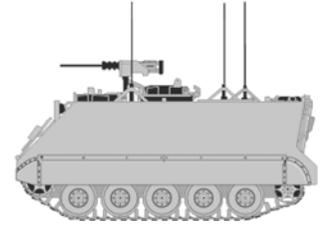


The Beans and Weenies of Death

By Roy Wnek



It was early Saturday morning, a market day, in a small farming town, somewhere in Southern Germany. The orange tones of early dawn were giving way to brightening sunshine. The air was still damp and the smells of a clear, cool autumn day were already quite noticeable.

The sights and sounds of a rural village preparing for market were everywhere. Old draft horses labored in front of ancient carts and competed for space along the narrow roads with small, beat-up Volkswagen trucks. Their under-powered engines strained under their over-packed loads. Farmers heaved baskets of produce with weathered hands while large, plainly dressed women tugged at sleepy-eyed children. With minor variations, this ritual of market day must have played out for countless generations.

But the tranquility of this pastoral scene was interrupted this morning by the clang, grind, and roar of diesel-fed metal monsters. Down the main street of this hamlet rolled a column of U.S. Army Armored Personnel Carriers or “APCs” as they were called by the green-suited men that lived within the guts of these creatures. In actuality, the creatures were large green-painted aluminum boxes. Each was the size of a large shed or small garage and noisily moved along by means of mechanical tracks, much like a bulldozer.

Aside from splattered mud and some streaks of oily grime, these rolling metal boxes looked rather clean on the outside. But inside, where their human cargo lived, it was a different story. Each APC was home for up to ten guys. And after a couple of weeks bouncing around, the inside of each aluminum box was a pungent tangle of dirt, weapons, equipment, food cans, personal articles, and tired, hungry men.

On this particular morning, these aluminum monsters had been moving since before dawn. Why they stopped in their particular town, at this particular time, we’ll probably never know. But stop they did, right along the main road leading through town.

Somewhere in the middle of the column, a young corporal sat inside of one of these metal monsters, tired and hungry like the other men around him. He was actually hungrier than the others, for while they had eaten earlier that morning, the corporal had waited.

The others had used small white plastic spoons to shovel the contents of plain dark green cans into their faces. Perhaps, it was better that they had eaten in a semi-comatose state of sleep-deprivation and in the gloom of the sparsely lit

interior; for that made them only vaguely aware of what they were eating. They ate such things as generic canned meat pressed into disks and packed in grease or green tinted lumps purported to be scrabbled eggs. Worse they had eaten these questionable delicacies stone-cold. These combat rations or “C-rations” were intended for physical sustenance during extreme conditions with minor regard for visual or taste appeal. However, they could be made tolerable enough if one could heat them up and perhaps add enough bottled hot sauce to disguise their taste.

And that is just what the corporal was patiently waiting for; he had passed up the opportunity for eating from his morning ration can until he had the chance to heat up its contents. He was issued his ration can earlier and like the others, what he had been given was selected totally by chance. Luckily, today, he had canned beans and franks, a particularly prized selection since they were a food that was actually meant to be canned and could taste quite good especially when heated.

The corporal had been holding his prized can of “Beanies and Weenies” all through the early morning hours as he and his comrades bounced around in the semi-darkness of their conveyance. When the column stopped in this rural village, he saw his chance and he knew exactly what to do. The corporal piled out of the APC with the others.

His APC was standing somewhere in the middle of the town next to a chest-high stone wall which was already crowded with civilian on-lookers. It was mostly children and old folks that watched in quiet curiosity since nearly all the younger adults were busily preparing stands and the like for market day. While his fellow soldiers stretched out their morning kinks or lit up over-due cigarettes, the corporal scrambled up on to the top of the APC. He looked around quickly and then dropped his still-unopened can of “Beanies and Weenies” down an engine exhaust pipe that extended vertically several inches above the top of the vehicle. This pipe was just wide enough for the can of rations to slide down. A metal screen located somewhere down the exhaust pipe would prevent the can from falling too far and the hot exhaust gases would heat the contents of the can just right; that is, if the can wasn’t left in there too long.

After dropping his prized can of “Beanies and Weenies” down the exhaust pipe, the corporal crawled along the top of the APC to the front where the head of the vehicle’s driver protruded from a round hatch. The corporal told the driver, a quite amiable teenager, what he had done and asked him to gun the engine in a few minutes. In so doing, the increased pressure of the exhaust gases in the pipe would push the hot can of “Beanies and Weenies” out to the waiting hands of the hungry corporal.

No sooner had the corporal made his request to the driver, when all along the column the loud voices of impatient sergeants could be heard ordering the

soldiers back into their vehicles in preparation for immediate departure. The corporal leaned over the edge of his APC and was about to plead for a moment's delay in order to retrieve his long anticipated breakfast. But one look at the angrily distorted features on the ugly face of his sergeant made the corporal wisely think twice.

The hungry corporal jumped down the large square cargo hatch that was left open at the top rear of the APC. As he stood upright, his head and shoulders just cleared the top. He watched the column starting to move like a long metal snake uncoiling amid a blue haze of diesel smoke. During the several minutes before his vehicle began moving, the corporal stared at the exhaust pipe containing his now over-heating ration can. He was frozen in place by the bellowing of his sergeant who was just climbing aboard the APC and threatening the foulest retribution to anyone who dared delay the movement of their vehicle in any way.

When the corporal heard the deep roar of his own APC's engine, he gripped the edge of the hatch to steady himself as the metal monster lunged forward. Just as the driver applied full throttle to the APC's engine, the corporal saw his can of "Beanies and Weenies" fly out the exhaust pipe. The can of "Beanies and Weenies" was quite hot, and moving with incredible force. It even appeared like the can had split open at the seam, releasing some of its steaming contents.

The corporal who was struggling to keep his balance while standing in the moving vehicle felt the enraged tug of his sergeant on his belt, dragging him down from the open hatch. At the moment the corporal was being bodily pulled back into the APC, he caught a last glimpse of his can of prized "Beanies and Weenies."

The can flew in a wide arc and landed squarely on the forehead of an extremely old man who was standing behind the stone wall. The old man immediately collapsed, with a clearly visible red ring on his forehead and the scalding contents of the can splattered all over his face.

The corporal never learned whatever happened to the old man, how bad was he hurt, or even if he might have been killed. Reporting the incident to his sergeant or anyone else in the company would only have been met with a total lack of interest and considerable laughter. But, forty years after it happened, the one-time corporal, now a retired old soldier not yet faded away, periodically wonders about that old German man. The years have made the irony so much more pronounced. This man who was obviously old enough to have survived two devastating world wars, only to be brought down by some freak encounter with the "Beanies and Weenies" of death.