

Rat Race to STUTTGART

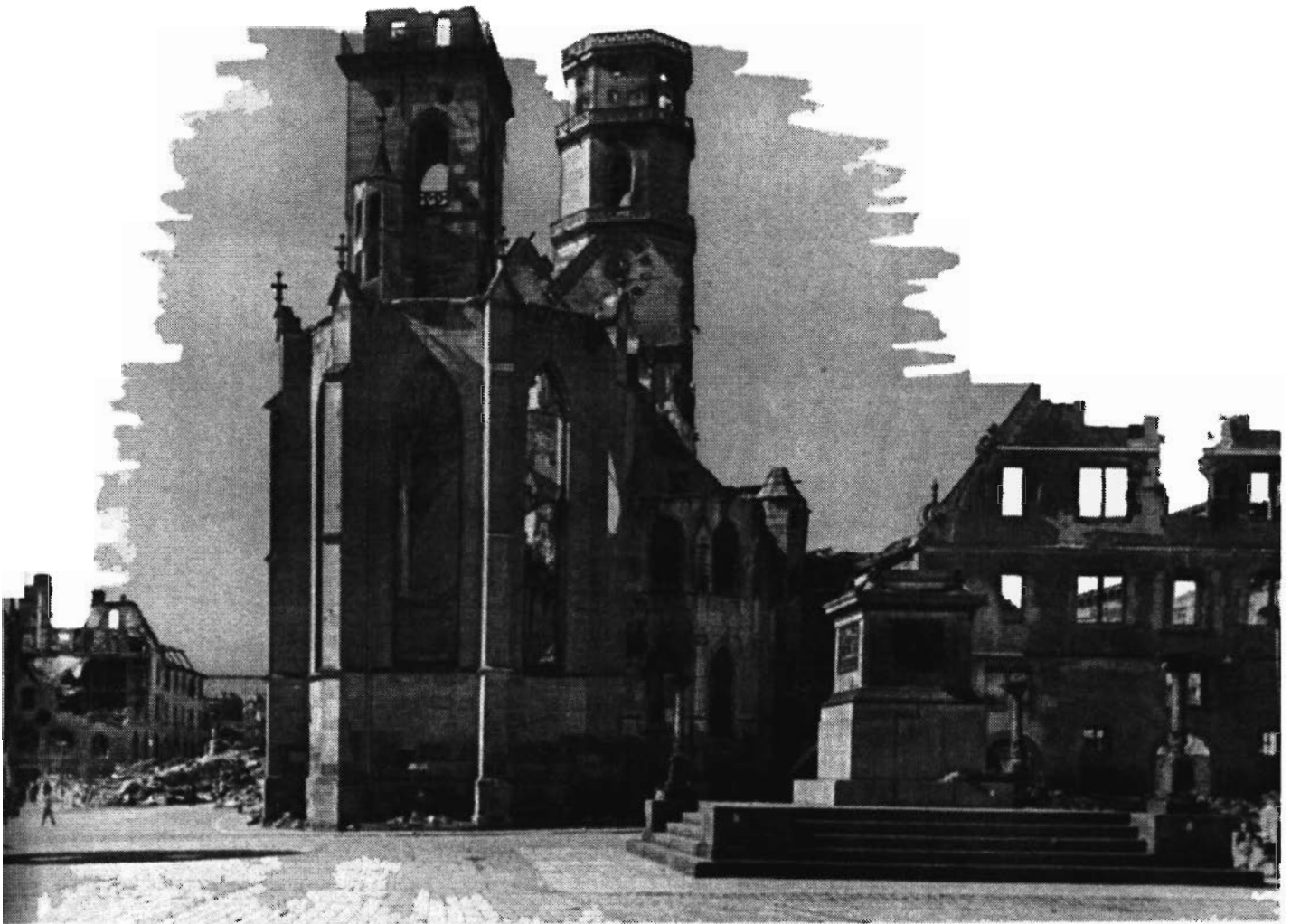


The 399th had broken the ring around Heilbronn by overrunning the hills to the East and the valley MLR to the South. From now on it was called the Rat Race to Stuttgart. *But all ratraces start slow, on foot and stomach.*

Sgt. John Delonas led an Easy patrol to capture the hilltop stronghouse at dawn. Easy Company pushed across a vineyard and an orchard to link up with George who had already kicked off toward Talheim. Running a 500 yard gauntlet of machineguns and mortars George and Easy burst into Talheim and mopped up all enemy by 0900.

