

Stranglehold
The Journal of Unteroffizier Markus Schultz (German 6th Army)

“I fear I will run out of bullets long before I
run out of enemies on which to use them.”

* Unteroffizier Schultz

January 10th 1943

Today I tasted raw horseflesh for the first time. It was even worse than I could've ever imagined. It was cold, slimy, and had very little taste. Great effort was required to swallow it down, because there was no other choice. These horses had helped us move supplies and equipment. Now, they helped us fend off starvation. One of the men in my squad, Ulrich, had tears streaming down his face as he tried to gag it down with every bit of determination he could muster. Kroll was the only man in the squad that managed to do it without great difficulty. He certainly didn't enjoy it, though. This unpleasant business was the result of many factors. The 6th Army of the Wehrmacht was completely surrounded at Stalingrad. It was next to impossible for us to get the supplies needed to keep fighting as an effective force. The Luftwaffe tried to fly in and drop equipment to us daily, but these attempts were constantly thwarted by Russian anti-aircraft fire, horrible weather, or our planes missing the target and dropping their loads into enemy hands.

The most excitement today came from a plane dropping a large container down onto our positions in the city. While the crate came parachuting down, we received a little morale boost thinking about the food, ammo, or winter clothing as it slowly descended. Upon opening the crate, what we found inside was playing cards,

cigarettes, some mail, and other items of that nature. It goes without saying that there were a lot of odd glances being tossed around. Glances showed nothing but confusion. High command and the Luftwaffe didn't understand our desperation. Maybe we were meant to beat the Russians at poker when they got here.

January 11th

Today I experienced a new kind of fear. This fear is something that I kept to myself. After all, as a squad leader, my men didn't need to know any of these thoughts. Today, Russian soldiers attacked our positions on the western outskirts of Stalingrad. These suburbs used to resemble wooden houses, but after extensive bombing by our planes, they looked like the rest of Stalingrad—rubble. I had no grasp on the mindset of these Russians. The way they fought makes no sense at all. My squad was positioned at two houses cut down the middle by a little dip into a valley. Early in the afternoon, the first Russian soldiers came around a hill revealing themselves in the snow-covered valley. In the left house, we had an MG42 set up. No tactics were employed. One soldier after the next came flooding into this valley. Our entire squad opened up and quickly began mowing them down.

I fired my MP40 submachine gun, and along with other SMGs and rifles of my squad, we inflicted heavy casualties. I'll never forget the sight of Harmel firing his MG42 and plowing through their ranks with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. The other squad members called him "smoke stack." However, these Russians would not stop coming into the valley. They would not hesitate to step over their own dead or wounded to keep pushing forward. When it came to my own kill count today, I stopped counting after eleven. An unexpected chill ran up my spine when I watched

the detached way that these men were attacking. It was an eerie scene, and I wanted nothing more than for this attack to be halted. They were like an infinite column of ants. You stomped your foot on them and killed many enemies, but the reserves appeared endless. This entry came after I tried to sleep but couldn't find any comfort. This scene keeps replaying in my mind. Enemy soldiers falling in bunches, and they never seemed to call out for medical help when wounded. Are we truly fighting against men at Stalingrad, or are these things something else?

This engagement was typical for the kind of brutality in the fighting against Russian soldiers. When we took over the huge majority of this city, it was done so by house-to-house fighting. Sometimes, hand-to-hand combat was needed to clear a room. After slaughtering the Russian attack, we looted the many corpses that were left in the valley, before they became stiff and covered in snow. We looted everything we could: Mosin Nagant rifles, PPSH submachine guns, heavy coats, boots, and any food we could find. I grabbed myself a PPSH and extra drum magazine to examine this weapon that had instilled fear in all of us during these close quarters battles. Seventy-one rounds could be fired in mere seconds. My MP40 couldn't match that kind of firepower.

