

#1 THE DAY PETE VICKLESS DIED

March 31, 1945 commenced much like the past three days since we crossed the Rhine River at Worms, Germany, on a pontoon bridge. The large permanent bridge at Worms just to the south of the recently launched pontoon bridge lay in the water by courtesy of the retreating German Army. The crossing was exceptionally peaceful. Nary a sniper's bullet nor occasional artillery fire.

Once over the river our fighting routine was altered. From Luxembourg to Worms we fought and rolled 24 hours a day with direct orders from Patton for no one to sleep a wink. We'd left Zimming Barracks on the Maginot Line near St. Avoird, France on Monday morning. The plans called for us to be on the Rhine at Worms on Saturday night. We went via Luxembourg and Trier, Germany, then across the Palatinate to Worms. Past the Rhine our general objective was Wurzburg to the east and to get there as fast as possible. Any opposition that showed itself received full blast of our gunfire as we looked for a way around it to keep rolling towards our objective. After crossing the river we were reassigned to Patch's 7th Army, leaving Patton's Third Army. The last village we entered as darkness descended we stayed for the night, after making the place secure. In varying degrees all got some sleep. Then we were up before daylight so the tanks could roll at daybreak.

Since the end of the Battle of Herrlisheim I'd been in the Vickless crew. Pete Vickless was from Brentwood Pa., a suburb of Pittsburgh. He was the youngest of ten children, three girls and seven boys. His father had died while he was in high school. From being last of ten, he had nephews nearly his age. He was a natural athlete and had run a football team from an early age. The University of Florida had given him an athletic scholarship to quarterback their freshman football team. He managed one year at U. Of Florida before entering the army.

When I came to Co. C 23rd Tank Battalion, he was one of the nine buck sergeant tank commanders. I became acquainted with him in a rather odd way. After all my personal tasks were taken care of at the end of the day, I'd drift down to the Post Exchange to drink a Coke. By this time a sizable contingent from C Co. had been there a few hours drinking the 3.2 beer allowed on army posts and were well under its influence. My not drinking that less than desirable beer made me the target of many jibes and drunken hilarity. By the time it had become wearing, I had noted Pete Vickless only drank Cokes with no remarks from anyone. Thereafter I waited until I saw Pete heading for the PX, then caught up with him for a peaceful Coke at the end of the day without the God-awful humor alcohol often produces.

I'm telling you this rather ordinary information for a distinct purpose. After the "Battle of Herrlisheim", as all of the survivors called it, Pete Vickless was our fighter supreme. He was capable of putting large losses on the enemy with no damage to himself or those with him. Most all of us in C Co. thought his aggressive and audacious fighting would catch up with him all too soon.

So when the company assembled after our sobering experiences of the past few days and Pete Vickless says, "I want Woods for my crew," there was no elation on my part. First came my close friends giving me variations of "It's been nice knowing you." Then the wisdom came to know there was no honorable way to dodge the assignment, at the same time aware it would likely be the greatest compliment of a lifetime. Why Pete Vickless would insist on having a skinny non-athletic farm kid as his boy Friday has escaped my comprehension over all the decades that have followed.

Now, nearly two weeks fighting our way across Germany the Vickless tank has been the lead vehicle all the way. In fact, in the two and a half months I've been in the Vickless crew we've always been the first tank into any fray. Pete didn't seem to mind. Never the slightest complaint. He was the most effective fighter of us all, so put him where the fights start. Of

course, taking the lead position (we called it "the Point") as a permanent assignment is akin to playing Russian Roulette with a bullet in every chamber. I was at ease with the situation, as all the crew appeared to be. For myself, after a few days at Pete's side I came to believe he could fight us through any situation.

Then a comment Vick (that was our quick and easy name for him) made early in the day of March 31, 1945 alarmed me somewhat. As we stood side by side in the turret in our regular positions, he turned to me and said, "Tomorrow is Easter. Do you suppose the high command will pull these tanks off the road to observe it?" Such a comment set me back on my heels for it carried a hint of wishing to pull back from the constant attacking. Along about midday, after having a number of small clashes and things were relaxed, he commented, "Sure hope they let us park these tanks tomorrow and observe Easter."

