



Major Bill Garden

# **Boxcars and Burps**

*Easy Does It*



*Craig Davison  
Bill Law*



Major Bill Law



Captain Craig Davison

**Baccarat, France, November 1944**  
**Raon l'Etape, France, November 1944**  
**St. Blaise, France, November 1944**  
**Sparsbach, France, December 1944**  
**Rothbach, France, December 1944**  
**Mouterhouse, France, December 1944**  
**Guising, France, December 1944**  
**Rimling, France, January 1945**  
**Hottwiller, France, January 1945**  
**Holbach, France, March 1945**  
**Bitche, France, March 1945**  
**Waldhausen, France, March 1945**  
**Pirmasens, Germany, March 1945**  
**Neustadt, Germany, March 1945**  
**Ludwigshaven, Germany, March 1945**  
**Mannheim, Germany, March 1945**  
**Weisloch, Germany, April 1945**  
**Hillbach, Germany, April 1945**  
**Heilbronn, Germany, April 1945**  
**Bad Constantt, Germany, April 1945**  
**Ulm, Germany, May 1945**  
**Goppingen, Germany, May 1945**  
**Stuttgart, Germany, August 1945**  
**Ditzingen, Germany, October 1945**

# Prologue

This story of Company E covers its day-by-day fight in France and Germany to the end of WWII and victory. It describes the how, where, and when of the history. This prologue tells both the light and dark sides of the combat experience.

Combat impacts deeply on the life of a young civilian-turned-soldier. It is an experience different from any he will ever face . . . and one he will forever remember.

Combat transforms the relationships between soldiers. Despite race, religion, social, or economic differences, everyone becomes his brother's keeper. They protect, share, help, and watch over one another. Comrades in trouble are rescued, often at great personal risk.

Combat stimulates the body to high energy and endurance levels which are impossible in civilian life. The mind also responds and attitudes become more confident, trusting, resolute, and cooperative. Unit survival depends on the power of teamwork and the need for harmonious interaction.

Combat leadership includes a quality that saves lives. It is seldom commented on, but every rank in the infantry knows it exists. The infantry leader's motto is "Follow me." In battle, this means that leaders do not send their men where they themselves would not go, and do not ask them to do what they would not. In combat, out of necessity, men who have never been formally trained to do so have taken over leadership of a unit either voluntarily or by designation, but all know the importance of leadership by example.

Combat means facing death every day. Dealing with death each day translates into contending with fear every day. That's the indescribable dark side of combat. The body reacts with a clammy sweat.

Combat is keeping in visual contact with the enemy so he doesn't surprise you, and seeking favorable positions from which to attack him.

Combat is the constant suffering from personal discomforts. Most of the time, day and night, the soldier is outside. He is exposed to weather that is too hot, too cold, rainy, snowy, or windy.

Combat is marching incredible distances on terrain that is muddy, sandy, icy, steep, wet, or all

of these. The infantryman wades ice-cold streams or stinking swamps up to his armpits, and has no chance of changing his clothes afterwards. The result is utter exhaustion with blistered, bloody feet, and chafed, bleeding skin.

Combat finds soldiers constantly seeking cover and digging foxholes. Even without being hit by bullets or shrapnel, it means bruises, scrapes, cuts, punctures, and sores. With only their feeble entrenching tools, helmets, or sometimes bare hands, soldiers bore through rocks or frozen earth when digging for their lives. Combat means sharing a very small hole in the ground with your buddy, taking alternate turns sleeping and staying awake.

Combat is doing without food and sleep for days, and often having diarrhea. It is wearing clothes and boots all day and sleeping with them on all night . . . without a mattress, on the cold, hard ground. It is not having a toothbrush or soap.

*Boxcars and Burps* was written in Germany following the end of WWII. It is a 16,600-word account of the nearly 180 days of combat experienced by the men of Company E, 397th Infantry Regiment in France and Germany. It was prepared by officers in the city of Ulm, Germany, while the Company performed occupation duties.

There was a serious price paid for those six months in combat. Counting replacements for men lost in action, 476 men fought in Company E. Thirty-one were killed in action, 105 were wounded in action, and 39 were officially missing in action. The reward was the everlasting pride of victory and 87 decorations for individual gallantry in combat.

After the war, when discussing their experiences, the soldiers of Company E were amazed at how dissimilar those experiences were. Soldiers viewed the same battle from different positions on the ground and at different times of day. Except for the officers, they were, at best, vaguely aware of the "big picture."

It became apparent that there was an interest in drawing together an account of the Company E combat experience. The officers and noncoms got

together several times to discuss what happened in combat. They decided to compile the significant events, and Captain Davison would write the history. It was published in *Easy Does It*, the company newspaper.

The question of including names in the history was discussed. Although not unanimous, it was decided not to include names on the basis that it was impossible to remember exactly who was involved in what action. Also, all Company E men performed heroically, so to leave any soldier's name out of the history would be unfair.

The German artillery had some very large pieces mounted on railroad carriages. They were used to destroy large areas such as supply dumps and airfields. Infantrymen knew that heavy long-range artillery often fell short of its target. One could hear these mammoth rounds in flight. You could not hear smaller-caliber rounds until after they passed because of their greater velocity; they traveled faster than sound. The railroad guns were fired at night and hidden during the day. The large shells weighed 400 pounds.

The sound in the night was unique and ominous. When the sound was perceived, it kept

coming and coming and finally lumbered overhead. The whirlwind type of rush of air was loud enough to make you feel it was almost on top of you. Sometimes the round wobbled through the air, producing an even more deadly sound. The giant rounds were descriptively nicknamed "boxcars" by American infantrymen who heard them because of the huge dimension of the sound.

The German infantry used a lightweight nine-millimeter (9mm) submachine gun with a large magazine. The weapon had an extremely rapid rate of fire—10 rounds per second. This intense firepower was used for close-in fighting. The firing of this weapon made a unique, continuous ripping sound similar to a long belch, or burp. Thus it was nicknamed a "burp gun."

The most common and ominous sounds of combat were boxcars and burps. It was therefore decided that the title of the Company E history should reflect this reality.

—Craig Davison

## Crossing the High Vosges

*Saint Blaise, France 23 November, 1944*

On 6 November 1944, a well-trained and well-equipped new company stepped in to the muddy prone-shelters and foxholes of a battle-weary unit on the front line near Baccarat, France. There were many nervous questions from the green soldiers who were coming in to the line, and sincere but tired replies by the old-timers who were being relieved. Successful in all its lesser tests, quietly, in the night, Company E began its greatest trial—combat.

We could hear our artillery pounding at Jerry and occasionally he lobbed an artillery shell our way. It seemed more like an artillery duel those first few days, and we didn't feel that we were really in the fight. On the fourth day on the line, however, we were shocked and at the same time molded into a fighting unit. Chellemi was killed that day by a German shell. It made a direct hit on his foxhole, and from that moment on, the men of Company E had something to fight for. It became *our* war and our hearts were in it as we battered German forces from Baccarat to Stuttgart in the awful months that followed—months remembered for the mountains we climbed, for blistered marching feet, for buddies we saw go down, for gnawing hunger, and for the grim humor still alive in desperate men. When they were past, we had amassed a consecutive-days-on-line score that ranked with the highest in the Seventh Army, broken only by a few days in Corps Reserve.

Talk of peace treaty rumors on the anniversary of Armistice Day echoed in our ears as Company E engaged in its first attack, and as a reserve company, we experienced our baptism of fire on 12 November. It was a withering concentration of heavy mortar shells that occurred just after our battalion (2nd Battalion, 397th Infantry Regiment) had driven the enemy from our first objective. The experience thoroughly frightened us, but it taught us how terrible artillery is and seasoned us at the same time. That baptism taught us in fifteen minutes what it takes forever to learn in garrison.

Having something to fight for, and with our baptism of fire under our belts, Company E moved out, leaving the dead and wounded for the litter bearers. We had a tough assignment, but we were moving now.

Our mission was to seize the high ground north of the key supply and communications center in the city of Raon l'Etape, on the Meurthe River. This meant clearing the Germans from their well-prepared defenses in the Vosges Mountains. The Vosges were long considered impregnable because no defender had ever been dislodged from their towering heights and deep ravines.

It is little wonder that the entire US VI Corps was stopped at the foot of the Vosges. So high and steep was the terrain that it was difficult to climb, much less fight over, and being a thick mass of old-growth forest made attack unsure and costly.

The enemy, difficult to locate in the woods and heavy undergrowth, had well-prepared, deeply dug-in positions, with snipers in front of them to harass us and slow our attack. When he got us where we were most vulnerable, he would fire from his main positions while snipers harassed us from our flanks and rear, frequently working right into our midst.



A 100th Infantry Division patrol in typical High Vosges forest, November 1944. *US Army Signal Corps (Signal Corps)*

## The 708th Volks-Grenadier Division

Although the 399th Infantry had been committed over a week before, the dense forests and steep hills of the High Vosges east of the Meurthe River provided the setting for the 100th's first combat as a division. As a unit, the defenders of this formidable terrain were as green as the American attackers.

The 708th Volks-Grenadier Division had been created in Breslau, Silesia, on 15 September 1944, built around a cadre from the remnants of the 708th Infantry Division. A coastal defense division, the 708th Infantry Division had been assigned coastal defense missions since its creation in April 1941, but had been battered into remnants in the battles in western France in the summer of 1944. It was withdrawn for reconstitution as a Volks-Grenadier Division (VGD) in August, and was trained in Slovakia for six weeks prior to being committed in the Vosges.

The 708th Volks-Grenadier Division's first mission was to relieve the 21st Panzer Division in their strong positions overlooking the Meurthe River east of Baccarat, and north to the approaches to the Saverne Gap. Although a significant number of NCOs and junior officers were veterans of the summer battles in Normandy, most of the men occupying these defensive works during the first and second weeks of November were from very different backgrounds.

Like so many men of the 100th Infantry Division, who were "retread" antiaircraft gunners, Air Corps crewmen and ASTP "whiz kids," many of the NCOs of the 708th Volks-Grenadiers were reclassified *Luftwaffe* and Navy crewmen; most of the *Landsers* (infantry soldiers), were inexperienced replacements, between the ages of 18 and 45. Nevertheless, they entered the battle at close to full strength—which, for a Volks-Grenadier Division, meant three regiments of two battalions each (although the 708th was reinforced by a battalion of the 361st Volks-Grenadiers near

Raon l'Etape) The *Landsers* were also equipped with the new MP44 assault rifle and one MG42 machine gun per squad. Thus, not numbers, not equipment, but training and leadership would make the main difference between the two units, and it would show in this first encounter of the two combat neophyte divisions.

The main elements of the 708th facing the 100th Infantry Division in the brooding Forêt du Petit Reclos came from Grenadier Regiment 748, although elements of the 100th later encountered elements of Grenadier Regiments 760 and 951 (the latter detached from the 361st VGD). Between the pounding the two southern regiments of the 708th took from the 100th in the fog-shrouded ridges of the High Vosges, and the beating the northern regiment of the 708th (Grenadier Regiment 720) sustained at the hands of a regiment of the 79th Infantry Division in its drive on the Saverne Gap, the 708th Volks-Grenadier Division was practically destroyed as a fighting entity by 17 November. The 708th's commanding general was relieved at noon on that day.

*Generalmajor* Josef Paul Krieger was a 51-year old Bavarian infantryman who had successfully commanded a regiment on the Eastern Front. A World War I veteran who had commanded infantry companies and battalions in that war, like most German officers, he had been forced out of the Army after 1919. Also like many German Army officers, until 1935, when Hitler formally repudiated the Versailles limitations on the *Wehrmacht* and began openly rebuilding Germany's Armed Forces, Krieger had served as a police officer.

After a second reconstitution, the 708th served on the north shoulder of the Colmar Pocket until February 1945, after which it was amalgamated with the 106th Infantry Division in the Black Forest in the closing days of the war.





The company fought its way forward for three days to positions north of the tiny village of Bertrichamps, leaving in its bloody wake such fortress hills as Hill 409, 417 (nicknamed “Snipers’ Ridge”), and 316. (altitudes above sea level, measured in meters on our Ordnance Survey maps.)

On 16 November 1944, the Company left positions near Bertrichamps on the last lap of attack toward Raon l’Etape. We pushed through heavy and accurate artillery fire, mortar barrages, and well-defended areas to seize the Camp d’Vacances and Hill 538, which was one of the key terrain bastions in the German Winter Defensive Line. We took the forward slope without great effort, but found the next day that Jerry intended to hold that hill at all costs. He staged a counterattack from two directions and sniped at us from vantage points around the forest. We held 538 for three hellish days while other units of the Division gained additional terrain fortresses nearby. These tactics cut off Raon l’Etape and made it possible for the Division to seize the key town and capture many prisoners.



The town center, Raon l’Etape, 1944. [Both photos on this page from *The Story of the Century (SOC)*]

We entered Raon l’Etape on 20 November and spent our first night indoors on beds since entering combat. Many thick beards were shaved off that night, for it was also our first opportunity to clean up. The next day, we marched two and a half kilometers to St. Blaise, where we remained overnight and conducted patrols.

