



Polis, Sam, 232-A

Letter to Dick Engler

Thank you for your letter of August 12. I really never got an answer to the identification of "Privilege System". It sounds as though you are, or were, against something, but I don't know what it was. I'm still curious about it.

Nevertheless, here's the story on Sessenheim.

First, a little about me. I was a machine gunner with the weapons platoon of Co. "A", 232nd Inf. You asked in your letter how the men reacted to the order, "hold at all costs." I cannot speak for others, and I'll answer your question in the narrative on Sessenheim. However, I had my own philosophy at that time. Perhaps I better answer your question now. We were in a town called Drusenheim earlier. We were in foxholes on the edge of a river that divided the town. The purpose of the story of Drusenheim is to explain my fatalistic attitude and why the order to "hold at all costs" did not faze me one way or another at the time.

One morning before dawn in Drusenheim, we were awakened by an artillery barrage. The shells whistled in, as you know, and occasionally dirt was flung down my hole. But the incoming shells kept coming for hours. I thought it was only a matter of time before a shell would come down my hole. Crouched, shivering and scared hour after hour wreaked havoc with my imagination. At one point, I popped my head up to see an American tank firing across the river. The tank was about 15 feet in front of my hole and suddenly there was a huge explosion and flash when the tank sustained a direct hit. A GI from the tank tried to crawl down my hole moments later, but there wasn't room for two, so he crawled back to a house. The artillery barrage lasted for five hours.

During the barrage I convinced myself that sooner or later I would be killed. I believed that the only evidence of my life on earth would be a piece of paper—a telegram to my parents saying that I was killed in action. Having accepted that, it made life much easier. Not that I wasn't scared during actual engagements, but when things were quiet, I was relatively relaxed and I did not worry or brood.

Others developed their own philosophies. One GI I knew was convinced that no matter what happened, he would never get hurt. Some men probably snapped; I think our company commander did from what I heard. I think our company went from 180 to 60 in thirty days.

Therefore, having a fatalistic view of my future, the order to hold did not faze me. What difference did it make when or where or how you got killed? The only thing I wanted to do was to take as many of the enemy with me as I could.

The shelling finally let up at Drusenheim. I expected to see hundreds of Germans getting ready to cross the broken bridge across the river that we were guarding, but none came. I crawled back to the building behind us and rendezvoused with some others. Our platoon leader's Jeep driver, John Hinekley, was there, having come up from the rear, and he told us to assemble with the others further back.

After the war, however, I did have some afterthoughts on the "hold at all costs" order. I felt it would have been better for us to have broken out and been able to fight another day. But we did tie down a lot of Germans who were trying to annihilate us. Perhaps it slowed down their offensive in the area by one day. Was this important? I'll never know.

Anyhow, about Sessenheim, I've never written about it, so I do not know how this story will come out. A lot of people don't know how people "get captured." And it's not a story easy to tell. But I have relived it, so I guess my memory of the story will be fairly accurate. I also feel that someone should write the story of Sessenheim. We're all getting older now and the story will die with us. So perhaps one small view of what happened should survive us. However since you said that your book is more of a "social commentary," you may not want to print the story. If you do print the story, it's OK to use my name and Redmond "Red" Davis' and John Hinkley's and George Sotak's, but the others mentioned in George's letter should probably be censored out since I do not know if their families ever knew the true story.

Sessenheim, Alsace, January 17-18, 1945.

Our platoon, the weapons platoon of Co. "A", 232nd Infantry (42nd Division), entered Sessenheim about noon on January 17. The town was occupied by elements of Co. "B". There had been a big battle and there were fires contrasting with the snow-covered ground and houses. Several dead Germans, frozen stiff, were lying around. Co. "B" was taking some POWs away. A German soldier was pushing a wheelbarrow in which sat a wounded lieutenant. An extremely young looking German was walking by with his hands over his head. In my best high school German, I asked him how old he was. He replied, "eighteen." He wasn't as young as he looked. He was my age.

I envied the German POWs. The war was over for them. They would survive. They would someday go home. I didn't think I would be that lucky.

We passed Co. B's kitchen. The large pails originally had hot cooked food in them, but it was frozen now. Co. "B" must have been in Sessenheim before

Hold At All Cost

the Germans attacked. We hadn't seen hot food since Christmas and New Years. We had plenty of "K" rations, however, and never went hungry.

We were told that we were going to attack the Germans in the next town. There was a large field with a dike in the middle; the Germans were in the town across the dike. The plan of attack was simple. There were no rifle platoons with us. The machine gun squads were going to cross the 100 yards to the dike and provide cover for our mortar squads who would act as riflemen and follow a tank and attack the town on the other side of the dike.

The machine gunners started out about 3:00 p. m., one at a time, spaced out by 50 feet or so. We started to run to the dike, but immediately encountered small-arms fire. I was about third in line in my squad and I was carrying two cans of .30 caliber machine gun ammunition for our 1919 A4's. The small-arms fire made a popping sound and we would briefly hit the ground and then get up and run some more yards before a few more "pops" sent us hurtling into the snow again. Then the swish-swish of incoming artillery preceded the impact of explosions all around us. Everyone was now on the ground trying to crawl forward in the snow, but the artillery kept coming in. At least in Drusenheim, we were in foxholes, but here we were caught out in the open. The artillery kept coming and we never got set up on the dike.