Pete deeply embraced his Catholic religion. He did not wear it on his sleeve. It never was in his conversation. It took weeks standing shoulder to shoulder in that tank turret for me to absorb almost by osmosis how strong his faith was.

Mid-afternoon on this eve to Easter Vick halted the column and said he was going to the rear of the column to confer with the company commander. When he did this, frequently, if he deemed the condition a bit dangerous he would hand me his personal weapon, a carbine, and tell me to sit on top of the turret and cover him should some enemy take shots at him. I never really became comfortable with that job.

When Vick returned and we both jumped down in the turret and began to move, he said, "We're going to fight on this Easter." What he didn't say was when he found the company commander, the battalion commander was present. Now this was our sixth Bn. C.O. in as many months. The first one was killed, the remainder wounded or captured. This present one was most likely a retread from the First World War. Gray headed and middle aged, we considered him way over the hill, something of an old fool. He kept himself constantly fortified with drink.

He proceeded to chew on Vick for not moving our group fast enough. I'm sure Vick did not rebut this with any comment. Alvin Kruse had his tank by the meeting and he informed me thus. We proceeded down the road with me doing my assigned task of spotting any target in all directions, then briefly describing anything spotted to Vick. Before long we came to a country intersection and on the road to the left were a cluster of German soldiers approximately 1000 feet away. This road was not our chosen route. Vick spoke into his microphone to the driver, Bob Grover, to turn left and proceed at high speed. Before we got up to speed a large team of draft horses hitched to a small farm wagon swung in front of us. The wagon had a seat to the front of the grain box wagon, much like our grain wagon of 60-70 years ago. On this seat was perched a small middle-aged soldier, weighing 100-110 pounds. Vick told Frank Conway to take him out of our way with the co-axial machine gun.

Here we are, racing down the road as fast as the small soldier can get his large draft horses to gallop, and the small wagon is skittering and bouncing all over the road with Conway firing constantly with the 30 caliber machine gun. Soon we swing into a right turn and we are going down the main street of a small village by the name of Althausen. The main street is full of German soldiers. Looks like we've barreled into a parade of them. They are scattering, for many other tanks are roaring after us plus numerous half-tracks full of infantry.

A staff car is backing out of an alley about midway of Main Street. That means high brass, so Bob Grover takes a swipe at the rear end of it. He just grazes it as it ducks back into the alley. At the end of main Street there is a turn to the left to cross the railroad tracks, then a quick right to head to the next town a short distance away.

About the time we engage the staff car I have to sit down in the turret on my small jump seat as Conway is really getting rid our our 30 caliber ammo rapidly. I have to be ready with another box.

After we left Althausen heading for the next village, German soldiers are everywhere, thick as lice. At the moment they are scattering, trying to get out of our way. As we are traveling at the tank's high speed, they don't all make it. We run over some of them.

Soon after exiting Althausen heading east, small hills rise up the left of the road. In fact, the road is cut into one of these hills, leaving an embankment as high as our tank turret. It is at this spot we finally drop one of the big draft horses, the one on the right. So we come to a quick halt.

Trouble is everywhere. All directions. To the right of the road is a flat field, the only place not thick with enemy. The next village about 1000 feet distant is teeming with soldiers and our first interest is an anti-tank gun all set up and firing at us. This being the greatest threat, we are firing the tank cannon with high explosive to get it. After a few rounds, it is dead and we turn to the next order of business. There is a German infantryman with a panzerfaust in his hands in the ditch on our right just ahead of the dead horse. The road is curving a little where he is, so we can't shoot up the ditch and hit him.

All tankers hate Panzerfaust as it is a miserable way to die. If this fellow gets a chance to fire, we are goners for sure, so Conway is firing the co-axial furiously. Too fast, for it is approaching full seizure, so I'm hollering at Conway to ease up. Guess he gets the word as he lowers the tank cannon to the bottom limit and gives him a high explosive, ending the threat.

Got a glimpse of other impending trouble and did not see Conway lower the cannon so when our high explosive round burst, it was so close the front of the tank reared up and I thought we'd taken a hit from some unseen large gun. Had a larger problem at hand so ignored our imagined hit.