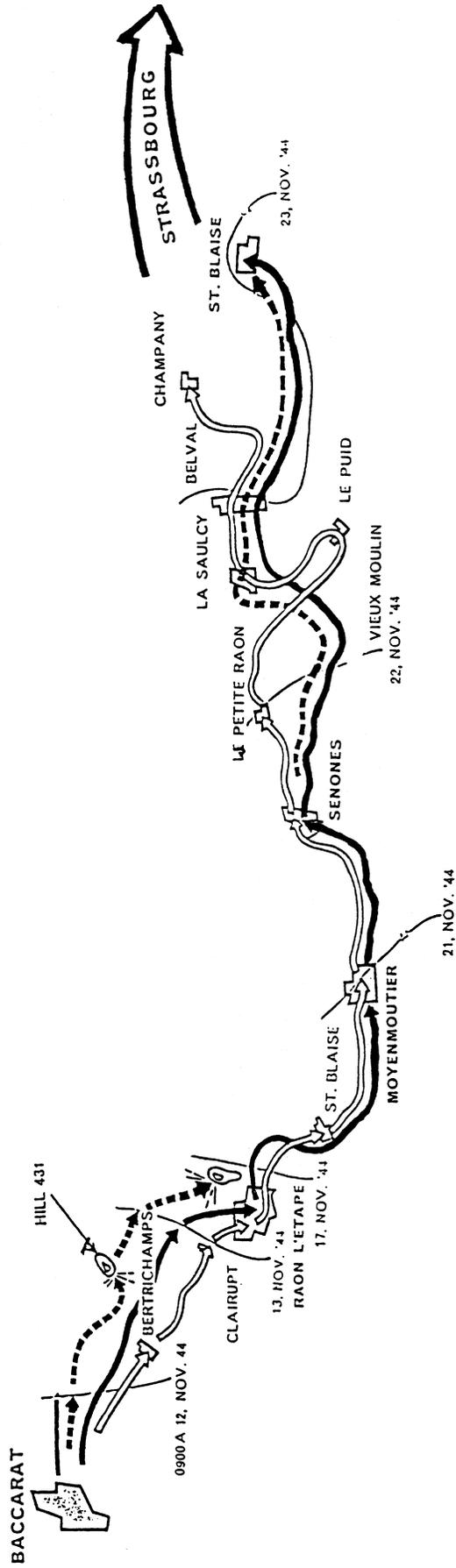
The following morning, 22 November, we pushed off at 0700 for an eight-mile march toward Vieux Moulin and encountered enemy mortar fire en route. Outposts and road blocks were set up within the town. We were hard on the heels in pursuit of the Germans and our Regiment was spearheading the attack in the Rabodeau River Valley, liberating town after town.

Men who were with the Company on 23 November will not soon forget that long, long day and night. That was the day we left Vieux Moulin at 0700 to take the high ground a few miles out of town. Here we dug in, cut logs for cover, and had just finished our positions when we were ordered to move on. After marching ten miles to the tiny settlement of Du Pont de Salm, via Le Most, Le Saulcy, and La Pârière, we completed defensive positions and road blocks in the town. At 1700, we were again ordered back to Le Saulcy to join the Battalion. Weary troops again started out, eating our Thanksgiving dinner—turkey sandwiches—on the march.

Passing through Belval and traveling all night, we reached St. Blaise-la-Roche at dawn on 24 November and took the town.\* This back-breaking road march totaled about 25 miles over steep grades in a driving rain. Few of the men realized that the battalion had breached the deadly “Wagner Line,” so called after the Gauleiter of Alsace, Robert Wagner, one of Hitler’s cronies since the early 1920s. The German 19th Army command had fully expected this belt of fortifications, constructed by forced labor units, to hold until at least the spring of 1945.

After posting local security, the exhausted soldiers of Company E rested in two houses on the outskirts of St. Blaise-la-Roche. The rest was short-lived. A guard challenged someone approaching the house occupied by the 3rd and 4th Platoons. Getting a reply in German, he fired

\*Readers should not confuse this mountain village with another, even smaller settlement called “St. Blaise,” which is just two kilometers southeast of Raon l’Etape.



**THE VOSGES MOUNTAIN CAMPAIGN**



*Snowline. (Signal Corps)*

in the direction of the voice. One Jerry was wounded, three were captured, and one escaped.

The prisoners were searched and the wounded man given aid, then all were herded into the basement under guard.

We hoped this was all and that we could finally get some sleep, but no, the same sort of incident recurred many times. By morning, we counted 23 prisoners and one good Jerry—a dead one. We discovered that we had picked a German company CP for our position.

We remained in St. Blaise-la-Roche for three days reorganizing and resting, but still conducting patrols, even while our battalion was held in Division reserve. There we ate a belated Thanksgiving dinner, abundant and delicious, to celebrate success of the Vosges Campaign—a fortnight in Hell.

# 2

## Pursuit to the Maginot

*Mouterhouse, France, 9 December 1944*

The Maginot Line was our next “big picture” objective, so we did an about-face and traveled 80 miles by truck. For two days, commencing on 26 November, we retraced our route through Raon l’Etape to Baccarat, then drove on through Blâmont, Saarebourg, and Saverne, arriving in Ernolsheim at night. There we were quartered in barns and houses. One platoon occupied a hall that German soldiers had vacated in a hurry, leaving uniforms and equipment. For the Company, Ernolsheim meant a day’s rest and our first experience with Alsatian hospitality—home cooking, local wine, and that searing poison they call *Schnapps*.

After a rainy, six-mile march, on 29 November we arrived in Weinbourg and quickly established roadblocks. On the next day, we were alerted to a possible enemy tank attack from elements of the 21st Panzer Division located in a large forest a few miles north. Our roadblocks were hence reinforced and our 3rd and 4th Platoons sent on a special mission, namely, to clear and occupy the key town to the northwest, Sparsbach, and thus protect the Regiment’s flank against the threatened tank attack.

At Sparsbach, the two platoons had their first practical experience in clearing a town and

establishing military government. Working on tips from the *FFI* (*Forces françaises de l’intérieurs*, or French resistance), they ousted the pro-Nazi town officials and reinstated, under our control, the loyal French governing body. There were also other things to celebrate, such as the appointment of the unit’s first GI Town Commandant and word of the birth of his first son that was received then.

These events were appropriately toasted with a two-day feast of “requisitioned” French chickens, steaks, and our first food packages from home. The *Schnapps* flowed freely, too. The threatened panzer attack failed to materialize, and at midnight on 2/3 December, the 3rd and 4th Platoons rejoined the Company at Weinbourg. Later we learned that soon after our men had vacated Sparsbach, the town was leveled by enemy artillery. At 0330 on 3 December, we set out for Rothbach, five and one-half miles northeast, to reestablish contact with the enemy. Rothbach was quiet except for enemy artillery; shells had been falling with methodical regularity for the past three days.

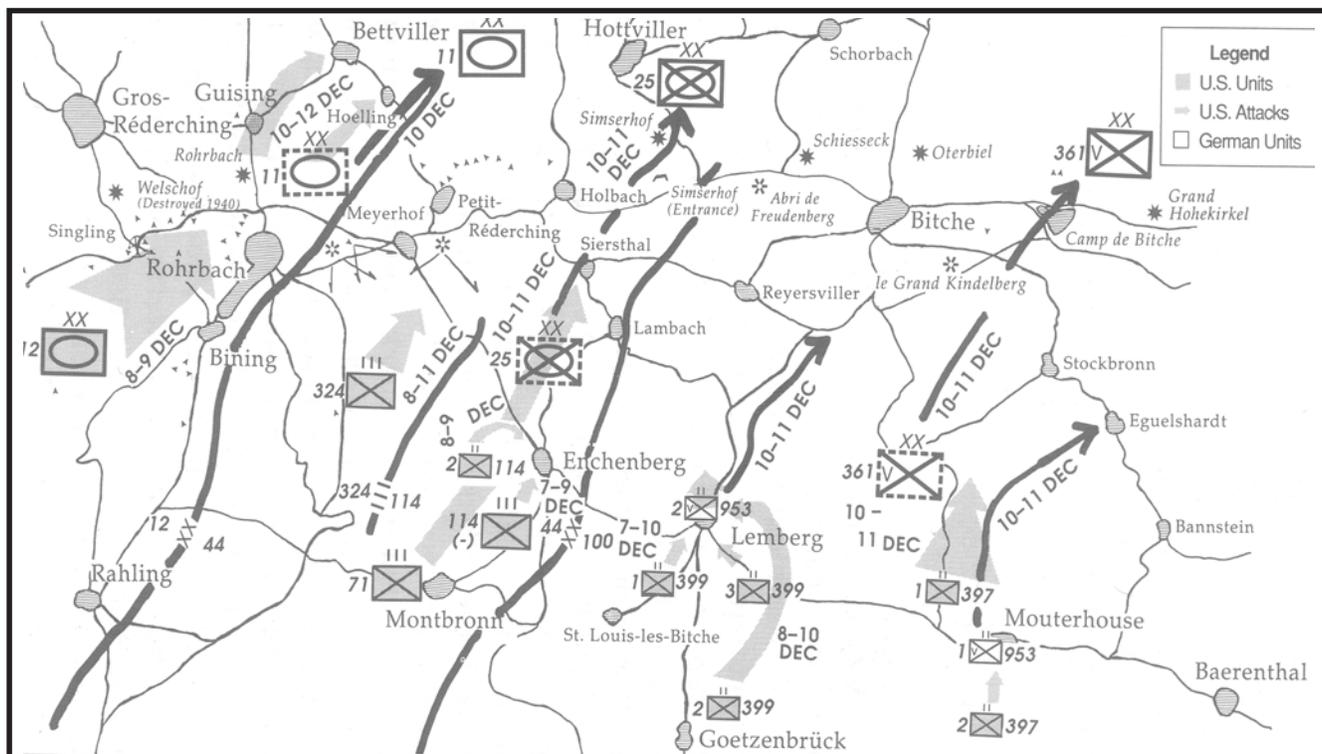
We knew we were close to an enemy with his back to the wall, on the doorstep of the “Fatherland,” and the air was electric with tenseness. We sensed the approach of a tough fight. The hours dragged by as we sweated out the coming of H-hour, 0900, 3 December.

At the very start of our attack, we were pinned down by a fanatical enemy deeply entrenched on the forward slope of Hill 369, our objective that day. The soul-jarring scream of their lighter projectiles and the deep roar of their bigger stuff, from 150mm howitzers and up, shook us to the roots of our beings. We had met some Jerry artillery before, but never like this. “Won’t those goddamn boxcars ever quit coming?”

Several attempts to flank the enemy under this barrage were unsuccessful, and we became resigned to the fact that we had met a force far superior in numbers and firepower. While digging in for the night after being ordered to the



Advance toward the Maginot Line, Winter 1944–45.  
(Signal Corps)



## XV Corps Pursuit Through the Low Vosges, Early December 1944

- \* Major Maginot fortifications (petit or gros ouvrages)
- Minor Maginot fortifications (casemates or blockhouses; direction of point indicates orientation of major weapon systems)
- \* Abris d'intervalle

right flank of the battalion zone, a new weapon terrorized us in our experience; it was our first encounter with the "Flak-Wagon." Although it was against the General and Hague conventions to purposely use against ground troops (much like our own .50-caliber machineguns), these automatic cannon, designed for anti-aircraft defense, threw 20mm explosive and tracer rounds at us in inconceivable quantities. We dug prone shelters frantically and "logged" them over with the trees Jerry obligingly felled for us with his boxcar artillery.

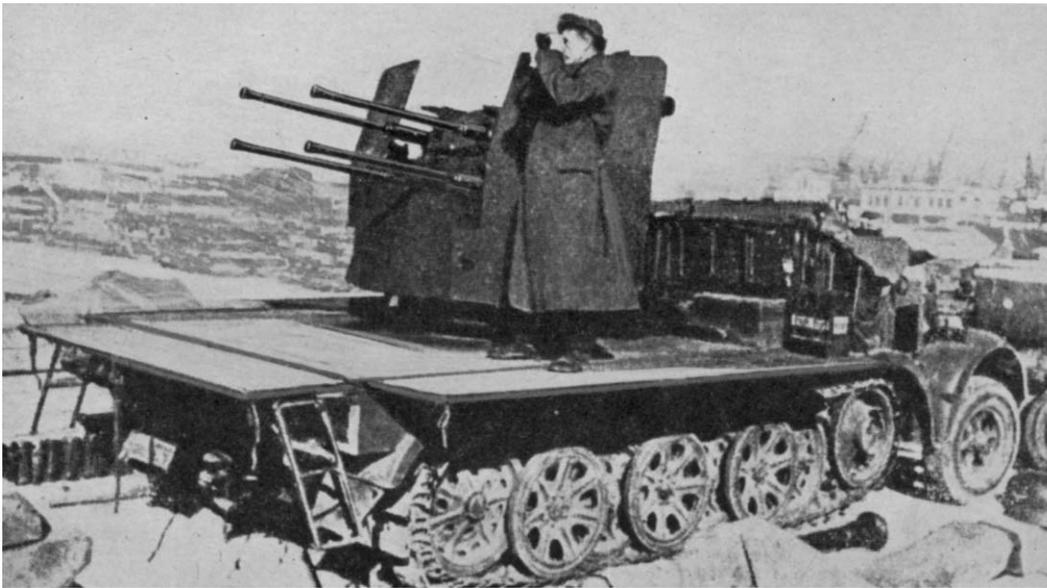
We lost our company commander that night (illness) but he returned in several days. He went back to the battalion aid station, a very sick man. The Company tenaciously held its position that day despite constant pounding by mortars and artillery.

Continuing the advance the next day, 4 December, at noon, the 3rd Platoon encountered mines and booby traps, the weapons mortally dreaded

by infantrymen. The 3rd had been ordered to a hill on the right of a highway in the battalion sector to knock out weapons supporting a roadblock that was preventing our tanks from advancing.

In marking a path through a dense anti-tank minefield, the platoon leader of the 3rd and his first scout also verified a rumor of the enemy's faulty ammunition. They tripped a "Bouncin' Betty," an S-mine that hurled itself into the air but failed to explode.

The men of the 3rd engaged in a running fire-fight, took two prisoners, and knocked out the weapons they were after. It was a large hill they had to hold, however, and while the platoon was consolidating and reorganizing on their objective, the enemy counterattacked at their weakest point. Caught off balance, the platoon's prospects were dark, but fortunately the rest of the Company arrived just in time and drove the Germans off, the objective secure. At dusk we dug in and that night learned that our original



Left: A German "Flak wagon," in this case, a Krauss-Maffei half-track with the deadly *Flakvierling* quad 20mm anti-aircraft guns. *National Archives (NA)*

Below: As part of their delaying tactics, the Germans left an abundance of mines on likely avenues of approach. These were cleared safely, but they still slowed down the advance. *(SOC)*

objective, Hill 369, north of Ingwiller, had been seized. Doing so, however, had required a whole infantry battalion (the 3rd Battalion of our own regiment), preceded by an artillery TOT mission.\* In two days, we had overrun the enemy's key defenses in the Rothbach area.

On the morning of 5 December, we began to chase the retreating Germans. The companies of the 2nd Battalion leapfrogged their way from hilltop to hilltop in their advance toward Reipertswiller. Through streams and deep underbrush, we marched up and down endless steep hills, often in sight of a beautiful unused highway that paralleled our course. This would have been faster, but much less safe; besides, the terrain features on either side of the highway were the logical places for the enemy to defend, so we were going the hard way.