Closer examination of this weapon showed that it followed the general philosophy that Russia employed throughout their military. They valued simplicity and speed of production over everything else. It was the complete opposite to our own views on weapons and vehicles. Our guns, tanks, and planes were made of higher quality materials. However, this came at the price of much fewer produced in factories. If we received twenty Panzer or Tiger tanks at the front, they would

receive one hundred of their T-34 tanks. Somehow, the same thinking applied to soldiers. Russian reserve troops could arrive at the front quicker than we could kill them.

Tonight, I overheard the men talking about today's combat. The nickname given to the slaughter was "The Great Russian Turkey Shoot." I wasn't the only one to notice Harmel's bad habit.

"Hey, Harmel. Real professional smoking during battle like that. You could at least try to look like a soldier."

"Get off your high horse, Gehring. The Fuhrer wasn't here to watch you today, so why do you care so much what any of us look like? You afraid of getting a little dirt on that pretty uniform of yours?"

"Why don't you ease up on him? I don't see any problem with him smoking. We're trying to survive, not win some kind of contest."

"Go eat some more horse, Kroll. You seemed to like it more than—."

"Gehring, go find some horse shit. I'm more of a survivor than you are. Not all of us grew up rich and spoiled."

The last squad member, Ulrich, had been silent up to this point. Him and Gehring often went back and forth.

"Gehring, let me tell you about a professional soldier. My father was a sharpshooter in the First World War. Best shot in the entire company. He truly put fear in the French soldiers. When he walked through the trenches, his own men got out of his way. The way they looked at him. They felt safe knowing he was next to them in battle. The true professional is the man that is lethal with his weapon. That

is the way to get respect from the men. Just *looking* like a soldier doesn't matter at all. You should know that, but you have your head too far up your own ass."

Stress and anxiety from battle manifested itself in many ways. I let the men blow off steam, and said nothing to them. I needed to pick my spots. And besides, I agreed with Ulrich's assessment of Gehring. He was one hell of a soldier, but I didn't like the man.

January 12th

No Russian attack came today. In its place, the Russian winter came with a fury. The temperature today was colder than I've ever experienced in my life. Nine casualties today despite no shots being fired by either side—froze to death. Maybe it was part of the plan for the enemy to let mother nature work in its stead. I doubted that they were that smart. Those tactics were too advanced for an army that's philosophy was to attack and throw as many soldiers into the meat grinder as it possibly could to achieve a slight victory. Snow fell all day and the driving winds made visibility a joke. The 6th Army was never equipped to fight this long campaign during the winter months. Many of our tanks and big guns have frozen to the point where we can't use them. We were lacking the clothing that the Russians knew would be required. When we saw the enemy, we were envious of their thick green or white coats—their boots too. In this environment, Russian boots became the most sought after prize in the whole God forsaken country.

In a bizarre twist, my squad hunkered down today and played poker with the same cards we received in the last airdrops. These same cards greatly boosted our survival of the Russian winter. I politely declined the invitation, and instead read a

letter from my younger brother that arrived today in another monumental success courtesy of the Luftwaffe. My younger brother Johann was a Panzer tank driver in the Afrika Korps. He was fighting under one of the most well respected commanders by both sides—Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. Rommel was legendary for his tactics in desert warfare. When Johann talked of his experiences fighting the British in Africa, the war couldn't have seemed more different to my war in Russia.

We were two different sides of the same coin. One side was still shiny and recognizable. The other was rusty and scratched to oblivion. Johann's picture detailed a brutal battle of another kind, but one that still was fought by the unwritten rules of combat. In Africa, if German or British troops improvised a game of football in the desert, the other side would not shell them with artillery. I'm confident that neither side here would grant this liberty. If we played football, it would not be done for enjoyment—it would be to try and keep us warm enough not to freeze.

