

THE GENESIS OF HERBERT STONE'S ODYSSEY TO THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE — DECEMBER 1944

It all began in Brooklyn, New York when I received an official notice from my Draft Board to report at 7:00 AM for a free bus ride to Camp Upton, an army base located in Long Island, New York. It turned out to be a very long day. It was the 2nd week of December 1942.

Upon arriving at my new home away from home, we were told to strip down and deposit our civilian clothes in the empty cartons that were given to us. These were to be shipped back to our homes. We were then issued what seemed to be plastic raincoats and stood in line in the near freezing weather for our very first Short Arm Inspection. The general feeling among the raw recruits...are these people perverts? We were then issued our fatigue and dress uniforms, shoes, duffle bag, etc. and assigned to unheated barracks. At last, our very first meal in Uncle Sam's Army...YUK! After a series of lectures and meal number 2, we were ordered to strip to the waist and to line up outside the barracks for our very first "shots". Each new recruit received 6 shots that first day. It was now 10:00 PM and before we could flop down on our hastily made beds, we were ordered outside and marched to a huge hall where we were given an I.Q. test. Little did I know at the time how this test would affect my stint in the Army. The Battle of the Bulge was two years away and the clock was now ticking.

After nightfall several days later, we boarded a train with the shades drawn and were instructed not to raise the shades until we arrived at our final destination. When the word came to disembark, we learned that we had arrived in Columbia, South Carolina. We were then loaded with our newly issued gear onto waiting army trucks that took us to Fort Jackson. It was only then that we learned that we were now part of the 100th Infantry Division.

Six months down the road, preparations were just about finalized to take part in our first maneuvers. I had been the acting squad leader for my machine gun squad and I was the only soldier in the squad that was able to disassemble the 30 caliber weapon and put it back together blindfolded. My platoon leader was hoping to transform his gold bars to shiny silver bars if we came through the maneuvers with shining colors. I was a bit ticked off at him as he was holding back my 2nd stripe, which I felt was long overdue. He assembled the platoon for final instructions for the pending maneuvers. Our platoon was standing at parade rest and our so-called leader came up to me and started to chastise me for deserting the platoon just prior to the scheduled maneuvers. I had no idea what he was talking about. He then blurted out that the entire platoon was training for combat and that I was running off to school. I still had no idea what he was mumbling about. Later that day I learned that senior brass responsible for overall planning had anticipated a shortage of engineers and they quickly put together a program called ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program). Recruits for this program were primarily selected from test scores obtained from the I.Q. test taken 6 months earlier on my first day in the army.

My orders were cut and I was to report to The Citadel in Charleston, S.C. The clock kept ticking and it was now 18 months away from the Battle of the Bulge.

The Citadel has a reputation of being among the top military schools in the U.S. Off came the 100th Infantry Division patches from my outer garments and was replaced by the new ASTP patches. Three days later we boarded buses to the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia and was addressed by the Colonel in charge. He informed us we would have 3 semesters and each semester would be of 3 months duration. Participants in this program came from various outfits. A single failure in any one subject would be sufficient reason to leave the program and we would be sent back to our last assigned unit. Upon successfully completing 3 semesters, 15 of us were assigned to Hdq. Co. of the 55th AEB (Armored Engineer Battalion), 10th Armd. Div. Other members of the graduating class were sent to various units of the 10th Armd. Div. It was now 9 months away from the Battle of the Bulge.

Shortly after arriving at Camp Gordon in Augusta, Georgia, the home of the 10th Armd. Div., we were briefed by Maj. Wadsworth P. Clapp, the Battalion Commander of the 55th AEB. He informed us that he and Lt. Col. Cornelius A. Lichirie, the Squadron Commander of the 90th Cav. Rcn. Sqdn. had

agreed to incorporate one engineer into each platoon of cavalry in time of combat. Both men were West Point alumni and felt strongly that this move would enhance the cavalry's reconnaissance missions in the event that engineering skills were needed in evaluating bridge loads, mines, booby traps, etc. Lt. Kinear of the 55th AEB was put in charge of our crash program of bridge building, demolition, physical training etc. We were given circular slide rules and bridge charts to help us determine if the bridges we reconnoitered were capable of carrying a 36 ton load which was the weight of our heaviest tank at the time. Description of road networks in rural areas were to be identified in our map overlays which would alert Cavalry Intelligence as to the width, condition and description of road beds and whether or not it could support 2 way traffic, etc. It was anticipated that these up to the minute reports would be streaming into Squadron Headquarters from every troop that was engaged in patrols / missions.

