

# The War from Inside a Tank

By Ira Wolfert



BEFORE we were sent on tank maneuvers in America, the Lieutenant said they gave us written field orders that told us what we were supposed and not supposed to do, where to go and how to get there, what to take with us and where to place it and not to please knockdown any telephone poles along the way. But when we came to doing business on a live battlefield nobody had time to write anything down. The battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel F. I. McConnell, just drove up to my tank in his jeep and said to me, 'I want your platoon to be the point today. Take off and keep in touch with me.'

This was early last August near Arras in western France at the time General Patton was beginning his drive toward Germany.

The Lieutenant is 26 years old George Hook of Middletown, Ohio, son of Charles R. Hook head of the American Rolling Mill Company. From the day on which General Patton's sweep began until it ended outside Metz Lieutenant Hook more often than not rode in the lead tank. The day a German shell broke two vertebrae in Lieutenant Hook's neck was the day the whole Third Army ground to a halt, before German positions too strong for it.

Except for the fact that Lieutenant Hook was at the very front of Pat-

The vivid personal story of a tank officer who rode in the point of one of Patton's great drives through and behind enemy lines

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ton's forces, his story is not unusual. It is in fact typical of the fighting done by all tank men — the Russians who went from Stalingrad to Kues, the British who pushed Rommel across Africa, the Americans and British who finally broke out beyond the Rhine.

When we started the Lieutenant said 'we were just told what to do to the end to keep going until ordered to stop. The tanks went tearing. The Germans ran after us and our army ran after the Germans. This kind of war seems confusing to the people back home, but it's easy enough to follow if you look at it this way. A defending army puts its strength into a thick belt in front of itself. That's 'the line.' But they can't be equally strong everywhere and somewhere your infantry makes a break through and shakes the tanks loose. In the area behind the line are headquarters, supply dumps, reserves, communications. When tanks get into that kind of stuff, everybody starts chasing everybody else."

An army advance now is a terrifying sight, immense with power, fusing the fields, churning the roads, striding across rivers, a glacial crust inching across a nation. But in the forward areas it thins out until finally it is just a few men or one man fumbling along in a worried way. That is the point, short for 'point of fire' — a probe thrust into the enemy to stimulate him to react and reveal his position and strength.

We took off into flat, wooded country, said the Lieutenant. 'The woods could have hidden anything. The standard solution for such a problem is to use two tanks for the point, follow them with a platoon of infantry in half tracks, and then close with the three other tanks. On a road there is always a rise of ground or a curve or something to hide behind — and the first two tanks play leapfrog with each other while one stays behind cover, ready to shoot whatever shows. The second tank dashes on down the road for the next bit of cover. And so on, until a battle starts and you have to commit your infantry.'

We played leapfrog quite a while, until there was no use in doing it any longer because we were in woods where a tank that stood still was just as vulnerable as the one making a dash. So we threw the schoolbook away and everybody stepped on the gas. Every time we got down to 18 miles an hour the Colonel was on the radio wanting to know why. Our job was to keep going and steamroller paths for anybody coming behind.

'When we got up behind Argentan, word came that the air force was

going to bomb the German ammunition dump there but we were not to wait for the air, we were to keep going. I saw about ten Thunderbolts diving down on the dump far ahead and then six bicycles turned into the road a mile ahead of us. The cyclists saw us and really started pedaling.

'I was traveling with the turret open — unbuttoned we call it. Nearly every tank commander travels that way. When you button up your turret, you have to depend for vision on a periscope. Your vision starts a 20 feet from the tank; you are blind to anything closer. If you overlooked a German in a hole or behind a window, all he'd have to do is hold onto his nerve and wait until you were within 20 feet of him — and you'd never know what hit you. Besides from the turret periscope all you can see is ground sloping toward you; there is nothing to orient it with and tell whether you're going backward, forward or even sideways. That made me even more nervous than thinking of possible Germans.'