January 13th

I'm still having trouble sleeping at night. I'm not sure whether it's the cold, or the memories of the January 11th Russian turkey shoot that I can't escape. I don't see these Russians with faces. Instead, they flow into the valley like a mass of water that has broken through a dam. Word spread today about the Russians attacking other sectors and taking over various sections of Stalingrad. Our commander Friedrich Wilhelm Ernst Paulus has repeatedly gone to the Fuhrer to request that we try to break out of this pocket and abandon Stalingrad. Each time, Hitler adamantly refused and told him to fight to the last man. This became personal for Hitler not to

relinquish the city that bore Stalin's own name. Lately, requests to break out turned into requests to surrender. Those were met with the same furious refusal from our Fuhrer. Over two hundred thousand of us were completely surrounded and cut off in the city.

January 14th

This morning, we discovered another twelve men froze to death overnight. The unrelenting winter has not let up for days. We were slowly starving, freezing, and running out of ammo. We abandoned the western suburbs today and moved further into Stalingrad's center. Russian artillery shelled us in a terrifying display this morning. The howling of those damn Katyusha rockets sounded like nothing else. I saw those machines up close a couple months ago. They were simply racks of rockets on a platform on the back of a beat up truck. The simplicity of the design made them Russian to a fault.

I don't know how many guns they had shooting at us, but it felt like it would never end. What remained intact of the wooden houses turned into oversized splinters raining down amongst the men. Soldiers fortunate enough to avoid these were only disintegrated by the shells themselves. At least they often didn't feel a thing. During intense shelling, squad leaders such as myself had to keep the men calm. Dodging this rain of death, I ran from position to position reminding the men to hunker down, not to move one bit until the barrage was over.

We cleaned up our dead and wounded before evacuating the outskirts. I overheard members of my squad talking about me. Whether positive or negative, I never did what I've seen other NCOs do—interrupt and end talk about leaders. My

belief has always been that soldiers have the right to complain, as long as they follow my orders when the time comes. It gave me a slight boost to hear them speak highly of me, talking about how I'll take care of them and have done a good job doing so thus far. They got their confidence from me in combat, which is the way it should be. I like my squad, but try to keep myself at arm's length at the same time. I'd liked them for months, while trying not to know too much about them. I knew most of them would never see home again.

When I first saw these boys, I saw the same zeal in them that I saw in my brother Johann back in 1941, right before he went off to the deserts of Africa. Johann would've fit in well with my young squad. There was that belief in the cause of this war that Germany would prevail in the end and the country would be even stronger. After months of this bloody fight for Stalingrad, I watched them closely. A soldier's eyes betray what his lips will never say. Eyes tell nothing but the truth, if a soldier is afraid, if he can't take any more, and so on. I've seen the thousand-yard stare before from soldiers in the Army. As we retreated into the heart of the city, I made sure that I didn't see this in my boys—I didn't. There were still traces of pride despite the ever-desperate struggle.

The ruined wooden buildings were left behind for rubble of a much more modern variety. Skeletons of stone and brick buildings lay in heaps or piles, mixed of course with plenty of fresh snow. The industrial heart of Stalingrad was typical Russian drab. Buildings were always grey, brown, or some other boring color. Occasionally a lucky building still stood with its frame intact, but its glass windows were blown out a long time ago. My mind wandered to Johann and the unforgiving

desert heat and sand he has described in his letters. The exact opposite of my letters showed that this worldwide war had many faces. Walking through the streets, we passed a monstrous structure—the grain elevator. Its thick walls had been punctured by hundreds of bullets and artillery shells, but it had resisted and towered over all of the surrounding buildings. On both ends, huge staircases led to small catwalks on the building's outskirts.

My squad was positioned a couple blocks away from the grain elevator. We were stationed in a three-story hotel in which the third story had mostly been caved in after countless bombing runs from the Luftwaffe. In the lobby of the first floor, a chandelier was crumpled on the floor, crushed by the weight of an unexploded bomb from one of our planes. This hotel was not as luxurious as it once was, and each room was virtually empty. A couple scraps of wood and cloth from beds and other furniture were the only evidence that people once slept here. At least there were enough walls standing that we were saved from the wind tonight. Maybe we won't freeze and live to see another day.

