

0081

vacation, for there are charming little islets scattered about the inclosed sea where one could live secure from interruption. The telegraph boy would have to come in a boat, and one could easily kill him while he was making his landing.

Vol. 41, No. 243, pp. 12-19

DER ARME DOLMETSCHER
JULY 1955
 by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

In 1955, Kurt Vonnegut, then a General Electric employee and an aspiring novelist, recalled an episode from his Army days.

I was astonished one day in 1944, in the midst of front-line hell-raising, to learn that I had been made interpreter, *Dolmetscher* if you please, for a whole battalion ...

It had never entered my head that I had what it took to dolmetsch ... While a student, I had learned the first stanza of *Die Lorelei* by rote from a college roommate, and I happened to give those lines a dogged rendition while working within earshot of the battalion commander ...

Two hours later, the company clerk told me to lay down the buckets, for I was now battalion interpreter.

Orders to move up came soon after. Those in authority were too harried to hear my declarations of incompetence. "You talk Kraut good enough foah us," said the executive officer. "Theah ain't goin' to be much talkin' to Krauts where we're goin'" ...

One [soldier] handed me a pamphlet purporting to make German easy for the man in the foxhole.

"Some of the first pages are missing," the donor explained ... "Used 'em for cigarette papers," he said ...

I examined each of [the pamphlet's] precious pages in turn, delighted by the simplicity of transposing English into German. With this booklet, all I had to do was to run my finger down the left-hand column until I found the English phrase I wanted, and then rattle off the nonsense syllables printed opposite in the right-hand column. "How many grenade launchers have you?" for instance, was *Vee feel grenada vairfair habben zee?* Impeccable German for "Where are your tank columns?" proved to be nothing more troublesome than *Vo zint cara pantzer shpitzen?* I mouthed the phrases: "Where are your howitzers? How many machine guns have you? Surrender! Don't shoot! Where have you hidden your motorcycle? Hands

0081

up! What unit are you from?"

The pamphlet came to an abrupt end, toppling my spirits from manic to depressive. [The pamphlet's donor] had smoked up ... the pamphlet's first half, leaving me with nothing to work with but the repartee of hand-to-hand fighting ...

Twenty minutes later ... four Tiger tanks drove up to the front door of Headquarters, and two dozen German infantrymen dismounted to round us up with submachine guns.

"Say sumpin'," ordered the colonel, spunky to the last.

I ran my eye down the left-hand columns of my pamphlet until I found the phrase which most fairly represented our sentiments.

"Don't shoot," I said.

A German tank officer swaggered in to have a look at his catch. In his hand was a pamphlet, somewhat smaller than mine.

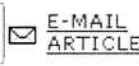
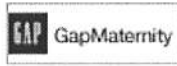
"Where are your howitzers?" he said.

Vol. 196, No. 1, pp. 86-88

Pages: 1 | [2](#) [next](#)

What do you think? Discuss this article in [Post & Riposte](#).

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY



Digg



del.icio.us



reddit

[What's This?](#)

Copyright © 2007 by **The Atlantic Monthly Group**. All rights reserved.
The Atlantic Monthly; May 2007; Humor; Volume 299, No. 4

[Home](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Back Issues](#) | [Forum](#) | [Site Guide](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Search](#)