We reached Reipertswiller at nightfall and our attached tanks were used for roadblocks. We turned in, tired but happy to be under a roof again. The next day, 6 December, we moved at 1330 to seize the tiny hamlet of Melch and the high ground overlooking Mouterhouse, the last major step in our drive to the Maginot Line.

Mouterhouse was a key rail supply center for the Maginot outposts and the last stand bastion before a vulnerable approach to the Line itself. The town, stretched out in a valley between two high ridges of the Low Vosges Mountains (the

\*TOT= "Time on Target," an artillery mission that combined fires from several units, firing from disparate locations, but brought all rounds together on the target simultaneously, to create a single, overwhelming effect.



Germans call this extension of the Vosges north of the Saverne Pass which crosses over into the Palatinate the "Hardt" Mountains), presented a serene picture when we first viewed it that morning on the third anniversary of Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1944. Even before we launched our attack, however, an enemy patrol infiltrated as far as our CP, and in the early dawn, a short fire fight took place, killing one of our men. After capturing two and chasing off the rest, we began our push for the town.

We advanced as far as the wooded ridge overlooking the town before the German artillery zeroed in. Their concentration was so accurate and dense that we were forced to begin digging in while the platoon leaders went forward to reconnoiter a route of approach into the town. During that time, our attached artillery FO called for fire on suspected enemy observation posts. One of

## The 361st Volks-Grenadier Division

The 100th Infantry Division first encountered the 361st Volks-Grenadier Division during the drive north from Sarrebourg toward Bitche. It was elements of the 361st that captured most of Company A/398th in Wingen-sur-Moder on 4 December, and it was this division that so stubbornly opposed the 100th's advance at Lemberg and Mouterhouse.

The first division to bear the number "361" was activated 24 September 1943 in Denmark. It was built around a cadre from the remnants of the 86th Infantry Division, which had been almost destroyed in the battle for Kursk, in the USSR, just a few months before. Replacements came from the Rhineland and Westphalia to form around this core, and after about five months of training, the 361st, commanded by *Generalleutnant* Siegmund *Freiherr* von Scheinitz, entrained for the Eastern Front.

From March to August 1944, the 361st Infantry Division fought the Soviets in Belorussia and Poland, as part of Army Group Center. By late summer, the 361st was all but destroyed, and the division was disbanded.

The second unit to bear this number was the unit which fought in the Low Vosges. It was organized as a Volks-Grenadier Division (VGD), and was built around an infantry cadre. Again, it included mostly men from the Rhineland and Westphalia, but this time, many of them were reclassified Navy ratings and *Luftwaffe* troops who by virtue of the fortunes of war, were out of a job. The ex-antiaircraft gunners, ASTP men and former Air Corps

"flyboys" who ended up in as infantrymen in the 100th Infantry Division weren't the only ones who got more than they bargained for.

The new 361st VGD's commanding general, Generalmajor Alfred Philippi, was a 41-year-old infantryman from Austria who had won the Knight's Cross for valor on the Eastern Front. Commenting on his new charges' attitude toward the Army, he remarked that few of them were enthusiastic about duty as combat infantrymen. He added, however, that, "The combination of men from Westphalia and the Rhineland proved favorable: the tough, persevering character of the Westphalian and the light temperament and verve of the Rhineland were a good mixture."

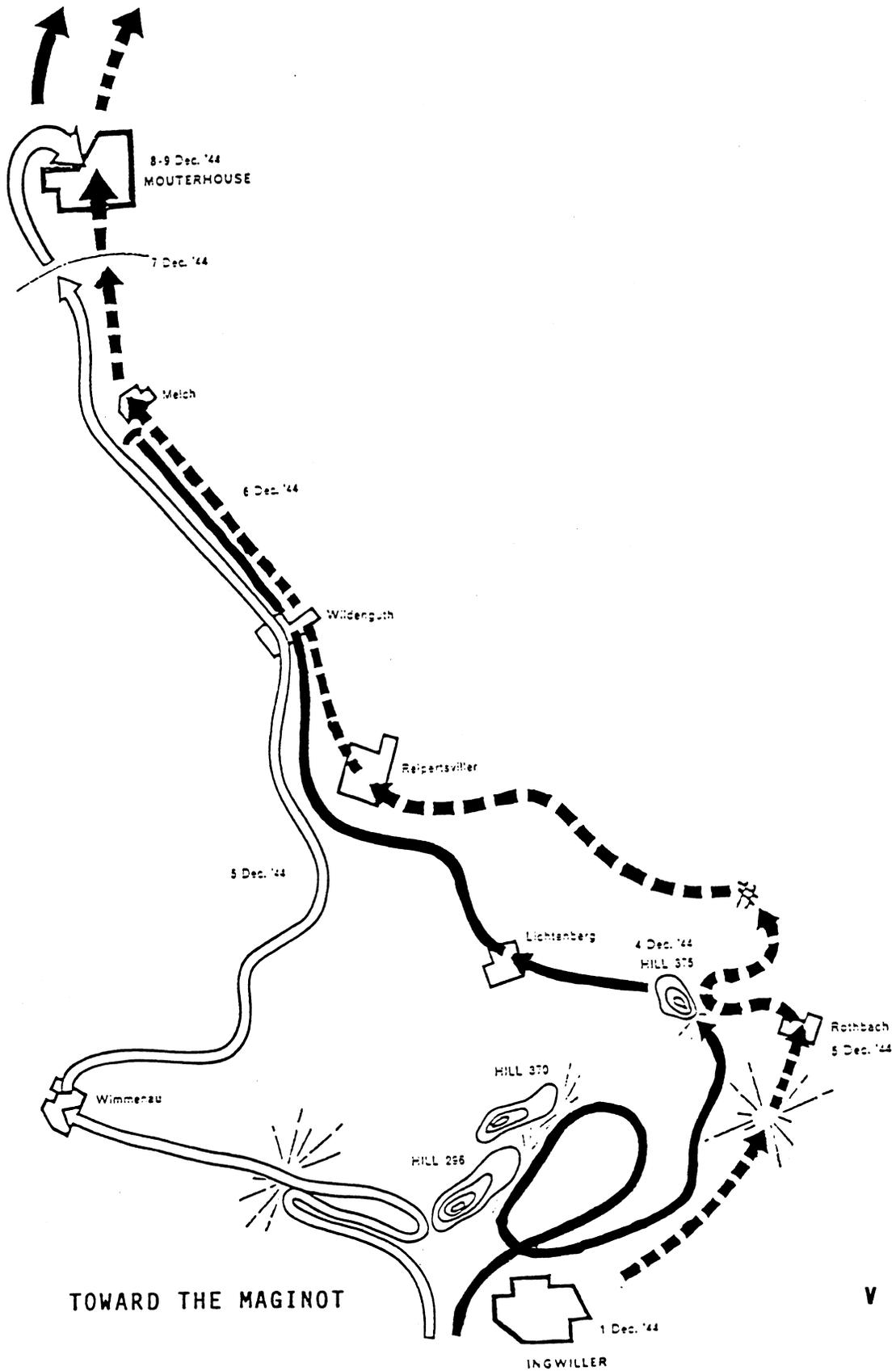
After about five weeks of training, the 361st VGD was deployed in Lorraine, fighting defensive and delaying actions against elements of the US Third Army. In November 1944, they opposed the advance of the 44th Infantry Division near Sarrebourg, and in December, they grudgingly gave ground as they fought tenacious delaying actions from south to north through the Low Vosges. After becoming familiar with the terrain between Bitche and the German border in this way, many of the 361st's leaders had a distinct advantage when they led their units over the same ground during the commencement of *NORDWIND*—an advantage that would be extremely useful when they counterattacked in early January, straight through the positions of Task Force Hudelson on the 100th's right flank!

the serious but sometimes unavoidable accidents of war occurred when our own artillery came in on us. No one was wounded, but it added to the confusion.

Our only approach to Mouterhouse lay across a hundred yards of open field covered by both sniper and machine-gun fire. One squad of the 1st Platoon managed to get into a church on the far end of the field, then a multiple-barreled flak-wagon opened up on us. The rest of the company

had to join the forward squad, however, so we faced the fire for the longest hundred yards in history. If it had not been a life-and-death struggle, our acrobatics would have seemed funny as we struggled across the slippery field at the highest speed possible under our loads of grenades, rations, weapons, and other equipment.

One man ran into a slug in the process of gaining the church and an aid man rushed to help him.



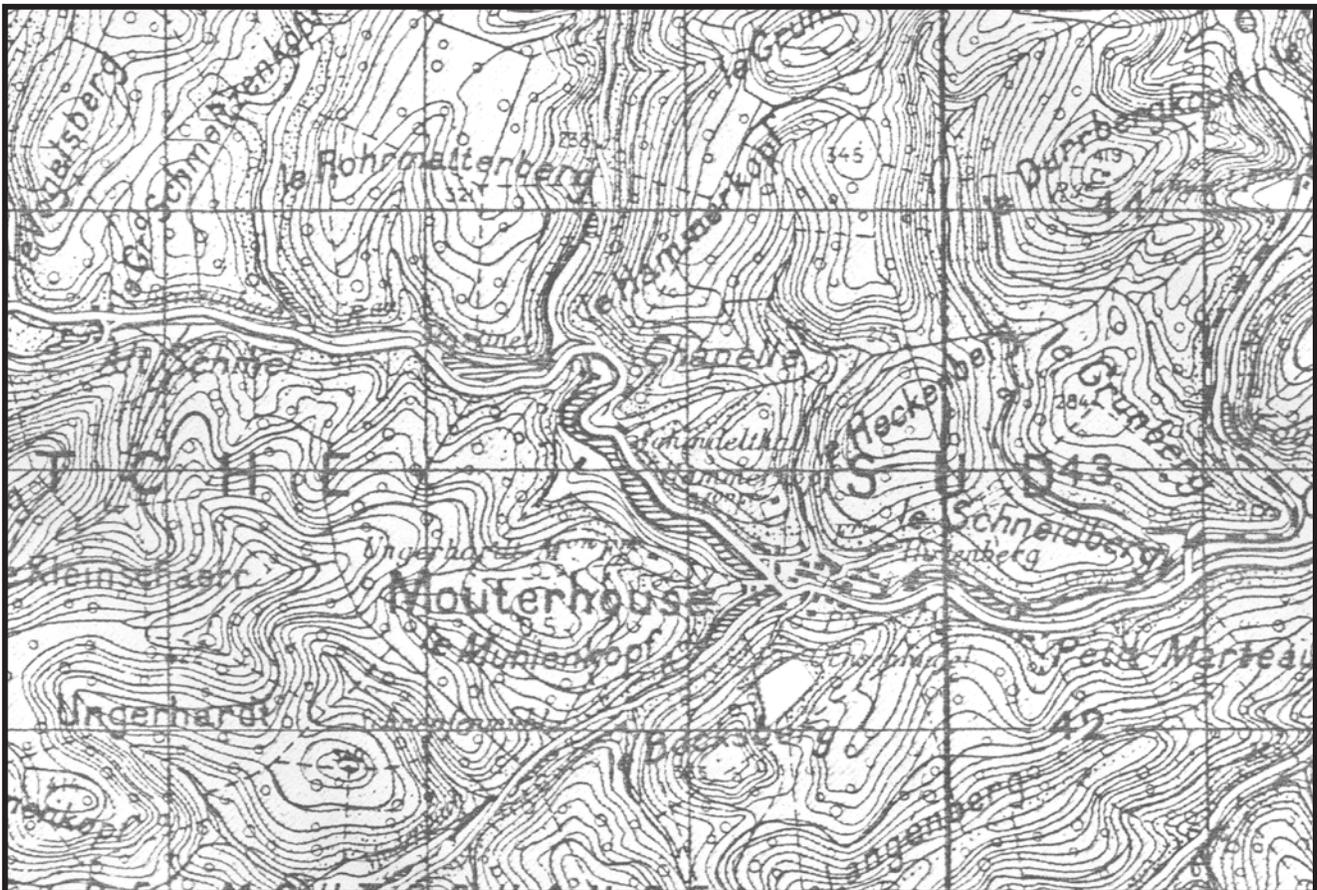
"Where are you hit?" the gallant medic asked.

The boy gasped "Stomach!" and fainted when he glanced down. The medic, too, saw a gruesome sight as he searched for the wound: a splash of reddish meat and vile fluid covered the soldier's mid-section. When the mess was brushed away, the aid man discovered that a sniper's bullet had struck a can of "C" rations the "wounded" soldier was carrying, leaving him unharmed except for the bruise from the impact of the bullet on the can. There would be no "meat course" for the otherwise incredibly lucky "casualty" that night.

Once established in the church, we set up our light machine guns and one heavy against the

murderous German flak and machine-gun fire. Our mortars, too, tried to get into action, but suitable observation posts were untenable.

Covered by machine guns, the 2nd Platoon moved from the church through a graveyard to their zone at the west end of the town. They reached the house they were to clear by ingeniously crawling down a shallow ditch and through sewers. The 3rd Platoon—with a mission of taking the eastern portion of the town and contacting Company F which was attacking on our right—was stymied when they moved from the church to the nearest house in their zone and found they had picked a house perched on a twenty-foot cliff, the side of which was being



## Mouterhouse

Scaled down extract of Map, 1: 50,000 BITCHE, Sheet XXXVII/13,  
US War Office, 1944

One grid square = 1 kilometer (.62 miles)

Contour Interval (altitude between contour lines) = 10 meters (10.9 yards, or 32.8 feet)

continually peppered by machine-gun and sniper fire. It was too “hot” to move from their house and darkness was falling, so they elected to remain there for the night.

The 1st Platoon, originally in support, moved into a house near the 3rd, and soon found itself in the same predicament; those men were “bottled up” for the night. The CP remained at the church, with the mortar section as security. The 2nd, meanwhile, was not encountering serious resistance, so they continued through western and central parts of town. Before midnight they contacted Company F, and most of Mouterhouse was ours.

It was a long night waiting for the inevitable German counterattack, but our artillery must have convinced them that we intended to stay, for their usual tactic was not employed. During the morning of 8 December, the 1st and 3rd Platoons joined the 2nd, and cleared the remainder of Mouterhouse. We consolidated our positions and dispatched patrols to the ridge north of town.