January 15th

The sun was just beginning to creep up through the low clouds when I woke to the sound of intense small arms fire. The noise was coming from my west, towards the grain elevator. Even from this distance, I could pick out the various sounds of the red orchestra. There were rifle shots with intervals of a second or two while the soldier was operating the bolt action, sustained machine gun fire from our MG42s, the slower automatic fire of MP40s, and the rapid sound of PPSH SMGs spraying their high rate of fire. I pictured what must have been a horrific and bloody

scene inside the narrow hallways, spreading out into the larger factory rooms. The concussive thud of grenades added bass to this nasty song. My squad received no orders, except to prepare to push back an enemy attack.

As we were consolidating our forces in central Stalingrad, the Russians were hot on our heels pressing their advantage. While we waited, we heard the rumble of armor and felt relief discovering that they were German. Our Tiger tanks snaked their way through the rubble, as this city as it was now was not friendly to armor. The Tigers positioned themselves behind piles of stone giving themselves some frontal cover, we positioned our MGs in windows that watched large sections of streets, we had a couple snipers behind our positions for support, and I even saw a few of our 88mm guns positioned guarding our flanks. We were as ready as we could be for the attack we all expected. No one in my squad was talking. We all waited in silence while we heard the violence from the elevator. It wasn't hard to understand the strategic value of the structure. Its supreme height gave it a great view over much of central Stalingrad, and the fighting gave further proof to that value.

I walked around and checked on my squad to make sure they were prepared. On the surface, it would've appeared to be an Unteroffizier checking on the preparations and soldierly status of his men. In reality, it was more important for each of them to know that I was right there beside them. As I came across each man, I took a moment to observe his actions. The first man I ran into was Kroll, who was looking over his rifle. He was counting the rounds he had remaining and shaking his head in frustration. Harmel was stationed at a window with his MG42 propped up

on the ledge. Of course, a fresh cigarette hung from his mouth. I could barely even tell that he was alive, except for his eyes frantically scanning the streets in front of him. In a word, he looked wound up very tightly. Ulrich's MP40 was propped up against a wall, which I didn't like. He was writing something, a letter most likely. Gehring looked like he was sighting in his rifle. The K98 rifle allowed for sight adjustments based on appropriate distances. Gehring was my squad member that was always thinking with a military mind, always doing a little bit more to prepare himself for battle.

Of these four men, I tallied that three of the four showed signs that were a little worrisome. Writing letters when an attack could be imminent, showing frustration when counting ammo, and there was something in Harmel's eyes that concerned me. If Gehring ever had frustration or trouble, I never saw it. It was time to talk to these men in a different way. We were positioned closely together, so I gathered my squad.

"I never told you men that I have a brother. His name is Johann. He's a tank driver for Rommel's forces, fighting the Brits in Africa. He writes me frequent letters about the combat, his experiences, and the horrible heat and sand. When I tell him about the Russian winter, he says he would like a little bit of this cooler weather. Not only is it cool here, look at this luxurious hotel we're staying in! We should be so lucky!"

I very rarely attempt to be funny in front of my squad, but humor can have a powerful effect at the right time. This received a few laughs from my guys, all except Gehring. I never expected him to laugh.

“Now that you know I have family, maybe you won’t think me such a cold son of a bitch when I spend my downtime by myself. Don’t take it personally, but I’m most likely writing to Johann about the beautiful Russian landscape. These vast, flat fields, a scenic hotel such as this one. You would hardly know a war is going on here, am I right, men?”

After my squad went back to their posts looking like they were in higher spirits, I wanted to talk to them in private to get a true reading. I talked to Kroll first.

“Kroll, how are you holding up?”

“I’m okay, sir.”

“How are you on ammo? When the Russians get here, will you be able to shoot back?”