Pete Vickless since our halt has been busy spotting targets and directing Conway the gunner. He squats down so his head is inside the tank and with his left hand is like swatting bees on the back of his head and neck. Instantly I realize the German soldiers on the embankment to the left side of our tank are firing at his head and he is slapping off bullet splash, which is similar to a yellow jacket attack.

Let's digress here to look at other folks' troubles.

When moving as rapidly as possible after a break through, we traveled in column on the roadways, then fanned out into the fields if we met stiff resistance. Usually one tank company and one armored infantry company moved together. Each squad of infantry had a half-track to ride in. If we were on the road there was first a lead tank (always Vickless' tank), then a half-track of infantry, then another tank, etc.

Often some of the infantry rode on the back deck of our tank behind the turret. Some of them got a kick using the 50 caliber machine gun mounted on top of the turret for anti-aircraft protection. The infantry would use it on targets of opportunity.

So it was on this Saturday, March 31, 1945, when we were racing down a country road chasing this team of horses. As we came to a halt, the half track behind us also had to halt, and in doing so, it pulled up very close to our tail, for its occupants likely saw the anti-tank gun that had commenced firing on our tank.

When in a melee like this, I constantly kept looking in all directions for threats to us and for targets of opportunity, all the while keeping both the co-axial machine gun and cannon fed with ammunition. I saw the half track pull up behind us. Other C. Co. tanks in the column pulled off the road and spaced themselves out across the field to help with all the enemy fire that was coming our way. Up on the embankment were many German infantry. A steady stream of armed Germans were running along the ditch between our tank and the embankment. I assumed they were going toward our rear to surrender.

Another glance revealed the half-track close behind us had taken a hit in their right gas tank. The remainder of the squad that was not on our tank were bailing out. Their squad leader's riding position was the right front beside the driver where a 50 caliber machine gun

was mounted. As the squad went over the side their sergeant was taking long strides across the driver's seat to go over the side next to the embankment, opposite the side of the hit. The sergeant was minus his steel helmet and all the clothes had been torn off his right leg from crotch to foot. The leg was bare and a mass of blood.

Next glimpse found he had jumped over the side onto one of the German infantry that were fleeing to our rear. Didn't witness the pile up but the sergeant and a German were furiously fist fighting toe to toe. Things were busy, so attention was diverted from this unreal bit of entertainment. My next glimpse revealed the sergeant must have won the fisticuffs for he was semi-draped over the German and they were hobbling and staggering towards our rear.

The infantry that went over the side had been thoroughly doused with 100 octane gasoline, for their hit was in the right side gas tank. As they ran across the field, they were tall burning plumes. Slowly the roaring fires burned the life out of them. They ran slower and as the flame began to subside, they ran in circles, and as they slowed the circles became smaller and they slowly collapsed to the ground. Not an easy death.

Back to the scene in our turret. Bullet splash comes when any bullet hits armor plating and small shards of bullet or armor fly every which way. The German infantry up on the bank were firing at Pete's head. I had kept watch, expecting them to jump on our rear deck and give us hand grenades. As soon as Vick had wiped the stings off his neck, he stood up in the turret, and my stomach sank. Sure enough, in a second or two he was squatting down into the turret again, this time a gray worm of brain squiggling out of a hole behind his left ear. He settled into a squat much like a quarterback does to take the call from center. I felt total defeat.

A bullet in the frontal lobes of the brain can be survived in some fashion. A hit from center to back of the head is always curtains. The little gray worm of brain is 5/16" in diameter and one inch long. It only drips blood. Then Pete tips his head forward as if in prayer and the exit hole over his right eyebrow now gushes blood with small pieces of brain matter in it.

Conway turns in his gunner's seat and tries to stand up at an angle to take a look out of the turret and try to disengage us. I shout for him to keep his head down and use the prisms in the turret ring to take a look. He continues up. I grab his jacket and hold him so he can't get his head up too far. He tries to shake me loose and I'm shouting, "We don't need another dead man in this turret!" Shouting is standard communication as tanks are noisy in the extreme. I soon have Conway doing it my way.

Then Brad Dressler, our medic, comes on the radio saying he is coming to get Vick. We tell him not to as there is no help for Vickless and there is a hailstorm of bullets.