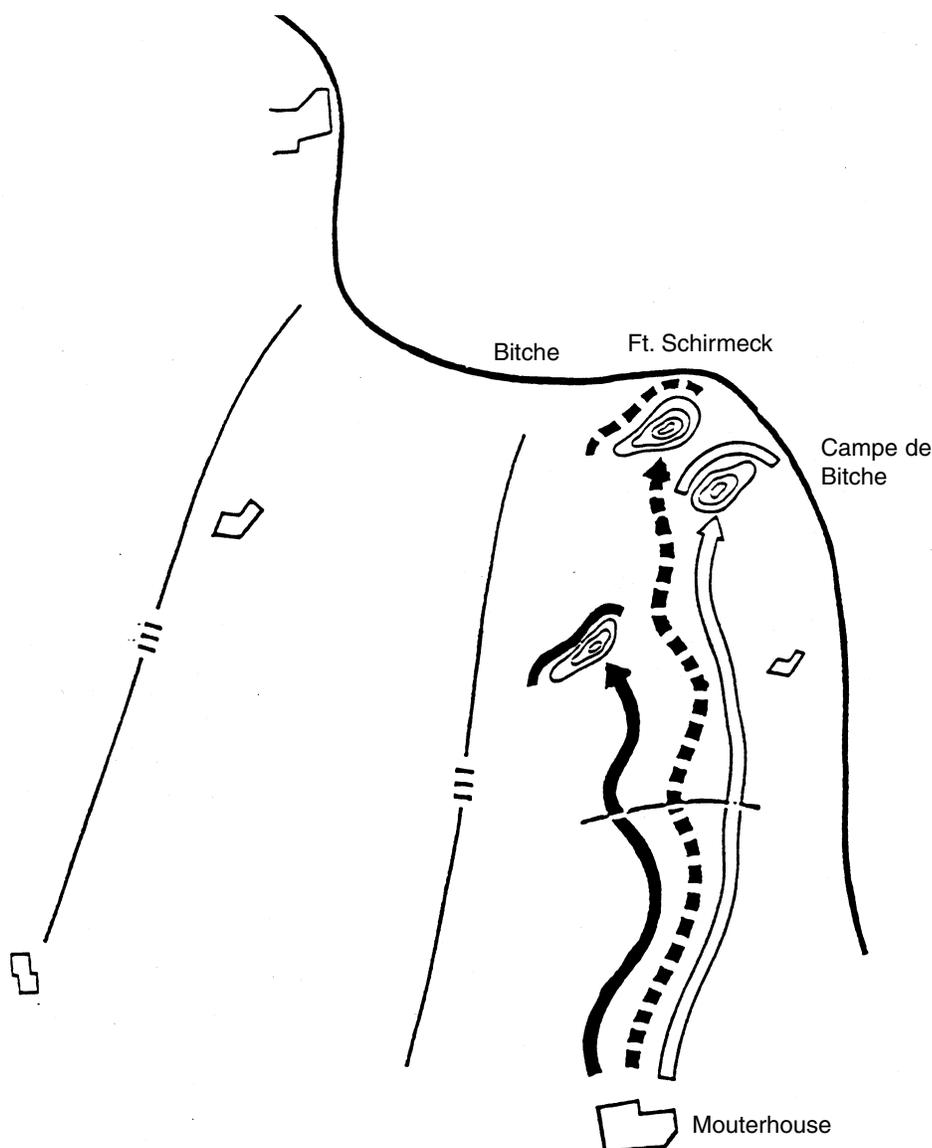
When all was quiet except for occasional sniper fire, back came the 1st Squad of the 2nd Platoon, which had left us late the previous night. Their departure in the black of night had been very mysterious. Only the company commander knew anything of their mission, and he knew very little. It was not until after they left that the men of the 1st Squad found what was planned for them. Now that they had returned, each man was surrounded by his curious buddies, eager to hear of the squad’s strange experiences. It turned out that in preparation for the attack on Mouterhouse, this group had been selected to go forward on a patrol with an officer from a heavy weapons platoon, infiltrate through the outposts and enemy positions on a flank, and secure themselves on a promontory far behind the German lines. There they were to lend protection to the officer while he observed for 4.2” mortars from the 2nd Chemical Mortar Battalion and our own battalion’s 81mm mortars. This 2nd Platoon squad moved out into territory none had seen except on their maps, and they moved through enemy positions about which S-2 had only meager information. Skillfully, they probed and searched for openings, but found the defenses well tied-in. To prevent further loss of time, it was finally decided that the best avenue of approach lay across a lake. The men crossed in freezing water up to their armpits.

The next problem was to seize a house on the high ground that was their objective. Were the Krauts on that hill, or in that house? Even if they were not ambushed, a skirmish that deep in enemy territory would arouse the entire town’s garrison and spell failure for their mission. The squad surrounded the house selected and two men pushed in. What a relief! There was only a cellar full of cringing civilians and no members of the *Wehrmacht!*

With the house searched and guards posted, the men made attempts to dry their clothes, but the suspense was fearful. They awaited dawn and H-hour far behind the enemy lines. With daylight came the knowledge that they had not ensconced themselves on the position they had set out for, but that the terrain they found was equally good. They could see the two roads leading out of Mouterhouse to Bitche, one to the northwest and one to the east, so they could direct 4.2” and 81mm mortar fire on those routes of potential enemy reinforcement or egress. To their left and rear, they could discern flak-wagons and dug-in enemy that had to be neutralized, or even better, destroyed. Later that day, they watched enemy artillery level the house they would have been in. Directing fire on all of the Germans’ major positions that impeded the attack on the town, their daring mission was given high commendation for its crucial part in the battle for Mouterhouse. Best of all, the 1st Squad of the 2nd Platoon returned



A heavy mortar crew fires their M2 4.2-inch mortar in support of advancing Seventh Army units in the Vosges Mountains, late autumn 1944. *US Army Military History Institute (MHI)*



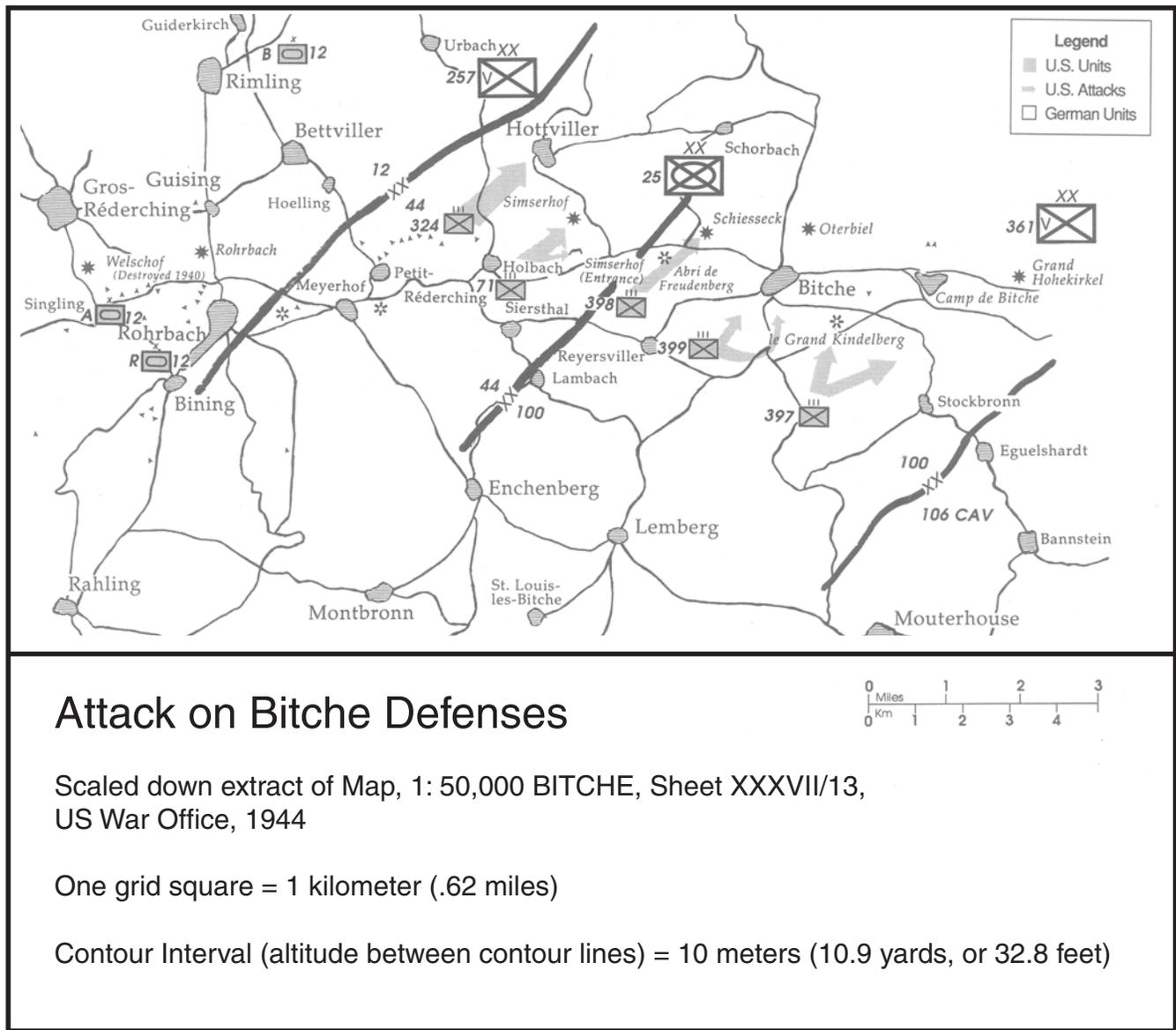
from its successful mission with the report "All Present."

On 9 December at 0900 we left Mouterhouse in an attack to the north with the ancient fortress city of Bitche as the Division's final objective. By nightfall, we had advanced to Hill 410 against scattered resistance from a seemingly disorganized enemy.

The next morning, we continued the attack against stiffening resistance. Even before we reached the foot of Hill 410, we had encountered harassing sniper fire; and soon after that, we ran into boxcars fired from the guns of the Maginot Line. That afternoon we held up on Hill 317, tied in with the rest of the Battalion, and dug a perimeter defense under intense mortar fire.

Early on the morning of 11 December, an enemy patrol infiltrated our defenses from the rear and surprised our heavy-machine-gun section. The whole section was captured intact, still zipped in their sleeping bags. To add insult to injury, the Jerries turned our own machine guns on us and fired a half belt into our area. We learned our lesson, and never again zipped our sleeping bags.

By 14 December, we had advanced to positions two and a half miles north of Mouterhouse. At 1300 that day, another company of our Battalion relieved us. Going into battalion reserve, we moved back to Mouterhouse for showers, mail, and packages, and to rest again in houses, which was increasingly welcome as the mountain



winter nights grew ever longer and colder. The showers were a new provision of the Service Company, which brought forward a portable eight-shower unit with a supply of clean clothes. This was our first opportunity for taking showers since leaving Marseilles over a month a half before.

The Company moved back to its former positions the following day, 12 December. At this time another "first" occurred: we were allotted our first pass-quota to Paris. We had barely settled in our holes when our orders were changed. We were ordered to move north on the road to Bitche to a low ridge overlooking the German garrison in the Camp de Bitche. Despite the previous

night's rest the strenuous upgrade grind completely exhausted us, but our pace quickened when a dozen German artillery rounds greeted us, and soon we were digging with enthusiasm on the prescribed ridge.

At dusk we were attempting to make contact with another unit on our right and to establish our own defense. As our left flank was exposed, Battalion loaned a reserve platoon to us. In the process of fighting them into position a friendly tank on our left opened fire on them and they were unable to get into place. The Company then shifted to the left and the 2nd Platoon took up the positions originally intended for the reserve company platoon.



## From Mouterhouse to Bitche

Scaled down extract of Map, 1: 50,000 BITCHE, Sheet XXXVII/13,  
US War Office, 1944

One grid square = 1 kilometer (.62 miles)

Contour Interval (altitude between contour lines) = 10 meters  
(10.9 yards, or 32.8 feet)

# 3

## Winter Counteroffensive

*Rimling, France, 13 January 1945*

We remained on the ridge overlooking the Camp de Bitche for nearly five days, sweating out sporadic mortar shellings, and watching our artillery pound the former French garrison, which the Germans had converted into a major training facility. Meanwhile, far to the north, in the great Ardennes Forest of Belgium and Luxembourg, the German 5th Panzer, 6th Panzer, and 7th Armies began their grand counteroffensive on 16 December 1944. As what became known as the "Battle of the Bulge" began, the US Third Army, to our north and west, began to shift its forces to attack into the right shoulder of the salient, or "bulge," created by the First Army's withdrawal in the face of the German onslaught. This forced the Seventh Army to "give left," to take over the defense of the sectors vacated by Third Army units headed north. Thus, we had no choice but to suspend our drive beyond the Maginot Line into Germany, and to assume a defensive posture.

Participating in the defense of the Seventh Army's extended front, the Century Division was ordered to extend its sector to the left. We were relieved of our positions on the promontories overlooking Bitche by the 398th Infantry Regiment and marched back to Mouterhouse, entrucked, and rode to Petit Réderching via Lemberg and Enchenberg. There we dismounted and marched two miles to the Kapellenhof estate to relieve Company A, 114th Infantry Regiment of the 44th Infantry Division. Shifting north again, we relieved the 87th Infantry Division's Company L, 345th Infantry Regiment, 1,500 yards northwest of Erching. Confused, in darkness, we effected the relief on the coldest night we had ever experienced.

The company dug an outpost line in soil which was frozen as solid as rock. Two rifle platoons and the weapons platoons were on the line with the CP, while the other rifle platoon remained in Erching. The same day, Christmas Eve, we were issued our parkas.