“We’re all low, sir. We need those airdrops. I’ve only got ten bullets, but I’ll make them count, sir.”

“I know you will, Kroll. We can’t depend on the airdrops. When we lose men, make sure and get some ammo off the bodies. If anyone gives you trouble, you tell them you were ordered to by your squad leader. If I come across any ammo, I’ll make sure and get it to you.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir”

I felt encouraged by my talk with Kroll. What made me happiest was him saying, “*we’re* all low” when talking about the ammo counts. Even with his obvious frustration, he was still thinking as part of the squad. Next, I checked in on Harmel, who had worried me earlier.

“Harmel, your MG ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When the attack comes, you have good sightlines on the streets. You can control the terrain. The ones you don’t hit will be funneled towards the flanks where we’ll be ready. In the meantime, what are you thinking about, Harmel?”

“Just trying to stay focused, sir.”

“I know you’ll be focused when the time comes. Do you have a girlfriend back home?”

“I do, sir. Her name’s Greta.”

“When you’re with Greta, what do you two like to do together?”

“It’s a little embarrassing, sir. I, I never learned to read much. Greta reads books to me. It relaxes me when she does it. I have problems with stress sometimes, and it helps.”

“When you’re sitting there at your MG, and you’re feeling that stress. Think about Greta reading your favorite book to you. Think about why it helps calm you down. Look forward to that feeling when we get home. Do that in your downtime, and you won’t have so much stress.”

“I’ll try, sir. Thank you.”

I thought about my words to Harmel: “when we get home.” It reminded me that we might never see Germany again. Those thoughts needed to be pushed aside, and I still had two squad members to check on. Ulrich was holding his MP40 at his waist, and saw me approaching down the hallway.

“Ulrich, how have you been?”

“I’m hanging in there, sir. Planning on making the Russians pay when they show their ugly faces.”

“You and me both. I noticed you writing earlier. Don’t worry; I don’t have a problem with that. I didn’t like how far away your weapon was from you. When the first shot is fired, you need to be reaching for your gun and picking it up before the second comes.”

“Sorry, sir. I’ll keep it closer to me from now on.”

“You’re such a good shot with that MP40. I just want to make sure you put it to its rightful use against the enemy. Don’t get caught with your finger on a pencil, instead of a trigger.”

I patted Ulrich on the back as I left him alone. The truth was that he really was a crack shot with that MP40. I could hold my own with the rest of the squad, but I couldn’t match his marksmanship. I’d seen him fire bursts with it that make our riflemen jealous. He was the most lethal member of this squad.

The last man to visit was Gehring. Of my guys, Gehring was the one that I never had to worry about. Recruitment posters wished they had this type of soldier that only seemed to be a fantasy. Gehring had no family after a tragedy left him alone at a young age, and he had put all of his drive and determination into being the finest soldier in the 6th Army. If I needed a man to get a task done, he was my first choice. Ulrich was the finest shot, but Gehring was the one that I could see leading men into combat someday. The only thing that I would’ve disagreed with Gehring on was politics. Gehring believed very strongly in the Fuhrer’s ideals. He had a *strong* hatred for Jews that I was never able to fully understand, and I never asked.

“Gehring, how do you manage to keep your uniform so clean all the time?”

“Every day I try to look after it, sir. On the off chance that one of these Russian animals shoots straight enough to actually kill me, he’s not going to get the satisfaction of seeing my dead body in a messy uniform.”

“Careful not to underestimate them. Remember the name of this city.”

I left the conversation at this and walked away. As much as I admired and depended on Gehring’s ability to function as the professional-looking soldier that he was, speaking to him would often leave me feeling a bit uneasy. Each member of my squad had been checked on, and I felt more confident about our ability to fight as a unit when called upon. While this was going on, the intense fighting in the grain elevator could still be heard. I’m not sure how much time passed, but I worried about the state of our men that were toiled in that bloody struggle. For some reason that I still can’t grasp, my squad was never attacked today. But, the Russians did manage to take back the grain elevator and its dominance over the nearby terrain.