The learning and training phase of the 10th Armd. Div. was now over. It was now our turn to be up at bat. The division headed north to Camp Shanks in New Jersey and on Sept. 12, 1944 the 55th AEB departed the U.S. on a banana boat called the Sea Owl. Eleven days later we disembarked in Cherbourg, France. It was now less than 3 months away from the Battle of the Bulge.

We remained in the Normandy Peninsular slightly more than a month. During this time our heavy equipment was unloaded and our last minute training minus one day came to a halt. I was able to get away for several hours and spend some time in the town of St. Lo, a short distance from Omaha Beach. My brother had landed on Omaha beach with his Infantry Regiment 6 days after D-Day and was severely wounded during the assault on St. Lo. This battle involved the fierce fighting in the hedgerows where the enemy introduced wooden tipped bullets. These bullets would splinter upon impact and the fragments were difficult to locate and would fester until removed.

The purpose of using this type of bullet was to tie up as many medical personnel as possible, which would adversely affect the efficiency of our medical teams.

Our group of 15 engineers was advised that our final day of "training" before being assigned to the Cavalry was to clear a minefield on Omaha Beach. It was a cold and overcast morning when the group of 15 engineers lined up on a straight line at 5 foot intervals on Omaha Beach. Unofficially we were introduced to a new factor that climaxed our official "training". It was the Adrenaline Rush Factor.

Every soldier that has ever been in combat has their own built in Adrenalin Barometer and on a scale of 0-10, with 0 being the lowest level of anxiety, the training period would rarely register more than a 2-3 on this scale. My own built in Adrenalin Rush Factor had just jumped to a solid 8 reading after lining up and being spaced at 5 foot intervals in a minefield. We did not know if we would run across anti personnel mines such as the Shoe Mine, which was capable of shattering one's leg or a Bouncing Betty. Both of these type mines can be set off with only about 6 lbs of pressure. The latter of the two, if stepped on, would then be propelled into the air to a height of 3-4 feet and a 2nd explosion would propel steel pellets over a 360 degree circle. The immediate concern that must have crossed everybody's mind was not just the Shoe Mine they were working on but a Bouncing Betty that could have been inadvertently activated by anyone in this group of novices. The anti tank mines took considerably more than 6 lbs to activate but one had to be very cautious before removing the mine because it could have been stacked on top of other mines and booby trapped with a trip wire which could set off the entire stack when lifted. We worked the minefield that day without any mishaps and we were relieved of this assignment before nightfall. It felt as though we had been there forever. We were completely drained! I kept the firing pin of the first shoe mine I deactivated and sent it to a War Museum in Washington, D.C.

Early next morning, our group of 15 engineers was transferred to the 90th Cav. Rec. Sqdn. I was assigned to the First Platoon, C Troop led by Lt. Eugene Patterson and fought with the First Platoon for the duration of the war. It was now less than 5-6 weeks away from the Battle of the Bulge.

Our division had orders to join Gen. Patton's 3rd Army just outside of Metz in Alsace Lorraine and it was here that the 1st Platoon of C Troop had its first baptism of fire and suffered its first fatal casualty. Most of the local residents spoke German and were pro-German, which surprised me since we were still in France. Had I taken European history I would have known that Metz was ceded to France after WW1. We participated in some light skirmishes in this area for the next several weeks. We then moved on to Sierck-les-Bains for several more weeks. It was now the morning of December 16th, 1944 and unbeknown to me, the Germans made their big push in the Ardennes backed by 600,000 troops. They plunged through an area 60 miles deep and 150 miles long. The Battle of the Bulge was well underway. It was a miserable morning. The weather was overcast and the temperature was hovering a few degrees above freezing.

Lt. Patterson approached me with a map mounted on cardboard and covered with a sheet of celluloid. He handed me a grease pen and pointed to a road on the map and instructed me to go north and locate our front line. I was to take 2 peeps (slightly smaller than a jeep) and I was to depart immediately.