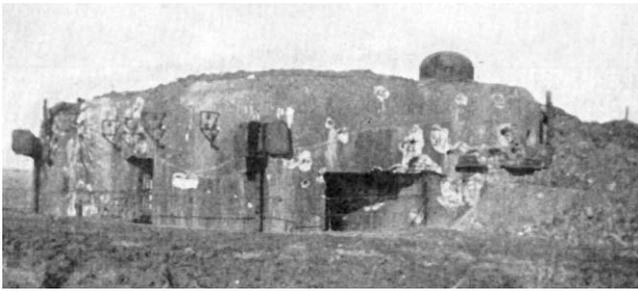
Christmas morning was quiet and beautiful. It seemed that both sides were going to observe the Holy Day. Except for a brief patrol into Germany, 25 December meant packages and pay, and we made plans for a Christmas dinner. Shortly before we were to have dinner with all the trimmings, the enemy lightly shelled Erching and our lines. We weren't suspicious. Our hearts were set on a peaceful holiday. But we missed the meal: Company F was attacked.

With Company F driven from the commanding ground, our positions were untenable. Unmerciful small arms fire poured in on us as we awaited orders. There was hope for a time that Company F could regain its ground, but soon the order came: "Withdraw!" It was a new and terrible word for us. We weren't used to defensive fighting, or to the withdrawal tactics of an outpost line.

It was hard to accept the idea of giving up ground. Thinking of the hard fight and many lives lost—the probable cost of regaining this ground—we abandoned our positions and returned to Erching, dodging machine gun fire most of the way. The three and one-half mile speed march through Rimling to Guising was made without casualties. The company's two vehicles were loaded beyond recognition with soldiers, equipment, and unopened parcels from home. With Yankee determination, the kitchen fed an abbreviated, hastily-prepared Christmas dinner in Guising at midnight.

Leaving Guising the next morning, we marched three and a half miles through Bettviller and Hoelling to Petit Réderching, where we immediately dug our part of a regimental reserve defense line. Tied in with Maginot Line forts and pillboxes, the positions were situated in terrain ideally suited to defensive operations.

The battalion sector was extremely large and orders were published for five different defensive plans. For convenience and to avoid confusion, these plans were given color names: red, blue,



Typical Maginot casemate in the vicinity of Petit Réderching (SOC)

green, brown, and black. We moved to the Rohrbach railroad station, center of the battalion sector, to be able to reach quickly any area attacked. This was how we were arrayed as we awaited the first hour of what we all prayed would be the last year of the war.

Alerted on New Year's Eve for a possible German attack, we waited, wondering where the attack would come and if there would be tanks. Waiting in defensive positions with no knowledge of what lies ahead has horrors altogether different from those of attack.

The Jerries finally struck, and at the weakest point in any defense—the juncture of two divisions. Our 3rd Battalion held the main line of resistance (MLR), but troops of the 44th Infantry Division on our left were pushed back several thousand yards, exposing our flank. Our artillery kept the Germans from penetrating as far as our positions. We did capture an enemy reconnaissance car, however, and took two prisoners. They had attempted a surprise dash into our lines, but our roadblock stopped them. The Jerries leaped from their rolling vehicle and crawled into tank ruts. One of our drivers, thrusting a pistol and a foot into the back of a prone Nazi, ordered, "Get up, you bastard!"

The Nazis tried to break our morale while we were at the Rohrbach railroad station by throwing in enormous shells from one of their railway guns. One night, two shells landed in our area, shaking us up badly but causing only one casualty—a man from another outfit. The concussion was like that of an aerial bomb. It shattered windows and tore tile from the rooftops. Shell fragments rocked buildings and leveled trees. At the point of impact, coffin-sized blocks of frozen earth were hurled a score or more yards. One of those rounds could have demolished a house and killed its occupants to a man. One shell missed our CP by about 75 yards and the other struck in

the backyard of another house. The side of the house was knocked in, and a man in the toilet was lacerated by splintered glass.

The Air Corps had spotted the railway gun and flew many unsuccessful sorties against it. The enemy hid the gun in a tunnel and was so harassed by the air raids that they dared expose it only at night. The bombardiers, we later learned, finally destroyed the gun by skipping bombs into the tunnel.

Fierce enemy attacks and severely cold weather reduced the fighting efficiency of the 3rd Battalion on the MLR. On 4 January, we began relieving their Company I, as our 2nd Platoon moved into position that night. They had to drive the Germans out of their holes with the aid of a section of light tanks from the 781st Tank Battalion. At 1900 the next evening, the rest of the Company marched two and a half miles to Rimling and completed the relief. At dawn the next day, we found that our positions were not on commanding terrain. It was impossible to get out of our holes without meeting immediate enemy small arms, mortar, and artillery fire. Because of this, we could not improve our positions, but had to make the best of what we had. The four platoons of the company, moreover, were not tied in, but were separated by other units of the 2nd Battalion. Thus, the tactical integrity of the Company was broken and we faced almost insurmountable communications and supply problems.

Our problems were compounded by constant enemy artillery attacks; we experienced non-stop shelling during the 96 hours we spent at Rimling. We could not get out of our holes except in



M5A1 tanks in action in the European theater. (NA).

darkness. During the days, we proved that a helmet could be used for almost anything. The cold was so severe that many of our weapons, as well as their operators, were frozen. Fires were impossible, for the enemy could easily detect tell-tale smoke and flames. As for food, those who were lucky enough to find them, gnawed on frozen K-rations.

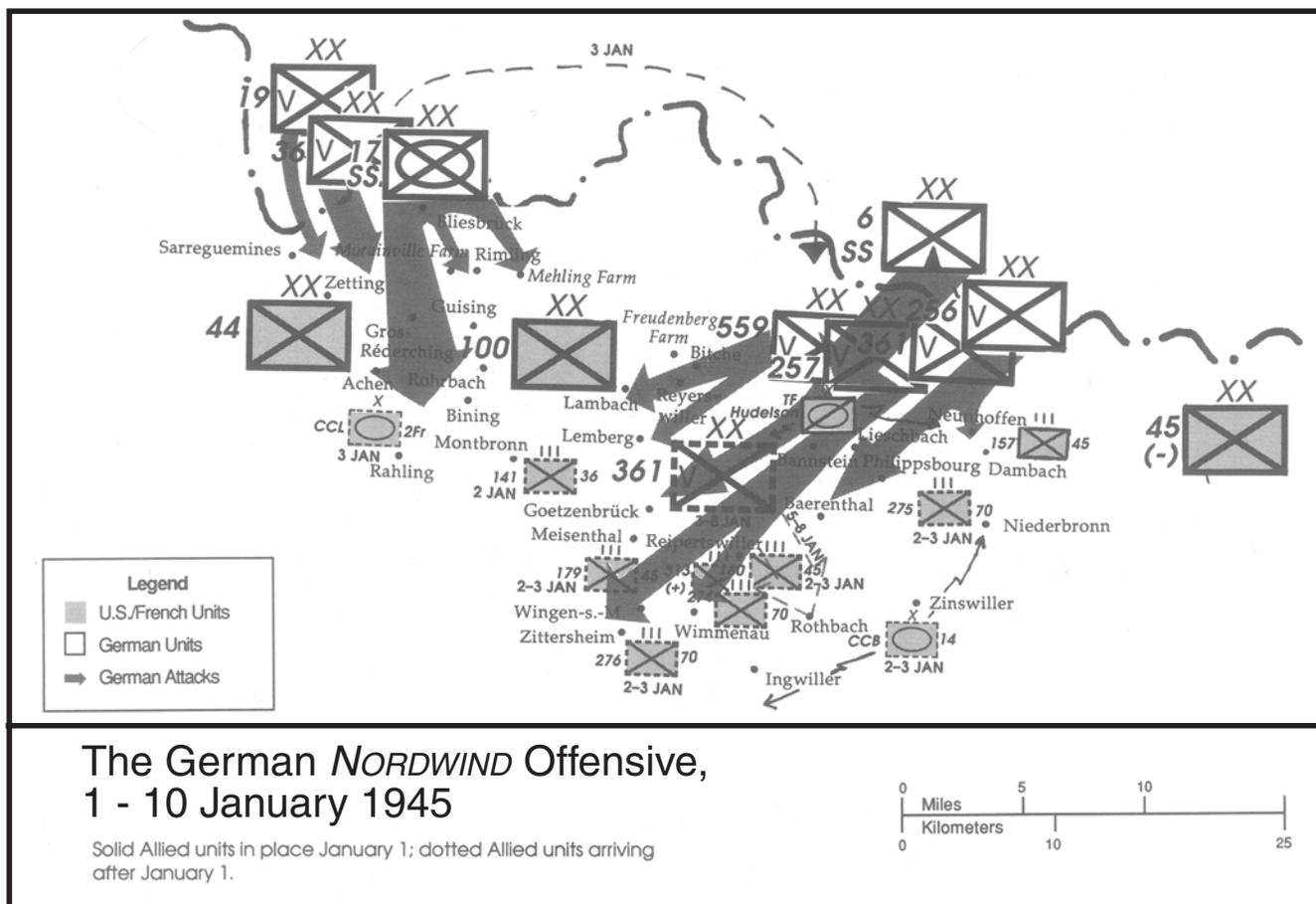
With the Company dispersed as it was, communication was one of the factors most vital to our survival. Incessant shelling kept our wire crews continually on the jump to repair our extended and vulnerable communication lines. They did a heroic job with the aid of riflemen who volunteered to help them.

We experienced only local probing attacks in the 2nd and 3rd Platoon sectors during the first two days on the line in Rimling, then enemy attacks grew more forceful. During daylight, we kept their tanks at bay with artillery fire directed by our FOs (forward observers). The fire orders had to be relayed from the 2nd Platoon to the 1st, then to the 4th; from there they were sent to the Company E CP via Company H, thence to the

Battalion CP, where the calls for fire and adjustments were transmitted to the 374th Field Artillery Battalion's fire direction center. It was complicated, but it worked!

Early one morning there was a lull in the shelling to which we had become so accustomed, and then it came. . . . Instantly, like a bolt of lightning, the sky was lit by what seemed like all of the enemy's rocket launchers, mortars, and artillery pieces in the sector! The shells and rockets screamed at us, and the whole world exploded on top of us. Men gasped breathless prayers. They checked their watches, asked what day it was. One does such things at times like this. It had started at 0200, 8 January 1945. It kept up. The continuous whining, the infernal screeching, then and the explosions—they dulled us to robots as we hugged the bottoms of our holes in sheer terror. Would it *never* end?

It ended as suddenly as it had begun. The time was 0225. Our minds were groggy from concussion. We sat up rigidly to check with buddies near us. As we did so, the enemy was upon us in their tanks.



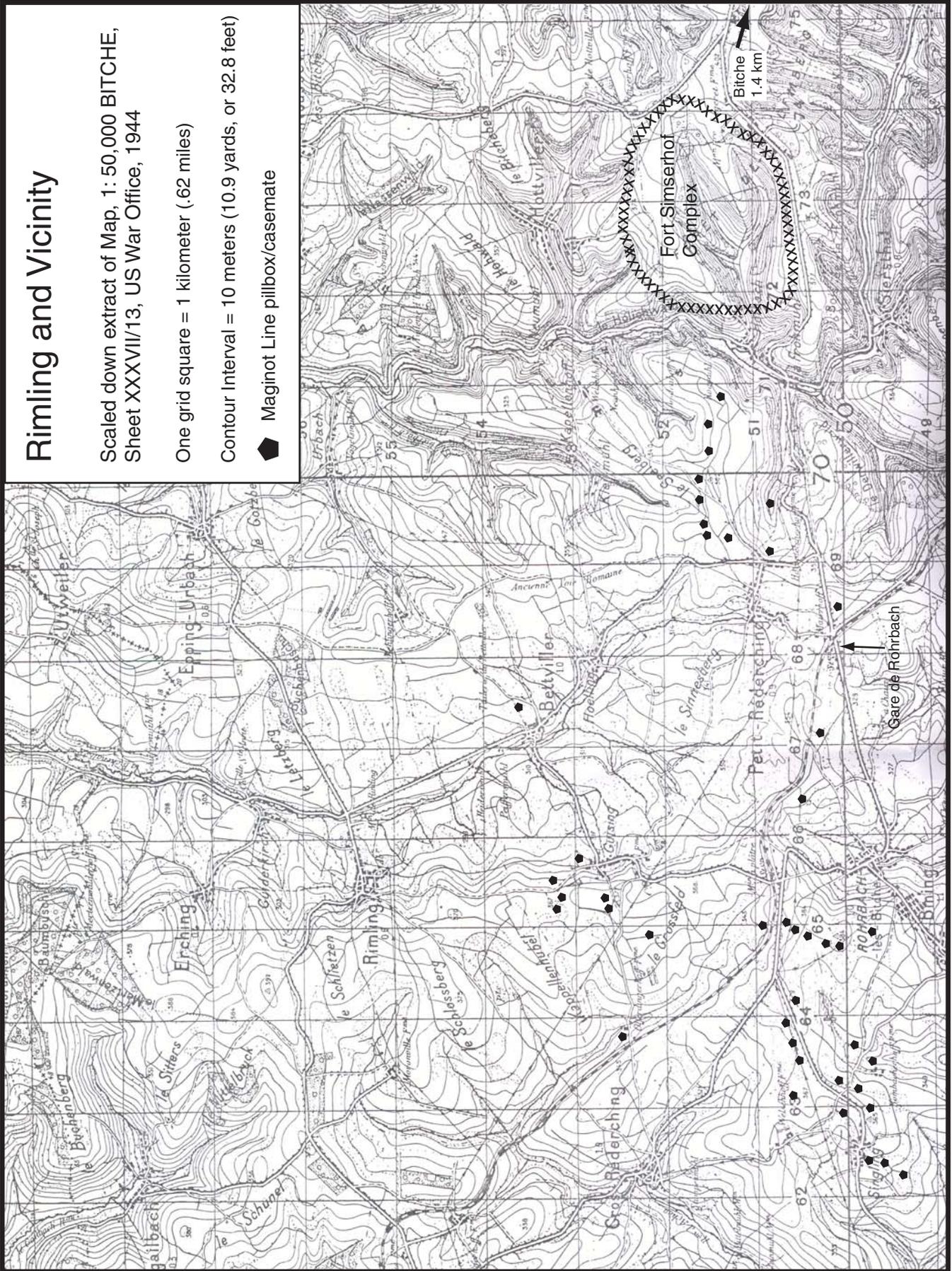
# Riming and Vicinity

Scaled down extract of Map, 1:50,000 BITCHE, Sheet XXXVII/13, US War Office, 1944

One grid square = 1 kilometer (.62 miles)

Contour Interval = 10 meters (10.9 yards, or 32.8 feet)

◆ Maginot Line pillbox/casemate



The 1st Platoon held its positions, able to keep the enemy off. When the 2nd was overrun and Jerry had penetrated the flank of Company G, however, the plight of the 1st became dangerous. Somehow an order got through to vacate the position and come to the CP in Rimling. Most of the platoon thus escaped the steamroller advance of the Germans. The men worked their way back to our heavy mortars where the mortar platoon leader guided them on into the Company CP. There they joined Company HQ and some 4th Platoon men to reinforce our defenses in the northeast section of the town. The 2nd Platoon was virtually wiped out when the Light Tank Platoon left its position supporting the 1st and 2nd. Their efficiency and fighting power numbed by the intense cold and fatigue, the crazed enemy swarmed over them. Most of the 2nd Platoon was captured. The 3rd Platoon occupied the northern outskirts of Rimling, tying in with Company F on the left and Company L on the right.