The Red Raiders jumped off before dawn for a big crescent of woods bending between Flein and Donnbronn. Able went in the Flein end, and Charlie went in the Donnbronn end to crash through toward a junction in the middle. Able plunged into the wooded crescent and was stopped cold by a heavily defended roadblock in a narrow waist of woods. German SP's started pouring stuff in.

"One of our outposts called for fire on a house full of krauts to the right of the woods. So the tankers come up to fill a house to the left of the woods full of 76's and the tankmen go in on foot with Thompsons to shoot up the house inside and out."



“**A**nother day, another town”



"When they got all through and back to their tanks, on the radio they heard 'When the hell are you tank jockeys gonna fire at this house, there are millions of krauts running around in and out'."

Tank Destroyer fire finally smashed the roadblock and Able slugged through a mile of woods, firing every step of the way.

Charlie Company got split up and surrounded by tenaciously-fighting green German marines. A terrible firefight resulted before Lt. George Everett came up on a Sherman to wipe out four machineguns and smash the encirclement.

"The forests of the Württemberg hills in Southern Germany were days of clucking cuckoos and running deer and death. We thought the cuckoos were clocks in some unseen town till they started striking 14 times. Plenty of times we could have shot half a dozen deer without even aiming. They pranced right in front of our tensed skirmish lines in the woods. The Germans were tougher hunting."

Afternoon of April 15th Easy and George Companies sent out task forces with TD's and Shermans to capture the two patches of woods between Talheim and Schozach. The raider force captured 15 Germans in buildings between the two woods, and George Company moved into the edge of woods commanding Schozach.

George went after Schozach on the 16th. The 1st and 2nd platoons ran a gauntlet of heavy stuff through a draw to get into Schozach with the armor while the 3rd platoon was pinned and pounded on high ground outside of town. Pfc Robert Barker, although wounded three times, held command of the 3rd platoon and finally led it into Schozach. Cpl Robert Brunet of the Medics took care of all the wounded on the shell-swept hill. Another day, another town.

The 1st Battalion pushed out of the woods to take Untergruppenbach with its medieval Citadel and tiny Wustenhäusen, towns just short of the Reichsautobahn between Heilbronn and Stuttgart. The Mayor of Abstatt across the Superhighway called up to say the town was ready to surrender so the 2nd platoon of Charlie took off at breakneck speed in two jeeps and trailers.

A cub liaison plane steered the racing task force out of one ambush by dipping low over the jeeps and yelling over the loudspeaker, but they ran into another invisible ambush outside Abstatt. Cpl Michael Escalera fired the .50 machinegun on his jeep while the platoon dove for a ditch. All day long the pinned Charlie doughs fought it out with the ambushers until Pfc Spence of Dog Company made a break for it and brought back Baker Company to rescue them.

"We used to call Baker Company the Fighting Irish. They were led by a bunch of officers named Flanagan, Sullivan, Reid, Leahy, Everett, and Snow, and didn't know what it meant to be scared."

The Regimental front on April 17th faced South 15,000 yards between the Neckar River and Unterheinriet. Grand strategy called for a breakthrough in the deep forested hills on the left flank which dominated the Reichsautobahn and the entire far flung Neckar Valley.

The thickly wooded, deer-filled hills south of Unterheinriet form a forested hand with extended fingers clutching westward toward the Neckar with the thumb at the bottom. The little finger is the hill Vohenlohe with a staunch medieval castle sitting at the end.