I was instructed not to get into any firefight and to be back the following morning before daybreak. My driver was PFC Benjamin D. Hough. It started to rain shortly after we left Sierck-les-Bains and within several hours the rain turned to sleet. The sleet was hitting us horizontally and felt like pin pricks as it hit our faces. We started this mission traveling about 35 MPH and I began to record road conditions, which was a standard operating procedure. The sleet increased in intensity and we cut our speed down to 20-25 MPH. Visibility was poor and a fog started to roll in. The sleeting had tapered off slightly and a blanket of the thickest fog I had ever seen engulfed our 2 vehicles.

Our speed was now down to 3-5 miles per hour. Hough was hanging over the side of the peep trying to keep on the road. At 1530 hours, darkness teamed up with the fog to limit our visibility to no more than several feet in front of our peep. When we put on our blackout lights, visibility resembled a white out in a snowstorm. It was impossible to read the odometer on the dashboard and when I used my flashlight – another white out. We did not know whether we were crossing an intersection or riding over an overpass nor could we see any road signs. It was the first and only time in the army that I was unable to pinpoint my position on a map. It was an eerie feeling. Despite the horrendous driving conditions my Adrenalin Barometer did not register more than a 1 on my personal scale. It was the frustration that bothered me more than anything else in not being able to carry out my assignment. We continued to head north at a snail's pace.

The hours dragged by and it was now 0230 hours on December 17th, 1944. We caught up with a convoy of American tanks and almost collided with the last tank in the convoy. After about 15-20 minutes I just had to see what was holding up the column. Time was running out for me to get back to Sierck-les-Bains before daybreak. I was reluctant to drive past the column because I was unable to see whether or not there were shoulders on the road that could support our vehicle or perhaps there was just a drop off. I told Hough that I was going to walk ahead and I would be back ASAP after I find out the reason the column stopped.

I started to walk up the left hand side of the road and saw the markings of the 6th Armd. Div. on the rear of the 1st tank. The tank was almost touching the tank in front of him. Between tank #1 and tank #2 on the right hand side of the road, I could barely make out a gravel road intersecting the black top that took us to this point of our mission. Within a foot of the gravel road was a huge tent and in front of the tent was a small red flag with one gold star planted just outside the opening of the tent. Then I came upon tank #3 and I thought the Company Commander should get his rear end reamed out for not spreading out this column. All 3 tanks were buttoned up and their engines were turned off. As I was passing the 3rd tank, I heard the occupants speaking German. In a matter of seconds, my Adrenalin Rush registered a strong 8 on my built in Adrenalin Barometer.

For a moment I was stunned and I recalled a fellow student in my ASTP class by the name of Alfred Behr who helped me out several times when I encountered problems in our physics class. Behr had

escaped from Germany before the U.S. entered WW2. I do not know whether or not he volunteered to get into the army or whether he was drafted.

He was a brilliant student. He was never able to shake his heavy accent, which resembled a Henry Kissinger accent. Was it possible that he wound up in the 6th Armd. Div and met up with another refugee from Germany and they spoke German as this was their native language? Highly unlikely but it was a possibility. I continued walking past tank #4. It was either tank # 5 or tank #6 that I again heard German voices. My Adrenalin Rush continued to climb and it was now at about a 9 – 9.5. My heart was pounding as never before and I turned around 180 degrees and headed back to my peep at a brisk pace. I looked straight ahead as I made my way back to my vehicle. I could almost visualize the tank occupants staring at me as I passed them. I learned later that Alfred Behr had been assigned to the 54th AIB (Armored Infantry Battalion) the same time that I was assigned to the 55th AEB and that he had been killed in combat.

As I approached the tent, I cut across the road between tank #2 and tank #1 and entered the Command Post. There was only one soldier in the tent and he was wearing an American uniform. He was a tall, lanky six-footer with no visible sign of any rank. The first thing I noticed about him was the crease in his pants and the immaculate long sleeve olive drab sweater he was wearing. He was not wearing any side arm. I thought this was a bit unusual as I had been sleeping on the ground since our landing in Normandy 3 months earlier and my uniform was anything but pristine. I blurted out to him that there was a German tank column outside the front of his tent. His reply in perfect English was “that’s preposterous” and proceeded a few yards away to a map resting on an easel. He then picked up a pointer and turned his back towards me while searching for a spot on the map and casually said “the nearest Germans should be about here”. I left him talking and bolted for the tent opening. As I passed the gravel road on my left and then tank #1, a chilling thought came to mind. If this was an American Command Post, the tent should have contained a number of senior officers milling about. If my worst fears came true and this was a German in a U.S. uniform, I wanted to get off of this black top road as soon as possible. I assumed he would probably contact tank #1 and have their turret turned around 180 degrees and just blow us away.