January 16th

Our pocket of ground here in Stalingrad continued to shrink each and every day. I had the most sleep I’d gotten in many nights. My head was clear and those memories stayed away for once, granting me a little peace. As I woke to another frigid day with winds whipping snow around destroying visibility, worry crept into my head about my discussions with the squad. I’ve put so much effort into not trying to get close to these men, and for months I have achieved that. I would take a bullet to save any one of them, but ultimately knew that I will fail to deliver them all back to Germany. I wouldn’t blame the men for being puzzled about me opening up to

them and speaking to them the way I did, but it seemed like the time was appropriate to try and boost morale.

In the center of the city, there was a great commotion late in the morning when we heard planes flying over Stalingrad. They were our planes. We could barely make out the planes through the dense layer of clouds and snow, but we all knew. As bad as visibility was, another airdrop was coming. It was impossible to tell how many there were, but through the thick snow and harsh winds, we could see numerous crates slowly drifting down throughout our positions in the city. I'm sure many more crates were missing than hitting the mark, but it wouldn't be the first time we would encounter enemy soldiers carrying our rations, clothing, cigarettes, mail, liquor, and more. My squad was among the troops that rushed through the snow-covered rubble to find the nearest crates and hope that the supplies were better than the last few airdrops. By the time I arrived, some of the contents had already been removed. There were still some rations and ammo left as squad and platoon leaders were sectioning off materials for their men. I forced my way into the fray and secured enough rations for a few days for the whole squad. I also obtained some K98 ammo that Kroll desperately needed. A few extra magazines for our MP40s were also too good to leave. Finally, an airdrop that had moderate success in getting to us, and contained what we desperately needed. Unfortunately, there was no heavy winter clothing in this crate. It remained the last crucial element missing from my squad to bolster our survival in these elements. Like so many men, I would've sold my soul for a heavy pair of boots.

As I returned to our hotel where the squad was set to reform after scavenging the supply crates, some kind of dread ceased hold of me. I thought about the horrible weather conditions, and the fact that many planes were lost during these airdrops because Russia dominated the skies. This all meant that this airdrop was a pretty big gamble, and a desperate one at that. If the Luftwaffe went to this kind of trouble to get us these supplies today, something extremely important and dangerous must've be on the horizon.

January 17th

Today, my squad and many more were allowed to hunker down in our buildings and rest. This came down from the top of the 6th Army. A day of rest today, for tomorrow my squad was to take part in the attack to recapture the grain elevator. That is why yesterday's airdrop was so important. We were as ready as we could be for tomorrow. Our stomachs were finally full of something other than this nasty horseflesh we had to eat with our shortage of rations. We had more ammo than we did a couple days ago. Hopefully, tomorrow the weather will be as horrible as it was yesterday. Low visibility will give us the chance to get as close as possible to the elevator before the enemy can see us and open fire. The airdrop also included a large bag of mail, and I got another letter from Johann. While enjoying my ration, I read the latest news from Africa. It was a disheartening letter to say the least.

The war in Africa had turned hard against Rommel and our forces. The British forces led by Montgomery had us on the run and were reclaiming places that Rommel had captured weeks ago. A particular passage saddened me.

We are on the run now, brother. These British troops are hardened and much tougher than I thought. Our Desert Fox Rommel seemed unbeatable, but is now giving up ground we fought and died hard for. Last night, I had a dream that my Panzer was hit, caught fire, and I was burned alive. It has now become clear to me that I will not leave this continent. I will die here, brother. I'm convinced of it. We will never see each other again. I hope you make it home. Both of us don't deserve to die like this.

I had never heard my brother speak this way before, and my confusion was followed quickly by worry. This worry for Johann piled onto this dread that tomorrow we will launch our first major attack in weeks. Now I knew that the war in Africa might be as unwinnable as the war in Russia. The Fatherland's chances of winning this war seemed to be disintegrating in front of our faces.