The second and third fingers are the twin wooded ridges of Steinberg, the index finger is called Kubelsteige, and the massive thumb is the mountain Fohlenberg.

Sgt R  al Parenteau of Able took a patrol up into the deep forests of Vohenlohe to capture the castle and set up an OP right across a checkerboard draw from silent Steinberg and mighty Fohlenberg on April 16th. The Regiment jumped off April 17th on the proposed breakthrough in a column of battalions — Red, Blue, and White. The 3rd Battalion had been released from duty with the 35th AAA Brigade and was moving up. A Provisional Recon Squadron held the thin line between Untergruppenbach and the Neckar as the 399th packed its punch. Baker's objective was the woods-locked town of Helfenberg. Able went after Steinberg and the town of Helfenberg in the valley below. Tankers and TD's were unable to penetrate the forest barrier into which the Red Battalion advanced. Baker ran into a canyon ambush outside Gagernberg and withdrew under shellfire. Able also ran into an ambush — 10 machineguns entrenched in a perimeter.

"We were moving out toward the end of Steinberg ridge right across the draw from medieval Vohenlohe castle when 1st scout Richard Watson came running back with a bullet in his nose. Everybody dove for a tree except Thomas Pitzer, R  al Parenteau, Raymond McIntire, and Herbert Rice. They ran from tree to tree firing while the frantic krauts opened up with all their machineguns and snipers. Those four daredevils wiped out four machineguns with their entire crews when snipers killed squad leaders R  al Parenteau and Raymond McIntire. Pitzer kept going like a madman, shooting up another MG nest and the two snipers before he finally got hit. Pitzer got a DSC, when all four of them deserved the CMH. All day long they shelled us — pinpoint mortars, big mortars, and canvas-ripping SP guns that knocked the trees down on us. Lying there in the warm breeze and sunshine we could see the castle 300 yards across the draw being knocked apart by the shells, the big Citadel of Untergruppenbach in the hazy distance, and the tower overlooking Heilbronn way off in the west. It was too beautiful a place to die."



View from Fohlenberg across the far flung Neckar Valley front . . . "It was too beautiful a place to die"

824th. Tank Destroyers lined up on a high ridge dominating Gagerberg and blazed a machine-gun and 90 millimeter tracer trail into the town as Baker doughboys moved up for a night assault. James Wright and Robert Reynolds wiped out the automatic weapons guarding the entrance to town and Baker overran Gagerberg.

At 0600 of April 18th the Blue Battalion was thrown into the battle of the Five Fingers. In the early mists of dawn King Company overran German outposts on Steinberg and jumped off against

1st objective Kubelsteige (the index finger) and final objective Fohlenberg (the thumb).

The forward slope of Steinberg bent down in a colorful patchwork quilt of farmland gardens dotted with tiny shacks. In the middle of the big valley below was the forested hill Kubelsteige, and beyond rose the steep slopes of majestic Fohlenberg.

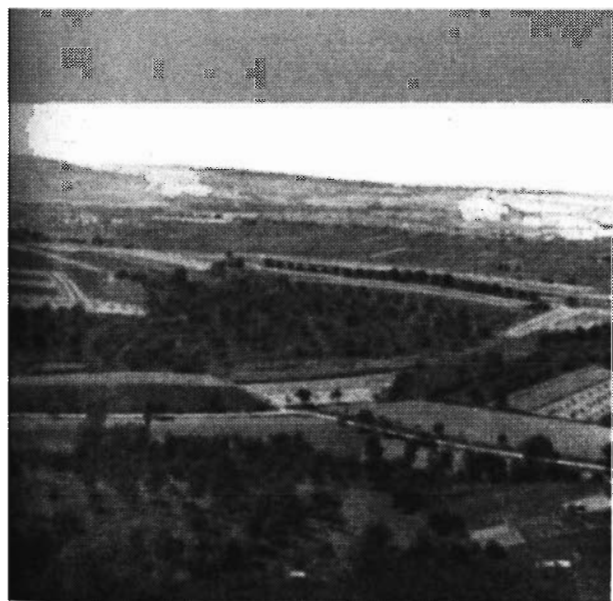
In the poem "Charge of the Light Brigade" 600 soldiers rushed into the Valley of Death. 602 Blue Battalion doughs moved down through the precipitous vineyards of Steinberg into the Kubelsteige valley of death.