When I reached my peep, I told my driver not to talk and we would go up this gravel road ASAP. I informed him that there were Germans in these American tanks. I also relayed this information to my accompanied peep. I had no idea where this road would take us. We drove past tank #1 on the right side of the road and went up the gravel road for about 50 yards. The road made a sharp turn to the left. Visibility was still horrendous and our blackout lights picked up a reddish reflection in front of us. We were only traveling about 3-4 mph and we came to a dead stop. Was it possible that we stopped behind another tank? I was aging rapidly. At least the sleeting had stopped.

After about 4-5 minutes my eyes were able to focus on my new surroundings and another shocker hit me. The red reflection was much clearer now and it was not another tank. The reflection came from something hanging on a wall. We had pulled into a farmer’s tool shed. As I headed back to the peep behind me, which was only inches behind my vehicle, the sleeting came back.

Actually it hadn’t stopped sleeting. The front of our vehicle which included the peep driver and me plus about 18 inches behind us was protected from the weather by the shed we had entered. The driver of our 2nd peep was a chap named Shields and he was still being pelted with sleet. I told him he would have to back up so that I could get out of the shed and we would head back to the same black top road that we just left. Then came the biggest shocker of them all. Tank #1 had pulled up extremely close to Shields’ peep and he was unable to back up until the tank backed up. Now my Adrenalin Rush had edged up to an explosive 9.8 – 9.9 on my personal barometer. My 2 years of high school German with a New York accent would be a dead giveaway had I shouted ‘back up’ instructions in German. Evidently the driver in tank #1 had assumed that we were part of his convoy and proceeded up the gravel road behind Shields’ peep. I shouted in English while frantically waving my hands “back up, back up – there has been an accident up ahead”. Waiting for a reply seemed like

an eternity but in reality he had moved rather quickly. The tank driver proceeded to back up about 3 feet which was enough for Shields to back up, make a U turn and head back to the black top road. That allowed my peep to back up and rendezvous with Shields who was waiting for me at the intersection of the gravel road and the black top. I often wondered what went thru the tanker's mind that we left at the farmer's shed.

We took off immediately heading south on the black top and searched desperately for an intersecting black top that would take us east. With Hough again hanging over the side of the peep, we increased our speed slightly despite no let up in the fog. It felt like we were driving with our eyes closed. We were traveling approximately 5-6 mph, which felt suicidal in that dense fog. It just dawned on me why the tank column was at a dead stop. Not only could they not see the road but also they did not have the luxury of a driver that was able to hang over the side of their tank looking for the good earth. Eventually we found an intersecting black top and we headed east hoping to latch onto another blacktop that would take us south. The fog was still quite heavy and visibility had not improved. We lost track of time and I had no idea how long we headed east until we came upon another black top intersection that took us south.

Daybreak was upon us and the sleeting and intermittent rain had stopped. We were uncomfortably wet and very cold. The temperature dropped below freezing but these inconveniences paled to my frustration in not being able to pinpoint the location of the tank column manned by Germans. This was vital intelligence information I was now privy to and the value of this information was diminishing rapidly with the clearing of the skies. There was no way of telling how many miles we had traveled south. The fog had dissipated just as quickly as it had enveloped our 2 peeps in the early hours of our mission.

When we found our way back to Sierck-les-Bains, 1st Platoon of C Troop had already pulled out and vehicles of the 10th Armd. Div. were barreling thru the town at about 25-30 mph. I had no idea where they were going but thought it best if we tagged along.

The occupants of my 2-vehicle peep scouting patrol were thoroughly exhausted.