Located on a piece of ground closely resembling the surface of a billiard table tipped toward the enemy, the 3rd Platoon's area extended some 300 yards right from the main road approaching the town from the north. During the day, the only men who could move were those in a barn being used as a roadblock. The 3rd's greatest danger came from the enemy's heaviest artillery, which was attempting to shell the town, but was falling short—right in the lap of the men on the outskirts. After the terrific barrage on the morning of 8 January, the enemy attacked from the west.

The men of the 3rd became the unwilling bystanders of the appalling attack. They could hear the seemingly drunken Germans, see their fire, and at times, by the light of flares, see the men themselves as they overran Company F and circled to the 3rd Platoon's rear. Next they watched the enemy running the streets of Rimling, shouting "Heil Hitler," and demanding American surrender.

In what seemed an eternity of hell, daylight arrived to disclose a desperate situation. Two hundred yards to the rear were three "Hunting Tiger" tank destroyers moving slowly up and down the streets of the town. That day, the 3d Platoon sniped at the enemy, and after communication lines to the CP were restored, they were able to drive off several tanks in their area and break up three daylight attacks. Here again, a circuitous communication route to artillery was employed, and it saved the group from disaster.

The machine-gun section, attached to the 3rd, had particularly troublesome times, too. One squad held the barn at the roadblock while the other, with several riflemen, was in a house on the left of the road protecting an anti-tank gun there. During the counterattack, this position was overrun, and the men withdrew to the Company F CP. But no sooner had they arrived than the Germans, like wolves on the doorstep, were howling outside, demanding surrender. They received a clip of eight rounds from a rifleman's M-1 as an answer.

The Jerries met such defiance by attacking the building in force, and although our machine guns and rifle fire accounted for forty or more, the holding force was too meager to withstand, and they withdrew into the night. By dawn, the machine gun squad and its supporting riflemen were again in the house that they had been forced to evacuate near the road. From there during the following night and day, they made sure that even more of the *Waffen-SS* and German Army died for "*der Fuhrer*."

On the night of 8 January, the Germans again counterattacked what was left of the Battalion's positions in the town. Again the 3rd Platoon watched, and by morning the entire rear was in enemy hands. The only remaining contact with the Company CP was by a mile-long detour under constant enemy observation through the sector held by Company L on the right flank. Again the Germans attacked the 3rd's positions in an effort to eliminate the one remaining nub that they had been unable to displace in the original counterattack. The 3rd drove them off with rifle fire and artillery. By 1940 hours that day, Battalion ordered the group to withdraw through Bettviller to Guising, thus leaving the only original position that the Battalion had held throughout the entire battle.

During the battle of Rimling, the machine guns of the 4th Platoon were attached to the rifle platoons, but the mortars were set up in battery in a quarry within sight of the town. The enemy suspected the quarry of being a gun position and directed harassing fire on the area. During daylight hours, it was impossible for the mortar men to move without drawing artillery, and at night, movement was even more hazardous because of the many duds lying in the area.

The mortar section maintained both physical and mechanical contact between the 1st Platoon and the Company CP. They also supplied the 1st

and 2nd Platoons with what food and ammunition they could.

As the German artillery increased to a crescendo, the effect of the concussion was even more telling in this location because of the confinement created by the stone walls of the quarry. To make matters worse, shell fragments were supplemented by flying rock chips, and were equally deadly. Those things, along with the bitter cold, quickly fatigued the men in the quarry. During the evening preceding the main attack, the platoon of light tanks assigned to support this inadequate defensive position left the mortar section against the demands of the company commander. The mobile firepower of the tanks had been of the utmost importance in defending the area west of town, and when they left, anyone who could not see their departure could certainly hear it, including the enemy. Perhaps this prompted the immediate German attack.

After a devastating 25-minute preparatory barrage, hardly had the last round exploded before the mortar men could hear the nearby rumble of tanks.

Regardless of training, it is always difficult for infantrymen to face tanks alone. For these men, it was their first encounter with armored might. The preparatory enemy artillery barrage had destroyed all communications between the men in the quarry and the rest of the Company, so it was with great anxiety that they greeted a group of riflemen rushing into their position with a report of disaster among the closest rifle platoon. The riflemen who ran down into the quarry were from Company G. They reported that enemy tanks and infantry were between them and behind the battalion's rifle positions, and that everyone was retreating.

The observers for the mortars looked for targets. What they saw verified the desperateness of the situation. Enemy soldiers were yelling and screaming like frenzied beasts, machine guns were being fired from tanks point-blank into the foxholes of their buddies. German soldiers were piled all over tanks, firing in the air, throwing grenades indiscriminately, and shooting flares. They were obviously drunk or doped. The whole scene was a nightmare.

The mortars were useless in such a situation, so pistols and carbines were the only weapons the mortar men could employ. Very soon an outpost of four men arrived from the 1st Platoon with the report that their outfit had been ordered to

withdraw; these men had received the order, but were separated from their platoon.

The first enemy appeared on the edge of the quarry. The enemy tank's main gun lowered at the men in the trap, but Company H heavy machine guns chattered in the draw to the right and attracted the attention of the German tankers. Then a second tank came to a halt on the precipice on the left flank of the pit; this time, the mortar men were seen.

In German came the cries: *Sie sind hier! Komm' raus mit den Hände hoch!* ("There they are! Come out with hands up!")

This was it. The men could not fight back against armor, and they could not surrender. Darkness was an ally, and somehow these men of the 4th Platoon escaped in small groups. Some reached the CP, but most of them got away through the draw running parallel to the road to Guising. A few groups of enemy soldiers were spotted and bypassed, but soon they came upon a line of infantry stretched out across the draw, digging in. Studying the silhouettes of those strangers in the early dawn, the mortar men felt sure that they were American. If they were not, however. . . . It was a momentous decision; every man shared the responsibility and voted. All were in favor of chancing it, and three men walked forward. GIs who were making a hasty second defense stand halted them. It was a part of Company G that had gotten back. Rifles were obtained from the Aid Station in Guising, and the mortar men served in foxholes as riflemen. There were other men from Company E who had come back the same way, and all of the men were grouped in the same part of the line awaiting the onslaught of the enemy.

By full daylight, the riflemen could see tanks and infantrymen on the ridge ahead. The infantry brazenly began to dig in, apparently aware that they were beyond the range of American M1s. From hull defilade, the German tanks aimed intense fire. Our tank destroyers rattled into position to return some of this fire. As they prepared to open up, two German armored cars popped over the horizon. The TDs' crewmen took careful aim, then fired two rounds as if their guns had been automatic weapons. The turret of one Jerry car disappeared in smoke and flame and fragments of jagged steel, and the vehicle burned. Shortly afterward the German division commander, *SS-Standartenführer* (Colonel) Hans Lingner, was surprised on the same ridge and

captured by elements of the 114th Infantry, to our left.

Before the Germans began their attack to seize Rimling, the Company CP was established in a sturdy stone house. Earlier shelling had damaged its roof, but it was otherwise advantageous as a command post. When the intense shelling began, nearby houses caught fire and some burned brightly for two days. The men posted at the CP had lighted candles, but extinguished them at the first bursts of the Jerry barrage. The sudden darkness created appalling confusion. No one could find his helmet, and now that it was missing everybody felt its protection paramount. Faster and faster rumbled the boxcars. All the fury of Hell broke loose on the ill-fated town, and the thunderous barrage seemed directed particularly at one house, the CP. Men stumbled about blindly; some found mattresses and crawled under them to avert the danger from falling masonry. One lieutenant, missing his helmet, had stretched his woolen cap over his entire face. An old-timer in the Army only a few days short of a complete hitch, he voiced everyone's pessimism as he feverishly muttered, "I'll never finish this enlistment."

The CP was miraculously undamaged when the barrage lifted, but communication was impossible; the fate of the rest of the Company was unknown. The likelihood of being overrun by a superior enemy force was of prime concern. Two light machine guns were on hand, and these were set up where the gunners could best command the surrounding terrain. Lookouts were constantly at each window, in the barn, in outlying buildings, thus minimizing the danger of a trap.

Shells tore off the remainder of the CP's roof during the night. Another peril arose next morning in the shape of three German Mark IV tanks. Further attempts failed to establish radio contact with Battalion HQ. A report received from the 1st Platoon, however, reassured the CP that the 1st had managed to withdraw into some houses across the street from the CP, to administer aid to their wounded.

Artillery fire was laid on the enemy tanks in the 1st Platoon area; soon the heavy shelling, first by 105mm and later by 155mm howitzers, forced the tanks to move. A number of Germans wearing white capes walked forward with their tanks. A full company of enemy infantry was sighted moving southeast across the 1st Platoon area to

cut us off from the rear. Placing light machine guns on manure piles, Company E men pinned them down at a range of six or seven hundred yards.

At this crucial point, radio communications went dead and we were no longer able to bring artillery fire to our support. Soon 81mm mortar shells started dropping. These forced the Mark IVs and the *SS Panzer-Grenadiers* accompanying them to withdraw to the 1st Platoon area between 1100 and 1200 that morning. Everyone was overwrought, eager to fire at anything that moved. One of our officers was nearly shot as he reported at the CP. Ammunition was redistributed in preparation for the grim fight ahead. Even the comfort of warm food was denied the men; the smoke of cooking fires would draw enemy artillery fire.

The CP was soon menaced again by the German tanks, which returned to the 1st Platoon area. The company commander was finally able to contact a tank destroyer that had moved during the morning into the center of Rimling. The tank destroyer clanked its way forward to the CP and lumbered into cover behind some manure piles. Everyone except the ill crew scurried into the cellar to avoid the gun's muzzle blast, and to escape possible return fire from the enemy tanks. At the first round from our gun, one Jerry tank burst into flames. A second round slammed into the burning monster; the gun crew "just wanted to make sure." Eliminating the threat from the first tank, the TD crew at once swung their sights onto the second, the one that lay in partial defilade on the hill. A single round *crumpled* into the tank's tread, and amidst the smoke and dust appeared an orange flag. That flag was destined



A Sherman crew's nightmare: a *Panzerjäger VI Jagdtiger* ("Hunting Tiger"), the most heavily-armed, most heavily-armored fighting vehicle of the war. (NA)



Heavy machine gunners near Rimling prepare to engage yet another onslaught by elements of the 17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division, January 1945. *(Signal Corps)*

to remain a mystery; for at that moment a five-man German light-machine-gun squad was sighted inching its way upward on a trail behind the CP. As suddenly as they had been sighted, they were dispersed; the CO snatched up a BAR, emptied a magazine at the hostile figures, and forced them to scramble for cover.

The TD followed the five men as they dashed into a barn, hurled four HE rounds after them. The Company E men subsequently found all but one: three men slightly wounded and the fourth unharmed, but playing dead. Company E had taken four prisoners and had learned another lesson: stay out of cellars when under fire . . . the enemy may at any time try to attack.

German artillery pummeled the town. Under constant shelling, Company E prepared with fierce determination to repel any night attack.



Captain Jack Churchill of the 776th Tank Destroyer Battalion, examines a knocked-out Jagdtiger ("Hunting Tiger") tank destroyer. With ten inches of frontal armor (the thickness of which can be seen on the detached front plate on top of the chassis) and an enormous 128mm main gun, this vehicle was the most formidable to see action in WWII. This particular Hunting Tiger of Heavy Tank Destroyer Battalion 653 was knocked out by a 397th Infantry Regiment bazookaman near Rimling . . . with a brave and lucky shot! *(NA)*

Battalion HQ called for continuous patrolling so that communications to Guising might be kept clear through the night. Defense was little short of impossible with the heavy snow blanket that blinded men and muffled every sound. It was bitterly cold, there had been no sleep or food for two days; small wonder the men were scarcely able to keep awake or alert . . . or alive.

Darkness—made doubly unendurable by anxiety, uncertainty, and discomfort—at last stretched into daylight. And with the dawn, vague fears gave place to real threats. Enemy riflemen were seen digging in on the high ground from which Company F had been driven the day before. Artillery fire repelled them, only to have them return when the fire lifted. Shells screamed and crashed into the new German positions, and those Jerries who were able withdrew—only to return once, twice, again as the shells ceased their wrathful roar. American artillery, fired so often with such deadly effect, was for once inadequate. Several batteries were employed to drive off the tenacious Germans, but observation was almost impossible, and the confusion arising out of the batteries' firing simultaneously gave the Jerries their one chance for holding their ground.

Battalion HQ ordered a withdrawal at 1900 that night, and Company E was to be the last unit to leave Rimling. Moving east, the Company's one jeep and trailer rattled on, bearing a wounded man, and piled high with equipment.

While crossing a stream, the jeep sank in deep tank ruts, and was saved only by a tank crew, which pushed the overburdened vehicle onto the opposite bank. The Company had barely cleared Rimling when the town, already in shambles, was leveled by our artillery. Advance echelons of the

2nd Battalion, mistaking the trapped German advance columns for Company E, thought that the company had been annihilated in the shelling. The Company reorganized at Guising and proceeded to the Gare de Rohrbach, where, at midnight, with no food or sleep for 48 hours, they hacked foxholes out of the frozen earth and waited for a renewed German attack.