King and Item slugged through the thick forest of Kubelsteige under shellfire and machineguns. Mike-gunner Glenn Estes knocked out a machinegun on Item's left flank that had been pouring heavy fire into the battalion. King and Item started the long attack up Fohlenberg, Love and Mike started the long descent down Steinberg.

"All the artillery in Southern Germany opened up simultaneously. Umbrellas of chopping mortars, full volley 88's, ripping SP's blasted the four alphabetical line companies on the exposed hillsides. A hundred guys yelled 'Medic' at once but there weren't a hundred Medics. George Demopoulos and Jack Williams were everywhere patching guys up. A platoon of Mike went into that deep ditch in the Kubelsteige woods and only four came out. Everybody was just waiting for the one with his number on it."

130 shells did have numbers on them.

Peaceful valley -- of death



"From Beilstein Castle 80 German OCS with automatic weapons charged up through the terraced vineyards" ... King was king of the mountain



The attack went on. The line companies stood up in the bursting shells and charged ahead. King and Item slugged up to the wooded summit of Fohlenberg Mountain, Love and Mike waded through Kubelsteige.

Then came the counterattack. From Beilstein Castle over behind Fohlenberg 80 German OCS with automatic weapons charged up a winding trail through the terraced vineyards toward the summit. There were only a handful of doughboys on top, and ammo was low as the enemy blanketed the summit with stunning mortars and crackling machinegun fire which clipped into 3rd Battalion foxholes.

"Lt. Marcel Novotny was commanding King's spearhead 2nd platoon, and when he was killed in the counterattack, many of the doughfeet lost confidence and started running back off of Fohlenberg. The battle was hanging in the slim balance when Sgt. Emory Yount of King stood up with his cradled .30 machinegun, crouched defiantly in the hail of enemy fire, and riddled the attackers.

Every Joe who stayed on top and fought it out was a hero. Pvt. Joe Chuey poured steady fire into the German ranks and the fanatical Hitlerite officer candidates were slowed to a cautious sniping advance. When Lt. Warren Behrens took a squad to the right flank firing every bullet they had left, the Germans broke and retreated down into Beilstein."

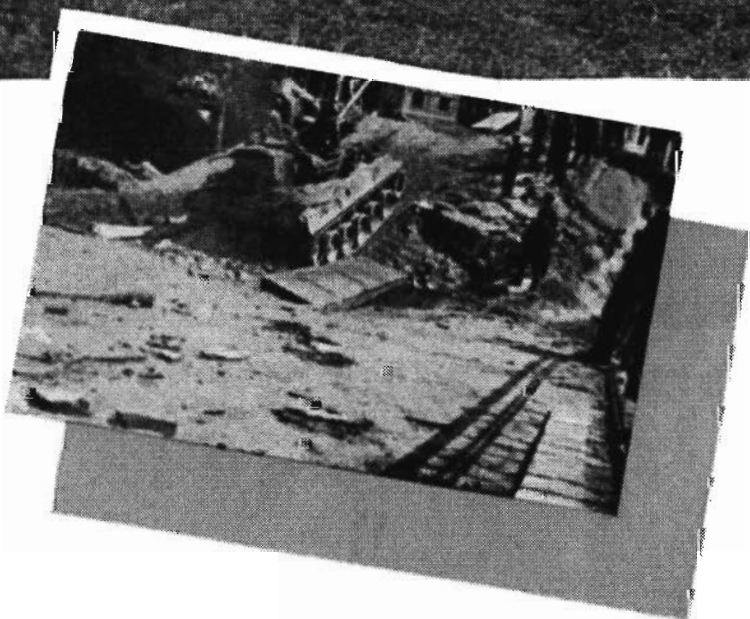
The Blue Battalion had captured the thumb of the hand, the mountain commanding the 15,000 yard Regimental front. They had smashed the German defense line east of the Neckar. They had opened the way to Stuttgart, Munich, the Brenner Pass. They were awarded the Presidential Citation.