I asked my driver Hough if he would like me to take over the wheel while we try to catch up with our platoon. He agreed and within minutes he was fast asleep. Our 2 peeps worked our way into the convoy, which headed north. Hours and hours went by and as in just about every long convoy there are times when it speeds up and there are times when it slows down to the point of stopping. The convoy came to a stop near an open field. I spotted a field kitchen of an artillery unit about 100-150 yards from my peep. I left the engine running and the emergency brake fully engaged and took off across the field with my dirty canteen cup. The kitchen crew was most accommodating and with a quick dunking of my cup in boiling water, I filled my cup with freshly brewed coffee. The convoy started to move and I started to double time back to my peep splashing coffee as I went along. I was now back in the peep holding the coffee cup in my left hand while steering and releasing the brake and shifting gears with my right hand. As we approached a bend in the road I changed hands holding the coffee. When I raised the cup to my lips, my head went back slightly. I do not remember actually drinking any coffee but the contents of the cup spilled down my face and I was fast asleep. My peep did not navigate the bend in the road and we went off the road, rolled over twice down the embankment and wound up on its side. On the first roll over I was deposited on the frozen ground and on the 2nd roll over Hough also departed the vehicle. Neither one of us were injured. What saved us from serious injury was the machine gun tripod mount that was welded to the peep frame. That kept the weight of the peep off both of us. The only casualty of the incident was a bent frame on the tripod. That incident was no higher than a 1 on the Adrenalin scale since the whole episode was over before we knew what had happened.

We finally caught up with C Troop and the 1st platoon in Lintgen, Luxembourg. We learned that we were assigned to CCA (Combat Command A) and we were to act as "Palace Guards", which was another word for Guard Duty to protect a General's Headquarters. This lasted for 6 days. We were

then deployed along the Sure River in Luxembourg near the town of Moestroof. We arrived at our outpost after dark and I was one of the 4-5 members of the 1st platoon to set up booby traps along the Sure River. We unscrewed the handle grips on fragmentation grenades and replaced them with firing pins mounted in a pull type device. We then tied them to the only thing available to us, which were bushes along the river. The trip wire was hooked up to another bush anywhere between 15 - 25 feet away. Once these traps were set it was virtually impossible to find them in the dark. A number of these devices were set off when the bushes swayed in 15 -20 mph gusts of wind. This rated an 8 on the Adrenalin Scale primarily because the Germans were just across the river and it was a bright moonlit night and we had no cover.

It snowed a few days after we manned our outposts in Luxembourg and up until the time we arrived, the Germans were not aware of our position along the Sure River.

My outpost consisted of 2 soldiers on a machine gun mounted peep and 3 soldiers in an armored car with a 37 mm canon. We had a fairly good view across the Sure River, which was more like a frozen trickle of a stream and anyone could have crossed by foot with the greatest of ease.

At night we could hear the clanging of hundreds of mess kits on the German side of the river. On Dec. 26th, a Major with his shiny gold leaf on his helmet was approaching my outpost while I was relieving myself under a tree. The Germans spotted his vehicle and the tire tracks heading directly to our outpost. The 1st German shell landed about 100 yards behind his vehicle and the 2nd shell landed directly on top of the tree that I was fertilizing. The concussion of the exploding shell was quite harsh and forced some blood out of my nose and mouth. I also had a small piece of shrapnel in one of my fingers. Both the peep driver and I managed to crawl under the armored car for protection. That only rated a 7-8 on the Adrenalin scale.

There were other incidents that stirred my Adrenalin Rush. One in particular that comes to mind was the battle for the town of Crailsheim. Task Force Hankins of Combat Command A drove 20 miles deep into enemy territory to capture the town of Crailsheim. Four German divisions including a Panzer SS Division encircled the town and cut off Hankin's lifeline from the rest of the 10th Armd. Div. The Germans controlled several wooded areas on both sides of the road leading into Crailsheim. We were alerted to mount up and lead the charge into Crailsheim. This was going to be a turkey shoot and we were the turkeys. The Germans were buried in foxholes on both sides of the road and the troops in open vehicles were most vulnerable.

The 1st platoon of C Troop was to lead the charge. Lt. Patterson rode on top of the 1st tank leading the charge with a radio in one hand and hanging on to the tank with his other hand. Patterson was the additional set of eyes that kept his tank and the rest of the column informed as to what was ahead. He was in an extremely vulnerable position. His tank was followed by another tank. The next vehicle was a peep with 3 soldiers sitting up front with a mortar and 60 mm mortar shells in the rear of the peep. My machine gun peep was next in line. I was seated in the rear of the right hand side of the peep crouching as low as I could possibly get and firing my rifle at an unseen enemy hidden on the left side of the road. The soldier on my left was firing the 30-caliber machine gun into the wooded area on the right side of the road. There were times when I could feel the top of my helmet rubbing up against the bottom of the machine gun barrel. Bullets were flying all around us.