January 18th

Today was another day of blinding winds and freezing temperatures. I was woken at daybreak and told to report for a meeting of just about every officer in the entire army. Walking to this meeting, I could never see more than twenty feet in front of me, as the howling winds reminded me of the sounds of Russian Katyushas—"Stalin's Organ." The planned offensive was simple enough. My squad and about one hundred more men were going to assault the grain elevator and surrounding buildings. Attacks were simultaneously going to hit the tractor factory, chemical plant, and other strongholds throughout the city.

At this meeting, I remember the sideways looks from many of the officers. I didn't look like one of them. When we would actually get some of the winter clothing, officers would always get top priority. I was one of the few that didn't

believe in that method. I didn't have the wool hat, fur boots, or heavy coat that many before me had. My grey green clothes were caked in dirt; my standard issue boots were wrapped in excess cloth to give more insulation, and my gloves were too thin to properly protect my hands. One of the biggest errors an officer can make is to place himself on a pedestal. I wasn't going to equip myself like them until my squad was able to do so. Until then, I would live in the same conditions. Yes, officers are important. However, the men that they command are equally important.

We were informed that the Russians were in control of most of the buildings and ground around the grain elevator. They had a horseshoe-shaped stranglehold on the territory, and other squads were going to assault these outer buildings while a force of fifty was going to assault the elevator itself. I wasn't sure if I liked my assignment more than the other options, or if I dreaded it more. By 8:30, we were slowly approaching our targets. The horrible visibility meant that we were to move out and quietly make our way through the streets. Walking in the streets, I could hardly see the buildings to either side. Each squad's goal was to quietly reach their destination before a shot was fired, using the visibility as a protective shield.

We had to get right up to the grain elevator before its commanding presence was felt. Others had departed to our left and right flanks and approached the buildings surrounding our main goal. We all reached our objectives without a shot being fired. The first goal was met with success. I led my men and crept towards the wide doors leading into the front entrance of the first floor. Other squads headed towards the ladders and metal staircases on both ends outside the building. They would clear the second, third, and fourth floors while we cleared the first.

Entering into the first floor, my squad walked into a huge open room with a maze of conveyer belts. On the floor, an occasional snowdrift had developed through the holes where windows or doors once stood. Little piles of wheat dotted the floor like islands, and boot prints were everywhere. Gehring, Kroll, and Harmel spread out towards the left sidewall, while Ulrich and I crept towards the right wall. With our guns up and ready, we advanced halfway through the factory room before discovering the first bodies. The previous massacre soon painted a bright picture. Ulrich and I discovered a German that had taken a knife to the back. He was lying face down on top of a wheat pile. That wasn't what made it an unusual sight. He was naked from the waist down. His boots were off, and his left leg up to his ankle had a pair of Russian pants on.

Moving on without saying a word, we approached an increasing number of bodies working our way towards the back wall. Most of them were our own men. One Russian was intertwined with one of ours. They had both been killed while in a struggle. The Russian had his head in some kind of headlock, and our soldier had long bloody scratches down his face. Their corpses were still embraced. Another German had been cut clean in half from a grenade explosion. His top half was lying neatly on the conveyor belt, and his mouth was agape as if in a scream. His bottom half was lying next to the belt on the floor, and a trail of his guts was reaching up towards the conveyor like fingers.

The first floor contained many German bodies, but very few Russians. We had just started moving up the stairs when the first shots rang out. It was impossible to tell which floor they came from, but my squad was supposed to move on up to the

fifth floor. Once cleared, other squads would then move up to the sixth, seventh, and eighth floors. We would keep alternating and leapfrogging our way up the elevator, until every floor was in German hands. Once the firing began, we quickened our pace and climbed as fast as we could. When we were close to the fourth floor, there was a fresh German body that was dangling over the staircase. He didn't fall though, as his right arm was tangled in the railing, preventing him from falling all the way down to ground level. Meanwhile, faint gunshots and screams could be heard outside the elevator. Our flanks were now engaged in bloody house-to-house fighting that had become a little too familiar to all of us.