The Blue Battalion attack moved from Steinberg (right) to Kubelsteige (lower left) and then up Fohlenberg (upper left) ... 130 numbered shells fell in the vineyards

*"Engineers threw a quick bridge
across the blown Murr River...."*

*"They had smashed the German line east
of the Neckar"....Smile, sucker, smile*



*"....and the rat race continued
southward toward Stuttgart"*

When the Pyrric thumb fell the rest of the 399th went to work. Able and Charlie spilled over from the forested hand into the valley floor below, overrunning the towns of Helfenberg, Abstatt, Sohlbach, and Auenstein. Blue Battalion night patrols probed the reverse slope before Beilstein without meeting the beaten enemy and at 0830 of April 19th Item's 2nd platoon thrust down to capture Beilstein and its Castle under rear guard sniper and mortar fire. *The enemy was fleeing southward.*

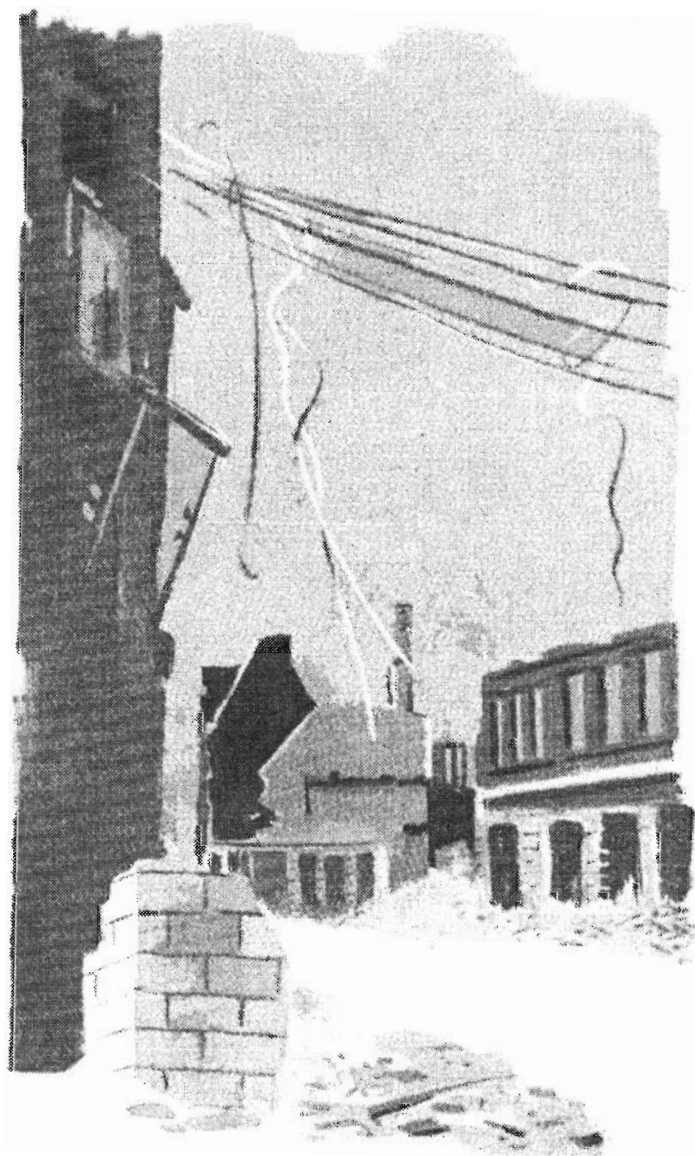
On April 20th the entire Regiment with Red, White, and Blue abreast jumped off driving straight south in a giant three-sweep pincers. Blue with strong armor busted through Oberstenfeld to meet White who had swung down from jumpoff Prevorst. Red kicked off from Nassach and made a broad sweeping scimitar through Kurzach and Altersburg to link up with the other two attacking battalions. By noon the advance was assuming Rat Race proportions, and the Red and White Battalions in parallel armored columns raced for Backnang to the southeast. By 1300 Red had taken the city and White was in a raging fire fight on the outskirts.

