in other tanks. It was a sad time.

Part IV

About pillboxes. We brake through the Siegfried Line. The Germans are surrendering everywhere, but not the pillboxes or bunkers. They can hold up the infantry, but not tanks. The infantry calls on us for help. We fire into their gun turrets. Some of them hoist white flags. Others are stubborn. Our engineers get behind them and put a weld on their steel doors. Some have tunneled and escaped to other bunkers. Many of them are round, concrete, flat-roofed domes. Others dug into a hill, and we faced a camouflaged concrete wall with gun turrets. We find out that what appears to be a country cottage is really a concrete bunker on which windows were painted. Guns are at ground level through what appear to be cellar windows.

We took one town at dusk. One more pillbox is on the outskirts. Our CPT Winiarczyk, "Winnie" for short, orders our tank to take it out. We go right to it. Garrett puts our 75-mm gun muzzle right into

their turret. I load a high-explosive shell, and we give them a shot. What a sight! About a dozen German soldiers come out. Their coats are on fire. They're bloody. They tell us that many are wounded inside. I tell them in Yiddish, "Go back and bring them out." (I did quite a lot of interpreting for our platoon). They drag out wounded men. Some are almost old. Others are boys 16 or 17 years old. Their officer has a broken leg. We assemble them in a nearby barn. The officer is trying to set his own broken leg. The other woundeds' faces are ashen grey. He asks for our medics. I tell him it will be a long time before the medics catch up to us. The 14th Armored Division is at least 10 miles long on the road, and the medics are way back somewhere. I can't help them. We leave them to their fate. We did, however, radio for help from our tank.

We collect prisoners by the hundreds. There are women soldiers amongst them. One of our tanks is approaching a farmhouse when they are suddenly shot at. When they speed up to the house, they find and capture women behind an anti-tank gun. Toward the end, the German army was recruiting men in their 60s, boys 15 and 16 years old, and young women. Hitler was "kaput!"

Part V

On May 2, 1945, hostilities ceased. We were deep in Bavaria. We could see the Alps. We rode into Munich. The streets were impassable. No buildings were standing. The walls were down, and bricks were cluttering the streets. German citizens were clearing the rubble by hand. I'm delighted. I had helped bring Germany to her knees.

I can't remember the exact date. We are ordered to proceed to Dachau concentration camp, not too far from Munich. We know about these camps, but are not prepared for what we see. I'm with another crew, and we stop at the gates. The inmates are like walking dead. They're dressed in those striped pajamas we all got to know so well. They are no more than skeletons. Their flesh is covered with massive sores. They can hardly speak. They can hardly cry. Their eyes are dry, large, and sad. I give them all of the provisions we have in the tank. They sit on the ground and look at us, and we look at them in disbelief.

Meyer and his army buddies in Bad Reichenhall, Germany, August 1945

I get out of the tank and follow a group that is moving toward a building nearby. They smash the windows and pour in, and I along with them. Inside are food and clothing. They begin to shed their pajamas and change their clothes. There's Hershey's Cocoa in cans, eggs in buckets, butter, sardines, and so on. They're loading up and looting everything. An American officer barges in, very upset. He wants them out of there! He orders me to drive them out. He's furious. I'm not. He starts shouting, *"Raus! Raus!"* ("Out! Out!"), and I am also calling *"Raus! Raus!"* but adding *"Langsom!, Langsom!"* ("Take your time! Take your time! Take your time!") in a lower voice. They understand and keep right on plundering. It felt good to watch them.

Part VI

I should report my stay in the hospital. It was more of a comedy than a serious problem. The war is over. It's springtime in Bavaria. We make a trip to Berchtesgaden. That's Hitler's hideout in the Alps. There's a cave with bodies of dead Germans that hasn't been cleared yet. The stench around it is suffocating. That's all I care to remember. We don't have many duties. We eat and relax and are gaining back the weight we lost in combat. We get a shipment of powdered eggs that is contaminated. Some men are getting sick. I am sicker than anyone. I suffer from dysentery and vomiting. I have a temperature and can't get out of bed. I'm not sure what happened, but I find myself in a hospital in Ingolstadt. My diet is tomato juice, and I'm told to walk down the hallway to an office a few times a day for a spoonful of bismuth and paregoric. Poor me! I hug the walls getting there. At my bedside is a large can of tomato juice with flies all over it. That is all.

I wake up one morning in this ward because of a commotion. I notice that the other "sickies" are running with cans of water to the open windows. My curiosity is aroused. It seems that there is a crowd of civilians on the pavement two floors below. The pavement is wet, and some are in their bathing suits. The GIs on our floor are dangling candy bars from strings just out of the reach of those below, and while they jump to snatch the candy, other GIs are dousing them with these cans of water. I have an empty can and join in the fun. Running up and back with cans of water, I get stronger and stronger. That was my cure.

Part VII

Thirty-seven years later, CPL Garrett called me from Terre Haute, Indiana, in the middle of the night. Many veterans have blocked out such memories. I suppose it was too painful for them. Some of us can't forget. That is what Arthur Garrett said. After all of these years later, he remembered what we lived through and just had to talk to me again. Some will say that we must have loved it because we remember the details. Maybe we did. Maybe we have wars because men love war. Maybe a man loves combat because that's the only time in his life that he feels

alive. No one can have the urge to fight and hate war as much as a veteran. No one can be so afraid and perform so heroically at the same time. It was a great part of our lives. If you weren't there, you can't understand.

No argument can convince me that this war did not have to be fought. A great menace was engulfing our world. This menace had to be destroyed. Hitler's thousand-year dream of domination lasted less than twenty years, and the havoc was beyond the capacity of the mind to comprehend. We had to do what we did.