At the fifth floor, I slowly peaked my head around the corner. In the center of the large floor were sandbags piled up. A Russian machinegun was set up there pointing directly towards my doorway. Another MG nest was positioned along the right wall. Spread throughout the room were more conveyors and large metal containers. However, I couldn't see a single enemy. I ordered Gehring and Ulrich to move towards the right wall and take cover. I would take the rest of the squad along the left wall. At the same time, we would assault the machinegun positions with grenades. In two groups, we were quickly advancing towards our targets when I heard the loud crack of a rifle shot. I almost fell over from the surprise of the noise as it reverberated off the walls.

We took cover behind a metal box twenty feet away from the MG. Rifle shots came at a furious pace now, mixed with the rapid fire of those damn PPSH SMGs. Bullets were flying over our heads or pinging off of the metal. I could barely make out Gehring and Ulrich on the opposite side of the room. Gehring looked at me and

nodded his head. They were pulling out grenades. I ordered Kroll and Harmel to ready more of them, and pulled out a grenade of my own. As I did so, I saw over the metal box that a Russian had appeared at the MG close to us. Most of his face was covered in shaving cream. While he was preparing to open fire, the right MG had opened up on Gehring and Ulrich's position. Ulrich was firing his MP40 in long bursts, while somehow he was controlling the recoil like he always could. Gehring threw his grenade and it exploded directly against the sandbags. However, the MG was still standing. Now, Gehring was firing his rifle to suppress the gunner while Ulrich prepared to throw his grenade. This ballet of suppressing fire and grenades was happening at my position at the same time.

I threw my grenade first, while Harmel and Kroll fired at the gunner to keep him occupied. My grenade made it over the sandbags, but flew too far. A Russian body was tossed into the air and bounced off the low ceiling, but the MG was not affected. Next, Harmel primed his grenade while a short cigarette protruded from his lips. More grenades from Ulrich and Gehring were heading towards the right gunner. Harmel's grenade landed softly on top of the sandbags and rolled over right in front of the Russian. The MG fell over and the gunner's right arm and torso took the brunt of the explosion. We quickly moved towards the nest while other squads were trying to advance up the center of the room and were pinned down by heavy SMG fire. I could still hear the right MG firing, when another two grenades went off and it was silenced. My squad was moving along the left and right walls. If we could make it to the end of the room, we would potentially cut off and surround the Russians.

My squad regrouped at the end of room. A handful of Russians came running into the back door in front of us. We were ready and waiting. I held down the trigger of my MP40 and our squad dropped them all before they could raise their weapons. Next, we would assault the Russians in the center of the room while the other squads continued to advance towards us, catching the enemy in a net of crossfire.

When firing at a rifleman from behind, I suddenly felt a tremendous blow and was lifted off the ground. I hit my head on the ground and then things went black. I woke up later and was being carried by Gehring. We weren't in the elevator. In fact, I couldn't even see the rest of the squad. Germans were slowly walking alongside us with their heads down. When I asked Gehring what happened, he told me how most of the Russians were waiting on the ninth and tenth floors. Our troops were massacred when we tried to advance, and we had to retreat. Of our assaulting force, most of the men were lost. Worst of all, Gehring told me that Kroll, Ulrich, and Harmel, each died in the attack. They all died in the fighting on the ninth floor, where Elite Russians squads were lying in wait the whole time—just waiting for us while we fought with those expendable units.

I was beginning to cry by this point, and Gehring looked at me and asked me why, telling me that I was going to be flown home with my injuries. I had survived the war. I still remember the only thing I could say to him.

"I'll never forgive myself, Gehring. The fact that I survived, that I'm going home. Instead of my men."