When the German offensive had been stopped, men of the 100th Division learned that theirs had been the only division along the entire Seventh Army front to hold its original ground. The Century Division held fast under repeated fierce attacks of three German divisions: the 559th and 257th Volks-Grenadier Divisions of the German XC Corps—which had hit the 399th Infantry and parts of the 398th on the Division's right (eastern) flank—and the crack 17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division of XIII SS Corps, which had hit us. When

the German rush had been stopped, the 100th Division sector protruded far ahead of other parts of the 7th Army line, and when we were ordered to withdraw, it was to even out what had become an untenable salient into the German lines.

Company E held its positions around the Gare de Rohrbach for eight days. Each platoon pulled outpost duty in Guising for a day at a time. The rest of the company was reorganized and reequipped, while new men were trained in their duties.

The officers were engaged in laying out elaborate defense positions extending from Petit Réderching through Rohrbach, the Gare de Rohrbach and almost to Gros Réderching. The engineers brought up pneumatic drills, snowplows, and dynamite, and dug positions out of the frozen earth. They worked day and night, their operations covering thousands of yards,

## **The 17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division “Götz von Berlichingen”**

Götz von Berlichingen (1480–1562) was a late-medieval nobleman who was a sort of Germanic Robin Hood. A fiery Swabian warrior, he lost his right hand at the siege of Landshut in 1504, and had it replaced with a prosthetic fist made of iron. The men of the hard-driving *Waffen-SS* formation named for him took especially great pride in his most famous quotation, a defiant retort to a surrender demand in one of his many campaigns which can best be translated as, “Kiss my ass!”

On 3 October 1943, Hitler ordered the creation of the 17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division, and decreed that it be named after von Berlichingen. It was raised in France with an officer and NCO cadre from experienced *Waffen-SS* divisions, and soldiers from all over Germany as well as *Volksdeutschen* (“racial Germans”) from central and southern European countries; there were also a minority of *Volksdeutschen* from Belgium, Luxembourg, Alsace, and Lorraine. Many of the initial complement of *Volksdeutschen* were conscripts. As the division received replacements for its casualties in 1944–45, draftees became the norm.

From the beginning, the 17th was especially trained in night operations to compensate for the conditions its leaders anticipated for the battlefields of the Western Front, where the 17th was expected to fight. Its leadership insisted on at least 25 percent of all tactical training being conducted under these conditions. By the time of the *NORDWIND* attacks against the 397th Infantry near Rimling and the 44th Infantry Division to the west, however, whatever proficiency the 17th's infantry units had developed in night operations must have been lost with the casualties it suffered in Normandy—only this can account for the crude “wave” attacks its *Panzer-Grenadiers* launched at Schlietzen and Schlossberg Hills in the first week of January 1945. The ultimate attacks on Rimling, however, were prosecuted by the division's reconnaissance battalion, which retained the original standards of training and proficiency.

The 17th fought extensively in the Normandy campaign, and suffered heavy losses of men and materiel there and during the subsequent withdrawal across France to Lorraine. During its protracted combat, it absorbed the

while the infantry sat back and supervised. The riflemen were dismayed when all this bulky and noisy equipment was brought up, but surprisingly enough, it drew very little artillery fire.

At one point in the line, an engineer officer accompanied by an infantry officer was inspecting the two-man foxholes completed that day. Jerry chose this moment to throw in some 75mm shells. The infantryman leaped for the nearest two-man hole as the other officer headed for the next shelter fifty yards away. The infantryman yelled, "This is the closest hole!" The engineer dove in with him in the nick of time. When the barrage lifted he glanced at the hole he had been about to occupy. It had become a shell-crater.

The company was alerted and moved out of the Gare de Rohrbach at 0800 on 19 January. After a six-mile march through snowdrifts and driving sleet, they reached Holbach and Hottwiller,

France. The company spent five days in defensive positions east and west of Hottwiller and then ten days back in Holbach while another company pulled five days on line in their turn.

In this, as usual, Company E led off, and pulled the first trick on line. The weather was bitter the entire time. The men were wet and suffered from cold the entire five days. Their foxholes were ankle deep in water and continually caved in. They were unable to get warm, for exposure during the day resulted in renewed mortar and artillery fire. The Germans advanced into small-arms range and ensured sleepless nights with a few rounds from their burp guns. Every night after dark, a report would come over the wires, "Burp gun Charlie is out again tonight."

Company E was on the line in Hottwiller in their occupation of that sector. By constant work on their positions, all accomplished in darkness,

49th and 51st SS-Panzer-Grenadier Brigades, and fought against US Third Army elements near Verdun and Metz. During the period October to January, the 17th was commanded by no fewer than four different commanding officers, and just before it was committed to *NORDWIND*, it received a large contingent of Russian *Volksdeutsche* as replacements for its two depleted *Panzer-Grenadier* regiments. These factors—lack of cohesion borne of little opportunity to train together and turmoil in the Division command structure—combined with the tenacious defense of elements of the 44th and 100th Infantry Divisions to spell failure for the 17th in *NORDWIND*.

Ordered to conduct the main attack for the XIII SS Corps in *NORDWIND*, the 17th's mission was to penetrate the American defenses and open the road to Diemeringen to the south; it was also to link up with elements of XC Corps, attacking from east of Bitche. Supported by attacks by the 19th and 36th Volks-Grenadier Divisions against the defenses of the 44th Infantry Division to the west, the 17th's success in this maneuver would allow Army Group G's armored reserve (the 21st Panzer and 25th Panzer-Grenadier Divisions) to dash to Saverne and beyond, as well as annihilate the 100th Infantry Division. Determined resistance from the 44th and 100th Divisions prevented this

penetration and encirclement, however, and completely frustrated the intentions of the German command. The epic stand of the 397th Infantry's 2d and 3d Battalions at Rimling against repeated, spirited attempts by the 17th to take the town contributed especially to the 17th's failure—and was recognized by a Presidential Unit Citation for the 3d Battalion and Company H of the 2d, as well as a posthumously-awarded Medal of Honor for Technical Sergeant Charles Carey, one of the many stalwarts of Rimling's defense.

The failure of the 17th to accomplish its mission resulted in the relief for cause of the division operations officer and other key staff members on 3 January; a few days later, the 29-year old division commander, *Standartenführer* (Colonel) Hans Lingner was captured by elements of the 44th Infantry Division. Although the 17th continued to attack for the next several days, the commanders of 1st Army and Army Group G had given up hope for any success, and the 17th was withdrawn.

The 17th eventually withdrew fighting across Germany and met its end at the hands of Seventh Army units south of Nürnberg (Nuremberg). In the process, elements of the 100th again fought against the 17th, when the 398th Infantry crossed the Neckar at Neckargartsch in early April.

the men had constructed wood-lined foxholes by mid-February. These kept the men dry, and heavy wooden tops were cut for protection against shell fragments.

Tactical (barbed) wire and many trip flares were strung in front of the lines. The artillery had registered on every square inch of ground across the front of the positions, and concentrations of artillery and mortar fire could be laid down at a moment's notice. The CP had wire communication to each platoon, and they, in turn, had communication with each squad, totaling some sixteen phones, including those to the heavy machine-gun section attached from Company H, observation posts, and mortars. The company CP set up an elaborate communications board with an operator on duty at all times. He listened to the company lines, recorded all reports, and made routine checks. There were also two phones to Battalion and one direct to the artillery fire direction center.

While on the line, the men received hot chow twice a day, and ate "K" rations at noon. Meals were served by carrying parties in the early morning and late afternoon under the cover of darkness.

The company's defenses were built around the Fort Simserhof complex, which was one of the largest and most elaborate of the entire Maginot line. Some elements of Company E, notably the mortar section, occupied these forts. In spite of

the danger of using these obvious targets, they offered protection from enemy artillery and mortar fire that opened up whenever we fired our mortars. The forts had been used by the Germans as targets to test their heavy guns, and they had also been heavily bombarded during the 44th Infantry Division's assault on them during the previous month; the concrete walls were pocked and shredded from the impact of heavy shells. Great danger lay in the hundreds of duds scattered outside and inside the huge structures. Piles of ammunition had been destroyed using TNT in the vicinity, leaving dangerous fuses and undetonated rounds strewn throughout the interior of the fortifications.

The larger forts had subterranean levels descending as deep as fifteen stories, and underground passageways connected many of the forts. Most of the structures had been demolished by the French to make the position inoperative. These great gaping shafts and the duds scattered around threatened death to the unwary soldier who ventured inside without a light. Since there were not enough flashlights for every man, a safety-tape was strung so that the GIs could move quickly and safely through the dark galleries.

There was the smell of death within those masses of concrete. The small gun apertures and a few shell holes were the sources of light, but even they were inadequate. The tomblike darkness nurtured the dank odor. The strongest stench

Soldiers of the 44th Infantry Division examine a fortified battery of 75mm guns that are part of the great Maginot fortress (*gros ouvrage*) Fort Simserhof, December 1944. Company E used various parts of the Simserhof complex during the first months of 1944. *[Signal Corps]*



## The 6th SS-Mountain Division “Nord”

Organized in early 1941 in Norway as a motorized SS Combat Group, formed around the 6th and 7th Death's Head (*Totenkopf*) Regiments of the *Waffen-SS*. Considered unready for combat due to lack of unit training at the time of its commitment to the invasion of Russia.

The division's first combat was as a full-fledged SS motorized division in northern Karelia in July 1941, as part of XXXVI Corps' attack to cut the Murmansk railway, a critical supply line for the receipt of Lend-Lease equipment from the States. The division suffered a critical defeat at the Soviet fortress of Salla, and was subsequently retrained and infused with younger men specifically trained to *Waffen-SS* standards.

Reorganized and redesignated as an SS mountain division in 1942, the division assimilated a significant number of *Volksdeutsche*, or ethnic Germans, from mountainous regions such as the South Tyrol and the Balkans, as well as some Scandinavians who chose to join the SS—although these latter did not accompany the Division to the Vosges.

Although the Nord Division never did break through to the Murmansk railroad, long-range patrols frequently conducted raids against it during the next three years of bitter combat against the Soviet Army, bands of partisans, and three near-Arctic winters. After Finland concluded a separate armistice with the Soviets in September 1944, Nord fought the rearguard actions for the withdrawing 20th Mountain Army against Finnish units, which had, up until the month before, been allies.

After marching 1,000 miles from Finland through Norway, the Division was taken by ferry to Denmark later in December 1944, and a combat group built around SS-Mountain Infantry Regiment 12 “Michael Gaissmair” arrived by train in time for participation in the opening blows of *NORDWIND*, and made the fateful attack to seize the key crossroads town

of Wingen-sur-Moder in the first week of 1945. By 9 January, the rest of the division was committed.

The division commanding general had this to say about Nord's condition at the time of its commitment a few kilometers east of the 100th's sector in Operation *NORDWIND*, “[The Division] was fit for any commitment. Officers and men were, with few exceptions, soldiers of long service, with particular experience in forest and mountain fighting. Morale and fighting spirits were outstanding . . . [the Division was] until then unbeaten and victorious. . . .”

Although its SS-Mountain Infantry Regiment 11 “Reinhard Heydrich” mauled six companies of the 45th Infantry Division's 157th Infantry Regiment on the hills north of Reipertswiller in the third week of January, like the results of Operation *NORDWIND* overall, most of Nord's operations fell short of intended goals. The two battalions of the Michael Gaissmair Regiment committed in the attack on Wingen suffered most significantly, losing 70 percent of the mountain rifle companies it committed to that mission.

By February, the division had been ordered to conduct defensive operations in its sector in the Low Vosges, and part of this sector was opposite the 100th Infantry Division's. Throughout much of the remaining time until the commencement of Operation *UNDERTONE*, the Seventh Army's drive to and across the Rhine in mid-March, many 100th Infantry Division elements encountered the fierce and highly experienced SS mountain infantry of Nord during their protracted period of patrolling and local defensive operations in the war's last bitter winter.

In March, *Nord* was transferred to the Saar-Moselle Triangle, where it was engaged by Third Army and ultimately pressed back into Bavaria, where it capitulated just days before the end of the war in Europe.

came from the subterranean levels, where the bodies of men long dead lay putrefying in stagnant water.

The mortars had ample supplies of ammunition and used it freely. Heavy fire was the immediate response to every sound or movement. Flocks of sheep roamed the hills untended, and sometimes tripped a flare at night in front of the lines. This brought withering small arms fire and often mortar and artillery concentrations. The result was scores of dead sheep in front of the American defense lines.

The Germans were well aware of the location of the American positions and respected their strength. They shelled them intermittently with mortar and artillery pieces of every caliber, and occasionally sent out patrols. These patrols did no harm and those that were discovered were often captured. They seemed quite willing to be taken prisoner. It was their artillery and mortar fire that made the situation uncomfortable. Company E sustained one casualty from enemy mortar fire. He was an excellent squad leader, and was killed during a barrage while trying to observe the direction from which the fire was coming. In trying to locate the enemy mortar position for our artillery, he unwittingly exposed himself.

At first glance, a schedule of five days on line and tens days back would seem comparatively easy. That proved not to be the case in this instance. Rimling left Company E with a great deal of reorganization necessary to regain full fighting strength and combat efficiency. The company was trained as thoroughly as conditions permitted. The training was focused principally on the automatic weapons and the mortars, but there were also classes in field sanitation, military courtesy, and discipline. All weapons in the company were test fired, causing nearby units to suspect an enemy penetration until informed otherwise over the phone. We continually sought to improve our defensive positions around Hottviller and at night laid wire and dug deeper foxholes to accommodate the wooden linings constructed by our carpenter shop. There had been instances of German infiltrators penetrating our lines in American uniforms and vehicles; to forestall this danger, we manned roadblocks at Holbach, keeping a close check on all vehicles and persons moving in that area.

The toughest job of all, however—even tougher than our regular five days on the line—were the night combat and reconnaissance patrols



A 100th Infantry Division soldier surveys his sector from his foxhole, early 1945. The winter of 1944-45 was the most severe of the 20th century to that time. (*Signal Corps*)

we were required to operate. Men assigned to this hazardous work sweated out the tedious, dangerous missions, and their anxious buddies sweated out their safe return. Battalion S-2 (the intelligence staff section) was eager for prisoners from whom they could obtain information. When troops were in defensive positions, prisoners became one of the few available sources of enemy information. Our patrols found it difficult to bring in live prisoners. German resistance was stiff; their positions were also strongly fortified. Many Germans died resisting our combat patrols. A few, eager for the relative safety afforded PWs, submitted willingly to capture. From the prisoners we did secure, we learned we had been known . . . since the action at Rimling . . . as the "Terrible Hundredth."