A German bullet fired from the wooded area on the right side of the road found its mark in the open peep in front of our vehicle. The bullet passed thru both thighs of the soldier sitting on the right side of the vehicle and entered the groin of soldier in the center seat severing a major artery. Despite the best efforts of the medical team to stop the hemorrhaging, his life could not be saved. He joined our outfit as a replacement for a casualty we incurred at the Battle of the Bulge. He left a wife and 2 small children.

Seconds later a German bullet fired from the left side of the wooded area hit the stock of my rifle while I was firing it and blew the wooden stock apart rendering it useless. I had a P-38 pistol given to me by a German officer who had surrendered to me about a week or so earlier. I fired the pistol into

the wooded area and then attempted to get off another shot. Unfortunately the empty shell case jammed and was not ejected. The 2nd bullet I attempted to fire was now jammed in the empty shell case.

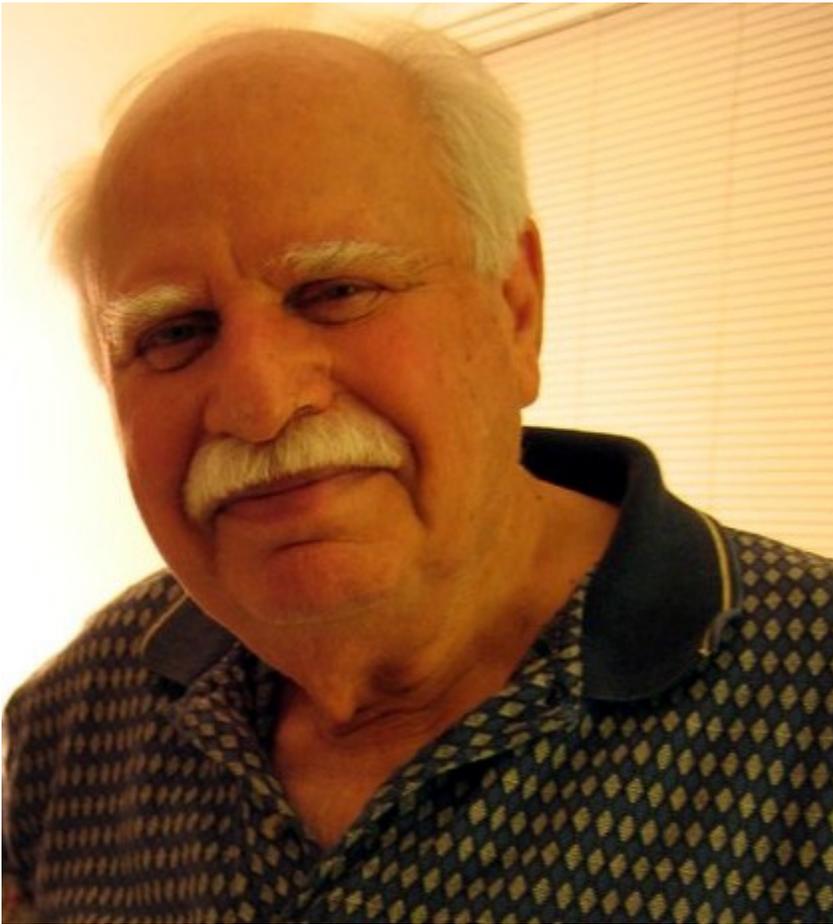
The only weapon I had left was my bayonet and needless to say, this did not give me a sense of security. When we finally broke thru to Crailsheim, I picked up the rifle from the soldier we had just lost moments earlier and used it for the duration of the war. My Adrenalin Rush registered an 8 – 8.5 that day.

There were no other incidents during the war that approached my Adrenalin Rush Barometer reading of 9.8-9.9 on that scary day of 17 December 1944. Approximately 500,000 American troops were eventually thrown into the battle to stop the German Juggernaut in the Ardennes. The 5½ weeks of combat were the bloodiest and costliest of American lives in any war since the birth of our nation.

This is a story of one soldier's activities that he had experienced during the Battle of the Bulge. There are 500,000 different stories that can be told of this battle. Each and every participant in this conflict had their own personal Adrenalin Rush Barometer and no two readings would be the same. The Adrenalin Rush was there on the Air Force's bombing runs over the Polesti Oil Fields of Occupied Romania; it was there during the Navy's Battle of the Coral Sea; it was there with the Marines fighting on Iwo Jima; and on and on. The Adrenalin Rush has accompanied every combatant in every war that was ever fought and has never differentiated between friend nor foe.



Germany, May 1945; Herbert Stone Driving



Herb Stone