'We closed on the cyclists to about 300 yards. Just as I gave the order to fire they threw down their bicycles and leaped to the woods. We got one Jerry in midair. The others disappeared.'

'I jumped up on the turret seat and yelled 'Jerries!' to the infantry back of us and pointed to the woods. They got the idea. The half tracks stopped, the men piled out and began working into the woods, low and crouched over.'

'About 1000 yards from where the town began some 50 Jerries jumped out of a ditch and ran across the road and toward a rise of ground. We

opened up on them. They were crews of two 88's that had taken shelter from our planes. We got some on the run and some while they were trying to load their guns.

"When you're the point, the question isn't who will fire the first shot (that's almost always the enemy) but who will hit his target first. Soon after we passed the Germans in the ditch, there was the terrible *zuum* of an antitank shell going past my ears. I was looking at the spot where I would have set up an antitank gun if I'd had the job of protecting that road, so I caught the flash of the 76 mm gun. Corporal Robert Mullins, the gunner of our tank, the

'Anxious Annie' had time for one shot before the Germans could try another. There was a red burst and I saw black pieces—dusts of the gun or the men firing it—striking through the flash.

We stopped then. It was plain that the town was defended and it seemed logical to have the infantry clean it up before the tanks went through. I told the Colonel my idea.

Pretty soon our infantry began coming up in the ditches alongside the road. I could see artillery shells come into them. Then Sergeant Gaffney came running up along the ditch to say that our No. 4 tank had been hit. I grabbed a fire extinguisher and ran 150 yards to it, so excited I didn't drop when the shells hit close but just ran through the blast of them. Four of the five men in the tank had got out. I tried to pull the driver out, but found he was dead. His body looked as if it had been put through a chopper and then burned.

"Awful things can happen to a

man in a tank. It's always heavy shells that get through and if one of them hits him it's like a hydraulic hammer smashing him. And when a shell goes into a tank it always sets your own ammunition off.

"A German panther tank was firing at us now and had got our 'priest' (a tank with a 105 mm howitzer), so I started toward him. I told the No. 2 tank commanded by Sergeant William Wickham, to move off the road to the left and I went straight down the road.

"There was a high brick wall on the left that we hit hard something and we stopped just ahead of it and waited. Finally we heard the squeaking of tank tracks. It's funny how far that squeaking carries. Even if tanks' motors are 100 m and their guns blasting, the sound you hear first is the squeaking of the tracks. A combat command of tanks advancing sounds like a million mice squeaking.

When the Jerry tank took its nose out cautiously beyond the wall Wickham was waiting for him, and with very fine shooting opened his whole side up.

"Then things got quieter. Our orders were to keep going so I told all the tanks within sound to follow me. I had lost my maps while running to our No. 4 tank so I went on memory. It was really black night now. I went under a railroad trestle and saw near the road a German half truck that had been strafed by our planes and was burning. By the light of the flames I saw a column of German trucks and two half tracks parked there and we shot them to pieces.

"We came to a square in the town, and went across it shooting. A Ger-

man command car scuttled into the street ahead of us and we threw a shell into its hind end. It rolled over, burning. We went crunching over it because there was no room to go around it. Finally we got outside the town.

Now one after another our tank commanders started calling to me that they were out of gas. We pulled into a field and I got Captain Malcolm O. Allen, our company commander, on the radio.

Withdraw, he said. 'We'll take the town in the morning with infantry.'

Hell. I told him, 'it's done been taken already!'

COMBAT COMMAND A of the Seventh Armored Division of the Third Army now lay across the eastern approaches to Argentan. In the Argentan Falaise area the bulk of the German army of the west was trapped. When the Germans lost this army they lost the Battle of France and Belgium, though this was not clear at the time to those on the ground there. The next line along which the Germans could make a fight was the Seine River.

'We breached the line there,' Lieutenant Hook said. 'at a place called Port Seine. The Germans held the east bank, our job was to hold the west bank and cover our infantry when they crossed.'