We all lay in the snow waiting for dark so we could crawl back. The snow melted under my breath until a 7" oval of dirt was cleared beneath my face. Darkness came, the artillery stopped and, one by one, we made our way back to a house on the edge of town. I brought back my two cans of ammunition, but one machine gun had been destroyed in the shelling. We still had one good one left, however. The attack plan had been aborted and the mortarmen were back waiting for us when we arrived. They were glad to see us, but no more than we were, to see them. That night, we were told to set up a perimeter defense in our house. This was unusual since you usually have a few men in each house covering each other. But our section leader, a staff sergeant, wanted a few men at each window and door, not only facing the field and town where the Germans were, but even facing the road back into town where our platoon leader, Lt. Morrisette, and others were. Our machine gun was set up on a table facing the field.

Red Davis and I were ordered to watch the road leading back to town. We were stationed on a first floor bedroom. I looked down the road leading back to other GIs and our platoon leader and Red stood on the opposite side of the window watching that portion of the road leading to the front door. We took turns sleeping that night. During the night we heard tanks maneuvering from the German side. This was reported "back" and later we heard that "Intelligence" claimed that the Germans had only one tank and were running it back and forth near the front lines to make us nervous.

Prior to dawn we were all awakened and told to man our positions all around the house. Red and I stood at the same window with our carbines. There were sounds of sporadic shooting from in town, but this was not unusual. It was pitch-

dark inside our house and pitch dark outside in spite of the snow covered ground. And then it happened. I saw the blurred images of some white-clad men outside my window heading for the front door. The next second seemed an eternity. So sure was I that they were Americans that for a split second I thought the white helmets and white clothes were MPs. After all, they came from the center of town, and the Germans we saw yesterday were not dressed in white. As the shape of the helmets became clearer, I raised my carbine to fire. I got one shot simultaneously with Red at the door. As we fired, a grenade came through our window and blew up on the bed. Red and I were both knocked down and a half-dozen grenades went off outside our window, thrown by the retreating Germans. Fortunately, the grenade on the bed was a concussion grenade and not a "potato-masher." Red and I recovered and, although all we could see was blackness outside, we emptied our carbines by shooting into the building across the street where the Germans apparently dragged their wounded. Then all was quiet except for our section leader coming to find out what we saw.

The fact that the Germans came from the center of town meant that we must have been cut off. However, our orders were to "hold at all cost," so no thought was given to trying to escape. Instead, we all remained in place awaiting another attack as the sun came up.

It never happened. They did not try to take the house again. We heard our machine gun firing from the other room into the field as some Germans tried to cross it. Occasionally, others fired at the surrounding houses. But not to repel attacks. What we hoped, of course, was that other units of our regiment would come into our town and force the Germans back into our field of fire. But they never came. Instead, the Germans gradually brought us under shell fire.

One of their first shells, coming from a tank behind us in town, exploded on the slanted roof of the building across the street. I felt a terrific blow against my helmet, knocking me once again to the floor. It was as though someone swung a baseball bat as hard as they could and slammed it into my helmet. I jammed the helmet on my head and stood up at the window again.

Red said, "turn your head sideways". I did. He said, alarmed, "There's a hole in your helmet." Shocked, I pulled my left hand glove off and shoved my hand up between my helmet and my head and pulled my hand out and stared at it. There was no sign of blood. I took my helmet off and looked at it. A piece of shrapnel from the shell that exploded on the roof across the street had penetrated half-way into my helmet and helmet liner before it stopped. Had it not been for the helmet, it would have entered my head about an inch above my left ear.

As time wore on we got more shelling but none directly on the house. It was falling around the house, but not on it yet. Finally, in the early afternoon they put two tanks in position and started firing 88s at us.

Red and I never heard the explosion. We regained consciousness with our mouths full of plaster and our faces and clothes almost snow white from plaster, and with our helmets somewhere in the debris. As we coughed and spit out

the plaster while hunting for our helmets, we heard the running feet of others heading upstairs or down the basement as fast as they could go. The shell had hit the wall in our room about ten feet from me and only about five feet from Red. Fortunately, it was a high explosive shell that blew up on impact. If it had been a high explosive anti-tank shell, it would have penetrated the wall and blown up inside the room and killed us both. As it was, it was a miracle that Red wasn't killed. We crawled to the top of the basement stairs and hurtled down the stairs before a second shell was fired.

Now it was the turn of the guys on the second floor. As though the Germans knew where some of the men tried to hide, a terrific explosion occurred on the second floor as another 88 hit the house. The men scrambled down two flights of stairs and joined us in the basement. By this time I realized I could not hear out of my left ear and every time I breathed, I could feel air going in and out of my left ear.

By this time several had been wounded. Our section leader was in the basement unconscious and our squad leader was also badly wounded. A Pfc. "acting sergeant" squad leader was now in charge.

Unfortunately, the basement wall extended above ground about 18". Although over the next half hour the first and second floors received more direct hits, they finally blasted into the top of the basement wall with a direct hit showering us all with rocks, stones and debris.