The 325th Engineers threw a quick bridge across the blown Murr River in urban Backnang and the rat race continued southward toward Stuttgart. The Red Raiders buttoned up Marbach rapidly and raced for Hertmannsweiler. Lt. William Kizer's churning Sherman tank was the spear, carrying Baker's 1st platoon.

"We spotted another convoy of GI vehicles racing for Hertmannsweiler along another road. We figured it was another battalion and began putting on steam as we rounded the last corner in sight of a Standard Oil Station. All of a sudden a 75mm gun invisible under a camouflage net roared and blew a hole in our tank from 75 yard range, killing a lot of boys. Then the German crew jumped into the GI vehicles and took off, while we were lying there on the road, stunned, with no rifles, helmets, or grenades. Then Wild Bill Sullivan and his boys went into town shooting along with the tankers who were firing Thompson subs."

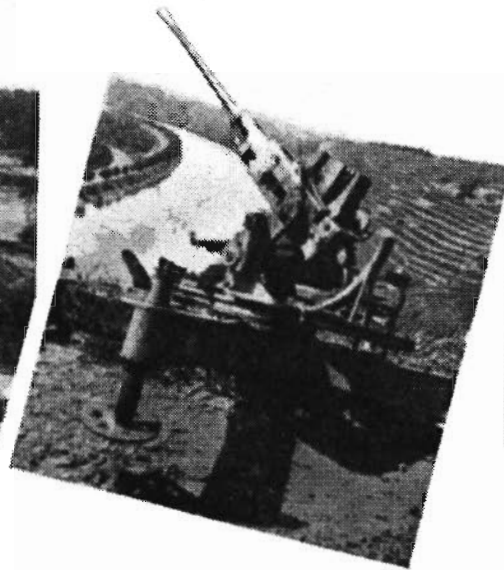


Wild Bill Sullivan and Hertmannsweiler . . . an Irishman feared no hundred Germans





"The Neckar loomed nearer"



Darkness and artillery broke up the advance as the 2nd and 3rd Battalions roared up through Backnang. *The 399th in one day had cut off 270 square miles of Germans between Backnang and the snaking Neckar.*

At midnight our outposts picked up two German priests who said the enemy were trying to blow the Buchen and Zipfel River bridges in the next large city of Winnenden. Fearing more German treachery, Baker kept one as hostage and led the other into Winnenden with a gun in his back. Two 2500-pounds bombs were removed from the bridges before the surprised enemy could pull the switch. *The 925th Artillery had set big Winnenden afire with white phosphorus barrages, and the 399th stormed in to clean out the city in the glare of the blazing buildings.*