'There was a high ridge with a lot of trees on it. We snaked in among the trees, took our axes and cleared fields of fire for ourselves.'

'At two o'clock I thunderbolts strafed and dive-bombed the Germans. We cut loose with our 75s

and machine guns, and the infantry assault boats paddled across the river. Then a German machine gun hidden in a clump of trees caught the infantry in the back. We cut loose on it and put it out of action.'

'Some of the infantry started working up the east bank of the river. We knew there were still Jerries there and Major John Brown and I screamed to warn our men. Of course they couldn't hear us. A tall, thin boy was in the lead. He saw a Jerry in a foxhole, and turned around and started marching him back. Another Jerry popped out of a hole and scrambled after them as if to say 'What for me?' Then the doughfoot began looking in foxholes for souvenirs. I couldn't believe my eyes. He kept throwing this away and keeping that and looking for places to put things in his stuffed pockets while his two prisoners waited patiently.'

'Well, Major Brown said, 'he's cool. You've got to say that for him.'

With the infantry safely across the Seine we crawled under our tanks and slept until the engineers could throw a pontoon bridge across for us. We went over the next morning. Mortars and machine guns began popping at us from all directions. I went up the road into a hail of machine gun fire. It turned out to be from our own infantry. 'What the hell are you shooting at?' I asked one. 'Somebody fired at me,' he said. 'But don't you know your own troops are down this road?' 'Listen up,' he told me. 'if somebody fires at me, I fire at them. That's ipso facto.'

We went up to Plovins from there, clearing the east bank of the

river for further crossings and turned east. Then Captain William Powers said to me, 'I've got a job you'll like. There was a company of German infantry coming into Provins that night and he wanted me to sit outside the town and greet them. So I went with Wickham and Jimmy brought the tanks along with mine and we had a platoon of infantry. The infantry had been working over German positions all day and was well supplied with champagne and cognac. We waited in fields alongside the road. Every once in a while the crowd would start singing. I'd go down and explain to the sergeant in command of the doughfoots, 'Shut the boys up. You can't hunt birds this way.'

Then we heard singing coming from down the road, and for a crazy minute I thought some of our boys in town were coming to join our party. But it was from the other direction and I knew these people must be Germans. Orders were for nobody to fire until I fired. I could make out a mass of forms 200 yards away, dense packed and singing with a roar. I waited until they got within 50 yards, then opened up with my tommy gun, and all our machine guns followed. It was a massacre.

The Germans hadn't known that the Americans had crossed the Seine. They didn't even know where their own troops were, and as our tanks lanced and trampled their rear, their chances of finding out grew less and less.

'I was next told to take off for Chateau Thierry and to cross the Marne and secure a bridgehead. And do they want me to bring back Hit-

ler's mustache, too?' I thought. It seemed crazy to expect a tank platoon to ride in there without getting its block knocked off.

'We kept running head on into German command cars and trucks all day. The trucks were full of troops feeding toward the Seine. They'd see us and try to turn, and we'd get them broadside. Nothing was happening wonderfully that day.

"At one place, a road came out of the woods to the right and merged into ours. A German mechanized column was moving down the road, slanting across our front porch, you might say. I told the No. 2 tank to get the rearmost vehicle and I took the lead vehicle. Then we had the road blocked fore and aft, and I brought my platoon up abreast and we kept pumping until we had every vehicle in the column burning.

'There was a lot of stuff behind the rear vehicle that had backed off into the woods. I decided to ask if I should go after it. 'Keep going,' they said. General Bradley was sitting on General Patton's back, I guess, hollering 'Keep going,' and Patton was sitting on corps' back, hollering 'Keep going,' and corps was sitting on division division on combat command, combat command on battalion, battalion on company, and company was prodding the point — which was us — all hollering 'Keep going.' So I kept going.