By using the prisms and the periscope, we get the tank backed out past the burning half track when suddenly Brad is standing on the back deck looking down into the turret. Says he wants Vickless. Pete was a big football player so this is not easy. Brad pulling on the shoulders, Conway working the middle, and me on the turret floor. We are struggling and don't have him to a standing position yet. Had a thought of pushing on his knee to straighten a leg to help. I barely touch his knee and he stands up on his own power! Instant elation! There is still life! Then instant deflation. I'd pushed on the reflex in his knee and there was enough life left for a reaction.

Brad takes Vick to the side of the road next to the embankment. We continue to back out without putting our head out for a target, Conway directing Bob Grover by the intercom. The prisms and periscope only let you see away from the tank; you cannot see anything closer than 20 feet from the tank. Unbeknownst to us, Brad had parked his medic's jeep tight up against our rear for protection. He had four stretchers laid out across the hood and back deck, fully occupied with wounded. When we started our slow backing retreat, the rear end of our tank began an abrupt rise. A quick glance out my hatch hole revealed we had a tank track

clear back into Brad's driver seat. The four wounded on litters became walking wounded instantly. We pulled forward and worked around the wreck. We finally turned the tank and drove back through Althausen to an open farm about where we latched onto that team of horses to chase.

C. Co. was there trying to sort things out. Also a fair number of German prisoners. Lt. Guitteau, our present company commander, came over and asked if Vickless was dead. I assured him that he'd be safe reporting him killed-in-action. Wanted Pete's family to have the truth instead of one of those slow torture missing-in-action reports. It was never accomplished as Guitteau was killed before daylight the next day by Konigshofen.

The last sight of the small German soldier driving the team of large draft horses was him sitting on the wagon seat with one horse standing and the other dead in the middle of the road. That little soldier sat on that seat as leisurely as you would on a park bench watching children play. For all of our expenditure of 30 caliber ammunition on him for over a mile's run, we hadn't put a mark on him. He had a good show to watch. It was the wildest, most disorganized piece of action I ever participated in.

I always told my old soldier friends that Hollywood could not produce a scene like the shoot-out by Althausen. It took them fifty-plus years and in "Saving Private Ryan", they finally did.

It is now early evening as we are parked on the safe side of Althausen. Everyone is out of their vehicles and gathered around the tank and infantry officers to get the word on our immediate future. I go to our tank and crawl into the turret to assess our situation. The turret floor is circular with an inch flange around the edge. In places the blood and gore is running over this flange, through the trap door in the floor and all over our 76 millimeter ammunition. The ammo is nose up and is bloody enough to prevent its extraction for use. The mess seems insurmountable. I haven't eaten all day. I pull out a can of C-ration beans and eat them cold.

It is finally decided we will move in column towards Konigshofen, nearer Wurzburg during the night and attack early morning. Our tank is hopeless for fighting so we are put at the very end of the column. Being at the back end of the column, we suffer the yo-yo effect. First we are hurrying to stay up to them, then we park and wait.

Just before daylight wild shooting and shouting break out up the column ahead of us. The Germans had entrenched themselves alongside the road. They are using panzerfaust, machine guns, rifles, and hand grenades. No large antitank guns or tanks. Due to their close proximity to the column they are wreaking havoc. Our tanks are very vulnerable to their panzerfaust and C Co. is taking hits. The wounded and unwounded are escaping the disabled tanks the best they can. At least panzerfaust seldom turn the tanks into large torches, burning the large amount of 100 octane gas we fuel them with.

The infantry captain is shouting for tankers to get on top of the dead tanks and fire the 50 caliber machine gun on top. The sky is lighting up enough to make such a person a nice silhouette on a perch. No one responds. So up goes our company commander, Lt. Guitteau. Such an inviting target never got his hands on the 50 caliber. In death, they promoted him to captain.

Before daylight the Germans slipped away, then subjected us to heavy artillery attacks the remainder of the day. From time to time we would put together small attack forces and try to get into Konigshofen. Never made it and took additional casualties. Towards dusk we pulled back whence we came.

Our dead were Lt. Guitteau, Maynard McFerren, Billy T. Raines and Timothy O'Brien. Ten to twelve wounded, most serious enough never to return to our company. Our tank was sent back to our company headquarters' group so we could clean it and refurbish it to combat condition.

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