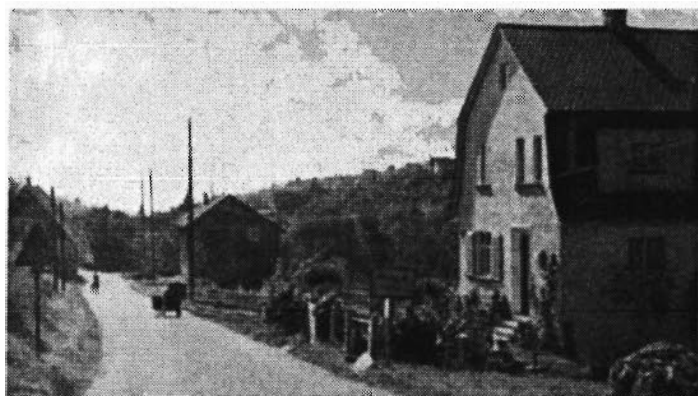
April 21st Blue and Red kicked off south again toward Corps objective Neckar River to cut off Stuttgart. Blue captured a Volksturm company after a firefight in Korb; Red roared through Hanweiler and drove toward Klein-Heppach. Item crushed small arms before Waiblingen and seized two bridges spanning the Rems River. Charlie grabbed Rems bridges at Beinstein and Able pivoted through Charlie to seize Endersbach. Blue overwhelmed Rommelshausen and the two battalions sprang pincers on Stetten.

Stetten was due East of Stuttgart. German stragglers trying to escape from the French through Stuttgart's back door infiltrated the Blue Battalion, making them fight twice for the same ground.

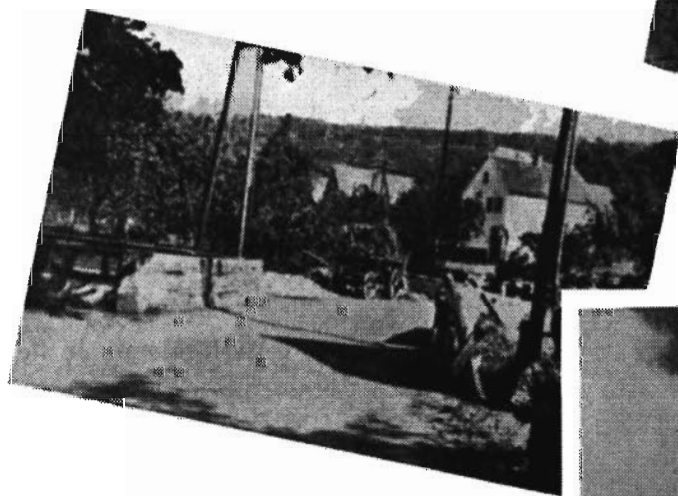
The Neckar loomed nearer. Able took Lobenrot, Baker and Charlie grabbed Schanbach, the 3rd Battalion chased an enemy column through woods between Rommelshausen and Waldenbronn.

"We had been fighting all day with rear guard Germans, when somebody heard a rumor that Waldenbronn was safe. It was pitch dark as we walked out of the woods, past a burning road block into the apple blossom scented valley of Waldenbronn. The TD's

Wäldenbronn King's last fight



c'était la guerre!



"Item captured Esslingen's 60,000 with two platoons"



were moving in the middle of the road with a column of men on each side. Then a big explosion from right out front and I look over and there's no more right column. Machineguns, burpguns, and panzerfausts opened up and combat CO Captain Batrus was one of the many casualties.

April 22nd was the clincher. On the right Fox stormed Rotenberg after a daring entrance by Lt. Martin Quinlan's platoon had captured 100, George grabbed off Uhlbach, and White patrols reached the Neckar at Obertürkheim and Untertürkheim. In the middle of the 399th, the Blue Battalion drove up to the river and Item Company captured Esslingen's 60,000 with two platoons. On the left Baker slashed through woods to Hegensberg, and the 1st Battalion pushed through to the heights of Oberesslingen.

The 399th lined the Neckar and awaited their next objective. *The orders never came.* April 25th the 100th Division went into 7th Army reserve after 175 consecutive days on line. The 103rd Division took up the chase into the Austrian Tyrol and the Brenner Pass.

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399th doughfeet watched the war peter out on May 8th without elation. They occupied Germany and sweated out the invasion of Japan. August 12th Japan surrendered and the doughboys relaxed.

The War was over...