We were always ready for a final assault. We expected grenades first, but some of us would have still been alive to fire in the direction of the stairs. But just sitting and lying in the basement waiting for the tank to finish us off didn't seem right. It didn't seem fair.

It was about this time that the acting sergeant suggested surrendering. Our latest hope had been to hold out until dark and then try to get back somehow. But it was now 3 p.m. and we'd all be dead by nightfall. The acting sergeant knew we had heard of American prisoners being shot after capture "up north" where we had heard the Germans had broken through. But he explained that if we were shot after we surrendered, we wouldn't be any more dead than if we had stayed in the basement. So we had nothing to lose.

In spite of this reasoning, some of us didn't want to surrender. He explained that if anyone stayed back and continued to fight, it would be certain death for those that surrendered. There wasn't much discussion on this. We didn't take a vote. A few minutes later, he ordered all of us to surrender.

I wanted to get rid of my dog tags first. They had my religion on them ("H" for Hebrew) and if we survived capture, I didn't want to handicap myself. In the basement, there was a dead German, who we hid by covering him with rutabagas. I removed some of the rutabagas as the others trudged slowly up the stairs and threw my dog tags on the dead German soldier and hastily covered him back up with the rutabagas. I then joined the line, carrying my loaded carbine with me. I placed it behind the door to the kitchen. If the Germans started

mistakenly shooting as our first men went out the door. I wanted to have a weapon to come back to.

We marched out, hands above our heads, about 15 of us left. No helmets, just wool knit hats. Some hollered "Kamerad," which I guess was the proper thing to say. We were all covered with plaster and debris and must have looked like very "sad sacks" since we were shell-shocked and frightened and at their mercy.

As I looked up, it seemed as though the second floor of every building all around us was swarming with white-clothed Germans waiting for us to try to break out. They lined us up in three rows of about five men each. The one in charge, probably a lieutenant, asked us, in German, if any of us could speak German. No one answered, and then I think he said, in German, that they were going to take us all down by the church and shoot us. None of us showed any emotion. He then arbitrarily picked out about six or seven of our group, including the man in front of me and the man on my left and separated them from us. We were then marched away.

I had assumed that the ones they picked out were going to be used to help gather the German dead from yesterday and today. Perhaps the American dead, too.

But we never saw them again. As we moved back through the Black Forest and other collecting points, we met other Rainbowers from our own company who were captured in other towns on different days. But we never saw the men from our own platoon who were separated from us shortly after our capture.

After the war I learned that one of the separated group was home also. His letter follows:

Hi Sam,

Received your letter and was very glad to hear from you. Thanks a lot for getting those three addresses for me. I'm getting nowhere here and the doc said I should be getting out in three weeks. I'll be getting out on points, no CDD. To get a CDD, one has to be half-dead. My back and chest are hurting, but can't convince the doctors.

Here's what happened to us when we were separated from you guys: the only guys that I saw in our group were from the first squad and that is why I wanted their addresses. One of these days when I get the nerve, I'll write to their parents and let them know just what did happen. Do you think I should?

When they picked us out we marched up the road a couple of yards, went through a barn and stopped before a couple of barbed wire fences. I could sense what was going to happen, but couldn't make a run for it. We were lined up with our backs toward the krauts. The first guy turned around and said "kaput" to the kraut and he said "nix." Then there was a burst and I found myself flat on the ground. I knew I was hit but wasn't hurting. The other boys were hollering from the pain and got more slugs until all was quiet. Then they came over and kicked us on the soles of our feet to make sure we were dead. I had no feeling in my right arm and didn't know whether it was on or off. A little time passed and a

Hold At All Cost

couple of krauts in back thought they saw me move or breathe and came over and picked me up by the neck and shoulder and turned me face upwards. Blood was coming out of my mouth and they were satisfied that I was dead and threw me down again. My heart was in my throat that time!

Some more time passed by and two krauts passed by in front of me and spied my class ring on my left hand and did their best to get it off, but couldn't. Someone in back called them away just when it felt like the kraut was going for a knife to cut off my finger. I was really scared!

It was just getting dark when a kraut whispered "hey boy, hey boy, hey boy" to us guys lying there. I wouldn't move for anything or anybody! I lay there a long time afterwards and figured I'd better try and get away or else die lying there. I'd swear all those guys were dead when I left that night. I picked myself up and started walking and crawling back to the town we started from—Soufflenheim. I just got outside of Soufflenheim and bumped into one of our tanks and they took me back to their outfit. I never did see the company. I played dead about twelve hours that day and can thank God I'm alive today. It was a "burp" gun that they shot us with. I got two scars on my back, one on my left shoulder and two on my right arm. The slugs in the back also got me in the left lung and I almost lost my right arm. A funny and lucky thing was that I felt no pain when I got hit.

Well, Sam, that's it. Sounds unbelievable but true and sounds like one of Ripley's "believe it or not."

I was sent to a hospital in England and stayed there a couple of months and then was sent back to France on limited duty.

I wish they had taken us to police up the dead krauts as you said in your letter. Buddy, George