

## Group A: Battlefield Experience Materials

### George Wilson, *If You Survive, 1987* (excerpt)

"...One evening just before dark while standing in line for hot chow we got a real thrill. Four German fighter-bombers zoomed right over us at treetop level. We scattered instantly and dove for the nearest cover. But their targets seemed to be somewhere near the coast. In seconds just about every antiaircraft gun and machine gun within range opened fire and we could easily follow the path of the planes by the red glow of the tracers. Every fifth machine gun bullet was glowing white phosphorus to help the gunners see where they were shooting. The display looked just like the fireworks back home on the Fourth of July, but the planes were so fast and so low that they were gone before anyone could take good aim, and none of them appeared to be hit.

"About July sixteenth, our regiment moved northeast, close to Saint-Lô. Here we got the news that we were to become part of a special task force of tanks and infantry -- with no other purpose than making a major breakthrough of the German lines. This was the first large-scale tank-infantry team action ever undertaken by the Allies. The enemy in our immediate front was to be carpet-bombed before our jump-off, and then a large army of tanks and infantry would drive through any hole created.

"The crucial problem was the hedgerows. In Normandy, for generations the farmers had grown hedges to separate their fields, however small. They had started by digging small ditches around the edges of the fields. The earth was piled in rows between two fields, and over the years many of these dirt piles grew to become over two feet thick and three feet high. Hedges were planted on top, and their roots prevented erosion. Various bushes and trees also took root to form a barrier strong enough to fence in livestock.

"The Germans, of course, seized upon the hedgerows as the natural earthworks they were. They were excellent for defense. Easy to hide behind, the thick dirt embankment served as a very good shield against our small arms. Usually the Germans put machine guns near the corners of each field, giving them a crossfire that made a frontal attack by infantry nearly suicidal. Sometimes the poor infantry would fight a whole day to gain a few hundred yards -- and that only if they were lucky.

"The special tactics that were developed called for the tanks to break out into a field and spray the next hedgerow with their machine guns while the infantry walked or ran behind the tanks, using them as shields. When the tanks got close enough to the hedgerow they'd raise their fire a little, and the infantry would run ahead, keeping as low as possible, throwing grenades over the hedge. The tanks would plow through the hedges and the infantry would follow closely, then fan out to either side to capture any remaining enemy.

"Originally a tank could not handle a hedgerow very well, because the dirt mounds would tilt them up and expose their relatively vulnerable underbellies to the German panzerfaust -- a lethal, armor-piercing rocket grenade similar to our bazooka, capable of knocking out a tank. After a while a sharp steel scythelike bumper, fashioned from old train rails and the scrap iron from German beach obstacles, was welded to the front of tank about a foot above the ground. It sliced a chunk out of the hedge, which allowed the tank to keep low as it burst through and took the Germans by surprise.

"If all went as planned, we would mop up the enemy and continue the attack across to the next hedgerow, and the one after. The tactic seemed practical enough, but even in dry runs it was utterly exhausting to carry all our gear while running behind tanks, bathed in their hot fumes and the churned-up dust.

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"After several days of grueling drill in the new tactics, we were ready to go. Every day we got our gear together and waited for orders to jump off. That went on for about a week, because the bombers that were to do the carpet bombing were grounded by the rotten weather. All the waiting didn't do our nerves any good.

"Meanwhile, there were a few sidelights. One day I came upon one of my young soldiers who had his pistol in hand, apparently getting up the nerve to use it on himself. He was terribly depressed because he had received any mail from home since his landing France. I sat down and quietly talked with him alone for quite a spell until he was assured his family really did care, but that our mail was all messed up because of the fighting. The very next day he received a couple of letters, and that snapped him out of his depression.

"One day our ever-resourceful cooks decided to treat us. They said that a nice young cow had wandered into enemy mortar fire, and that fortunately they had been nearby and so knew it was fresh meat. The steaks were a marvelous change from regular Army rations. A little later, however, Captain Holcomb was somewhat [sic] embarrassed when a French farmer came calling and excitedly demanded payment for his slaughtered cow. He was turned over to a major from Military Government, and I suppose something was worked out.

"Another day Major General Barton, our Division Commander, held a regimental review to award medals for heroic actions since the invasion. As we marched by companies to the parade field some German fighter planes roared over at treetop level -- and men and heroes scattered in every direction, with some diving right through dense hedgerows. The planes never fired on us, and may never have seen us, so we resumed our march to review. We kept looking over our shoulders, but the planes never circled back.

"One of the men had some barber tools, so we took turns sitting on a stump for a quick haircut. I don't remember getting my hair cut again for the next eight months."

## Secondary Sources

*World War II: A Visual History*

**American Battle Monuments Commission**

[https://www.abmc.gov/sites/default/files/interactive/interactive\\_files/WW2/index.html](https://www.abmc.gov/sites/default/files/interactive/interactive_files/WW2/index.html)

At the link above, click "enter," then click "1944" on the bottom of the page. Explore the materials available under the "Normandy Campaign" and "Northern France Campaign" buttons.