"Some French resistance men jumped on my tank and led us to where the Germans had been mining the road. It looked so obvious that I suspected the thing was a plant. I got out and dug with my penknife into the refilled holes in the road but

there were no mines. We found that the mines were all on the shoulders of the road. The Germans had expected us to come battering along, see the refilled holes, swerve off to the shoulders, and blow up. I radioed the news back, left the Frenchmen there to warn those coming up to stick to the road, and kept going.

"About four o'clock a motorcycle tore down the road toward us and threw itself into a ditch about 50 yards away. I told Mathias to keep the Jerry from slipping a beehive on us as we passed. Our 75 boomed and we saw pieces of the German and his equipment fly over a tree.

A motorcycle usually has something behind it and we kept on the alert. Soon we saw a mile away a bunch of howitzer 76's—all murderous stuff, bent, pulled onto the road. There were also supply and ammunition vehicles. I spread my platoon of tanks across the field in echelon formation and we opened fire at 600 yards, shooting fast and carefully. We couldn't afford to miss, so we didn't miss.

"We got a lot of prisoners there. We rounded them up in a field and I thought I'd get myself a souvenir which I had always wanted—a Luger pistol. Our colonel came running up. 'Why the hell are you sitting here?' he shouted. 'It's been quite a battle here,' I explained, 'and we've got all these prisoners and don't know what to do with them.' The hell with the prisoners, he said. 'You keep going!'

"Du came on. Then there was a sign on the road: *Chateau Thierry, 112 Kilometres*. 'We're winning the whole damned war,' I said over the radio.

"*'Keep on moving!'* yelled the Colonel.

"A half mile outside the city was a column of German supply trucks—ammunition, clothing, food. It was eight o'clock then, and deep twilight. We came up shooting and the Germans jumped out of their vehicles and ran crying *Kamrad* or lay still or held their hands up to us imploringly. We bunched on past the side of the column running over whatever was there—debris or men, and shot them round to the side.

The id was a bridge over what a thousand hit with the Munche but there was no time to look at it in a map. A 76 mm. anti-air gun was shooting down the road at us from a corner of the bridge. We were in a alley, the end of the hell were going back and forth like bowling balls, but Mathias got the gun before it got us. We got across that bridge and on to another one. The id was when a 20 mm. cannon opened up on us. There was a shell that was like a kick in the heart and a spurt of flame that took my eyelashes off. The shell had knocked the driver's periscope off and he had veered—and we hung on the bridge by one track. When the driver, Sergeant Brodie Butler, got the rim out of his head he pulled the whole set hit down, put a new plastic head on it, backed onto the bridge and got us going again—all this very calmly and efficiently while the shells were whipping round us like sparks off a grindstone.

"Finally we came to a big bridge. There was an ammunition truck on it and we started it burning and edged past it. On the other side I shifted the tanks round to command the roads leading to the bridge and

can back to find the Colonel. 'Keep going,' he yelled. 'And get that damn truck off there before she burns a hole through the bridge.' I held my arm in front of my face and managed to throw a cable over the truck's bumper and one of our tanks towed it off the bridge.

Now we were over the Meuse at last. But we were cut off in the town the rest of that night. We had rushed past a whole choke of German traffic, and the rest of the command behind us couldn't get through it. All we had in the town was a battalion of tanks, a company of infantry and the headquarters. The Germans started pounding us with artillery, and the French resistance people and local gendarmes led infantry squads to the buildings where the Germans were hiding. The town was a madhouse all night with guns screaming everywhere and big shells whizzing down. But by eight in the morning the rest of the outfit had punched through and we took off for Rheims.

The war went altogether crazy after that. Every day was like the havoc from Provins to Chateau Thierry, with retreating Germans blundering into us and advancing Germans and cut-off Germans and wandering Germans and Gestapo guys and SS fellows in black uniforms driving cars, trucks, horses and on motorcycles and bicycles. We poked the chaos up and made it burn.

'At Fort Brumont near Rheims, the Germans in a factory making airplane parts kept on working until our infantry walked in on them.

'In one town, Jerry riflemen potted at us from the houses. I told gunner Doc McFarland to work

over the second-story windows and the tools with his machine gun while Mike O'Connor pounded the ground floors with our 75. Suddenly there was a terrific explosion a few feet in front of us and smoke and flame vomited over us. A Nazi was rolling teller mines at us from around the corner of a building. We got him just before the second mine went off ahead of us.

'We got out of that nightmare of a town and into an apple orchard and waited for somebody to catch up with us. Then I heard the Colonel asking what road we had taken.

'You'll see some German trucks burning. I told him 'You go straight past them and a motorcycle burning, and after that an armored car burning and you'll see an apple orchard. We're in the orchard.

'Take off, he said. We'll follow you. I told my platoon 'Let's go, boys. They want us to win the war tonight.

We went through the Argonne at 33 miles an hour. We came to a place called Neville. Suddenly our tank lifted up. It felt as if I had been taken by the scruff of the neck and shaken so hard that my legs nearly broke off at the hip. Butler said he couldn't pick up, we were stuck. Then some 88's cut loose at us from somewhere close by. We started hitting back but our tiredness and that first wallop had done something to our shooting—we couldn't drive one home.

'I kept looking at the muzzle flashes. One shell hit our right side and another went through the tank and through a gunner and the leader and blew up in the turret. The next thing I knew I was in the middle of

the road I dragged myself to a ditch. I could see big flames coming out of our turret. A man was lying beside the tank 'Lieutenant' he kept calling 'Lieutenant!'

"I ran over to him. It was Mike O'Casio. I told him to roll over on his stomach and put his hands around my neck. The Germans were still trying to kill us, but we were low down to the road and not very good targets. I crawled on my hands and knees to the ditch, Mike holding onto my neck, and to a hut 50 yards away. The other tanks were nearby, waiting for our priests to come up with their 105 howitzers which could shoot over the curve and drop down on the 88s.

"When the daze wore off I found there was nothing wrong with me except that my ankle was chipped and I was flecked all over with bits of fragment. I went to sleep under a tank and the next morning we fought into Verdun and seized the bridges there. Then we waited for supplies to catch up with us.

"No matter how fast we had come on our wild ride, or how far, every morning the familiar five gallon cans of gasoline and new ammunition and rations had been waiting for us. How those fellows in the rear managed to move their dumps forward so fast, and fight the stuff up to us through the Germans that we left behind everywhere, was a mystery to me. But finally there came a point when they couldn't do it any more. We were just too far ahead for our outfit that point was reached just outside Verdun.

"In the five days next there we all got brand-new 76 mm tanks, a shave and fresh meat to eat. Then we

headed for Metz, going fast until we got to St. Privat. The Germans had built up a strong new line there, but we didn't know it. We went breezing right into it in the manner to which we had become accustomed. The Jerries let us have it with everything in the book. There was so much noise that I didn't hear the shells falling, I just heard tank commanders hollering. I looked around and there were some fellows crawling toward me from Sergeant Wickham's tank. I yelled, 'Find cover,' and put my head over the turret to see if I could spot the guns in the woods. That was my last act as a platoon leader of Company A.

"I never felt anything when that shell hit our turret and broke my neck. There was no noise or flash or fear or burn. I had my head out looking at the woods, and suddenly I was lying on the bottom of the turret looking up. I couldn't move my arms or legs. 'Lieutenant Hook is dead,' I heard the man in the turret say over the radio. I made a desperate effort and nudged him. He looked down startled. I forced my eyes open, made a final desperate effort and winked at him. Then I passed out." \*

The wild hayride was over. Hook had ridden it out for 37 days, a lifetime as far as points go. It was two months before the Third Army progressed beyond St. Privat, but this spring it went on another such ride — across Germany.

\* Lt. Hook was hospitalized in England and later sent to the United States with his neck in a cast. He has been told by Army medical authorities that he will be discharged from the hospital fully recovered probably in early summer. He hopes to get back into combat — in a tank.