Our prisoners all were heavily dressed . . . so bundled up with clothes it amazed us that they could fight. Their clothes were of warm wool, but dirty and worn. Every prisoner wore the characteristic ankle-length overcoat; we ceased wearing our overcoats shortly after going into combat, because at a distance, olive drab resembled slate gray too closely. We learned a great deal about our German prisoners during these days. We learned that he has a smell all his own: a combination of perspiration-soaked wool and lice-powder that is unmistakable. We learned that they were more miserable than we: he had no shower units, few passes, and little rest. A "rest" consisted usually of a march from one sector or front to another. We learned all this . . . but we didn't need prisoners to learn one basic fact: our enemy was a tough, ruthless fighter.

# 4

## The Battle for Bitche

*Bitche, France, 15 March 1945*

We had thought it couldn't happen to us, but the order came we had heard so often before: ATTACK! Once you've been away from it, it is difficult to comprehend the full meaning of that word.

The whole Seventh Army was committed to a massive offensive into Germany, codenamed Operation UNDERTONE. Company E's role started with leaving Holbach at 0400 on 15 March and moving on to the high ground north of Hottviller. It is a miracle that there weren't more casualties at Hottviller. The minute we reached the town, the Germans hurled rockets at us. Streets of the jump-off town were congested with tanks and TDs and men.

We found no natural cover or concealment on the high ground. To reach commanding terrain, then, we were forced to crawl forward, single file, through the largest anti-personnel minefield we had yet seen, all the while under heavy mortar shelling. We incurred three casualties in that long snake-like procession and soon we were under fire from self-propelled guns. Men sought cover in tank ruts, in abandoned trenches, anywhere; no one could dig without drawing fire. With guts . . . and luck . . . Company E was ultimately able to report "Took objective; in position."

This message was the signal for the rest of the Regiment to pivot on us northwest to Schorbach. The 397th was to cut the arteries of supply and communication leading north from Bitche, and then besiege the fortress city, allowing the Germans neither aid nor escape. The 398th and 399th were to take Bitche.

While the enemy tried to blast their attackers from the face of the earth and stem the Regiment's advance, Company E held its lines on a pocked strip of ground north of Hottviller. The 397th advanced; we held until 0300 the following morning, when we moved out again with tanks. Advancing through Schorbach along the Hottviller-Schorbach road, we reached a draw to

the left of the road. We entered the draw, spotted a wide area dotted with camouflaged shelters and holes recently vacated by a large enemy force. They had retreated in haste; a number of their dead lay where they had fallen.

Proceeding up the draw in column, we wheeled in a flanking movement, running across the floor of the draw and up the steep slopes of the opposite side. The forward elements had just reached the crest when we heard the whine of the "screaming meemie" rocket guns. We hit the dirt, but we were bunched together . . . we had committed the infantry's cardinal sin. The rounds screeched overhead and hit several yards away. That was good enough for us; elements had gone out in an effort to contact other units of the regiment, and we dug as we waited. As much dirt flew from our shovels as flew from the rocket bursts as we dug in under incessant barrage. We moved out, however, before the enemy had zeroed in on us. We had contacted other units of the 397th by early morning. They were dug in on a ridge overlooking the main highway to Bitche. The road lay in a valley; our job was to seize the high ground beyond.

Starting down the slope, we were pinned down by intense fire from machine guns and SP guns. Under concealment offered by foliage, we managed to crawl out of a tough spot, and while Battalion called the 4.2" mortars for a smoke barrage in the valley, we moved to get better cover.

The Air Corps tailed Jerry that day. We could see the "orange tail" squadron of the XII TAC (XII Tactical Air Command was the Army Air Force division-level command that provided medium bomber, fighter-bomber, and fighter support to Sixth Army Group), then as they strafed their quarry, probably retreating German columns. We always prayed for good weather for the Army Air Forces; the combination was death to the Kraut artillery. Ask a GI watching our planes strafe the enemy who were our two greatest heroes, he'll probably tell you the Wright Brothers.

The aerial attacks forced the Jerries to lighten their shelling. Here, though, we suffered a casualty that affected every Company E man, for it was here that we lost our company commander. He fell not as a victim of enemy fire but as a victim of his own determination and courage and self-imposed demands for performance. Fatigued by the long winter and weakened by a severe attack of pneumonia, he left Company E, not to return as its commander. Yet his example remained as the embodiment of the Company's strength, courage, aggressiveness, humor and...its honor.

The 4.2" mortars zeroed in on the draw with white phosphorous rounds, filling the whole area with dense smoke. The mortar section had trouble with one gun; before they adjusted it to the target, two rounds fell short: one in Company E's area, and one behind the Battalion Staff. There were no casualties.

Once their mortars were trained on the target the 4.2" platoon threw round after round into the open draw, and the enemy was soon unable to fire on us with any accuracy. Loaded down with equipment we ran across the valley as fast as we could. We forded a stream and struggled up the steep slope of the other side. Jerry continued to fire on a crossroads a few hundred yards distant, and spent fragments thudded all around us. The whole company finally crossed the draw unscathed.

The enemy didn't spot us again until we had climbed high on the side of the ridge. We had stopped to await further orders and to catch our

breath when several high-velocity SP guns opened up on us. We were exposed, and the rocky nature of the ground prohibited digging in. We moved on hurriedly and sought cover from the German guns in a terrain corridor on the ridge. Our artillery observers then went into action against the enemy. Perhaps they computed the German positions by shooting azimuths; at any rate, our artillery loosed everything they had on the SP guns. It was enough to disperse them, and we took no more fire from them.

Not long after this, we received instructions to seize a commanding piece of wooded terrain overlooking most of the surrounding territory . . . and commanding the all-important route to Bitche. The encirclement of Bitche was completed by this maneuver, and the rats were caught in their trap. The top of the hill was a little confining for the whole company. There were elaborately-dug gun positions, dugouts, and trenches about the crest. We holed-in, bone weary. Company E men then slept for the first time in 36 hours. After being restrained from its capture since going over to the defensive in December, it took the Century Division just 36 hours to accomplish what the Prussians failed to during their siege in 1793; what the Bavarians failed to achieve during their attack in 1870, and what the mighty *Wehrmacht* had been unable to do during their attack in 1940, namely seize the bastion of Bitche by force of arms. The Citadel—dating back to the early 1700s—had never before been conquered.

# 5

## The Rhine Drive

*Pirmasens, Germany, 22 March 1945*

We were packed on trucks, moving swiftly in a cloud of dust, when someone cried out "There's the border—the German border!"

It was 1002 hours, 22 March 1945 . . . and it was the second time Company E had crossed the German frontier. The pursuit-race had begun in Schweyen early that morning. The town had had barely enough buildings standing to shelter the Battalion. Companies scrambled to secure quarters. It was an enthusiastic scramble, though, for on the march from Waldhausen to Schweyen, news came that we had been taken off the line for a brief assignment as Corps reserve. At last, Company E was to get a rest. Men congratulated one another and spoke of the letters they were going to write, the sleep they were going to get, and the food they were going to eat. They dreamed for seven hours of their great reward. Then they were ordered back on line. The seven-hour reserve status had only one result: our record for continuous contact with the enemy was interrupted after 134 consecutive days.

After Bitche, our objective had been Waldhausen. Our march to that little French town had been a long and eerie one—under heavy skies, through still, dark forests. The roads were bordered by countless gun positions. Shell cases and ammunition boxes were strewn about. Mines were concealed in neat piles among the trees. The forest had been a German concentration point, and had been heavily shelled by American artillery. We were on the enemy so fast that here again they had been unable to remove their dead . . . or else didn't care. One German soldier, who had been covering a roadblock with an automatic rifle, was scattered over a 40-foot area. There were no recognizable parts of his body; only minute fragments of flesh and a red putty-like substance.

Jerry corpses lay along the roadside ditches, the dirty gray death pallor on their faces. "Wish every one of his buddies could see his stinkin'

body now," said a buck sergeant viewing a blood-drenched German corpse.

We took Waldhausen quickly, at dusk. There we had a chance to sleep off the nightmare of Bitche. There were a few shells, a few wild rushes for the cellars, but we had a rest. We stayed three days and reorganized. Our executive officer, back from a brief leave in Paris, assumed command.

The 60-mile lightning drive through the Siegfried Line (the Germans called it the *Westwall*) to the Rhine took only two days. We climbed on anything that was rolling forward—artillery trucks, tanks, half-tracks, jeeps, and trailers. We moved fast . . . so fast that tankers burned up bogey wheels as fast as they could replace them. The weather was warm; we enjoyed the race.

We left Schweyen at 0800, crossed the German border, and drove through the Siegfried Line. Viewing the maze of tank traps, dragon's teeth concrete tank obstacles, wire entanglements, trenches, and cunningly camouflaged steel-reinforced concrete pillboxes with their carefully-arranged interlocking fields of fire, we had to admit that it was all in superb defensive terrain; we breathed a prayer thanking Him we didn't have to fight our way through it. The Siegfried Line stretched out as far as one could see, and was about six miles deep at our breaching point. It was a game, during those six miles, to spot the well-camouflaged gun positions and pillboxes.

The white flag of surrender flew from every house in every town through which we roared. Flags? Well . . . pillowslips and sheets and nightgowns and petticoats, all converted suddenly into something more than protection from chilled air. In the first town, a group of *Wehrmacht* "supermen" were huddled dejectedly in the main square, guarded by two proud GIs. The very young civilians and the old waved us a happy welcome. We didn't wave back. The men and women from 15 to 40 years weren't happy. Their faces showed no hate, however, only dull

A Seventh Army M-10 tank destroyer crosses a row of "Dragon's Teeth" tank obstacles in the Siegfried Line. Combat engineers have built a field expedient berm over the otherwise impenetrable obstacles, and filled in the antitank ditch that laid beyond. The 100th Infantry Division was fortunate that the Germans chose to not defend the Siegfried Line in its sector. (*Signal Corps*)



incomprehension. They couldn't admit to themselves that the Fatherland, land of the *Herrenvolk* (the "Master Race") had been overrun by the "gum-chewing cowboy Americans."

By 2300 the first evening, we reached North Pirmasens, where we billeted in a former German Army Officer Candidate School. It was a group of beautiful modern structures much like a typical new American college. There were adequate quarters for the entire candidate battalion. Having ascertained there were no booby traps, we ate, posted guards, and slept.

The morning came warm and bright, and we left Pirmasens after a rush for souvenirs of the German OCS. We passed through deep gorges cut with flashing streams, dark evergreen forests, and charming villages. In one of the streams we washed away the dirt accumulated since we left Waldhausen. We passed through town after town and were gratified to see white flags everywhere. The people crowded along the sidewalks and hung out of windows to gawk at the passing Americans. The children ran in terror from our tanks. The civilians' faces exposed what was in their hearts. There were expressions of hate, resentment, and incomprehension.

We encountered a great many log crib roadblocks and also some roadblocks made of overturned army vehicles and huge buses. These blocks aren't effective, though, unless they're covered by infantry or artillery fire and with tanks and division engineers, we bored through quickly and without casualties. The quantities of enemy soldiers retreating along these roads must have been enormous. There was evidence of their

mad confusion on either side of the road. Their overloaded vehicles were abandoned where they broke down on the road. There were civilian cars and trucks, SP guns, kitchen vehicles, ammunition half-tracks, radar trucks, motorcycles, and even some French trucks.

The retreating enemy seemed to have demolished most of the heavy guns and other ordnance they abandoned, but the rest of the materiel lay where it had been driven—into a ditch or over a mountain precipice. Many of the vehicles had caught fire, or been burned purposely, and they still smoldered and stank of burning rubber. Despite their invention of modern mobile warfare, signs of the World War One level of technology that characterized much of the German Army were everywhere; many horse drawn vehicles lay abandoned or destroyed along the road, along with the occasional dead horses that had drawn them.

One thing very noticeable about the vehicles was the abnormal amount of trash around each one. It seemed that the Nazis had collected a little bit of everything and stored it all in their vehicles. After abandoning their unserviceable vehicles, they were unable to carry so many belongings on their backs and had apparently strewn them over the ground to pick out what they could use. There were scores of records, forms, photographs, manuals, toilet articles, apparel (both male and female), and *Wehrmacht* uniforms. There was also tableware and trinkets, possibly French loot. They were now running for their lives and were no longer interested in such items. Apparently, they were also through fighting, since many rifles



were left behind. There was an occasional dead soldier along the road who had probably died of his wounds and been left behind to lighten the load. It was the refuse of an army in its death throes, dying, but not yet dead.

We passed through two long columns that had been strafed the day before by our fighter bombers. The first that we saw was in a deep valley. We could smell the stench of death even before we could see the mass of wreckage. A haze of smoke drifted lazily above this area we dubbed "the Valley of Death." It was reported that 155 vehicles had been hit; in addition, there were scores of dead horses and destroyed wagons. A large number of dead Krauts were visible from the road. The scene indicated untold suffering. Horses had twisted themselves around the wreckage in their death struggles. Their bodies had burns on them with blisters as large as watermelons. The odor of burned flesh filled the air.

Toward the end of the afternoon, we roared into Neustadt, Germany. It is a large city, the largest we had been through. The rail yard at the approaches to the city had been thoroughly bombed as were other sections of town.

We stopped for the night in Hochdoch, Germany. Our first experience of evicting civilians from and taking over their houses as quarters for our troops was here. We were clumsy at this at first, but we soon became very proficient. A veteran of many quartering parties described the process this way,

The method, approved by *Good House-keeping*, is to select the most pretentious section of town with enough modern houses for at least two per platoon and one good house for the CP. Have the interpreters go to all the houses except the house chosen for the CP and give the civilians fifteen minutes to vacate. The civilians then take all their bedding and food to the CP house. After all is accomplished, take the quartering party to the house picked for the CP and evict the neighbors who thought they had a haven in the house not picked by the Army. The supply sergeant then sorts the bedding and food equally among the platoons.

The next morning, we left Hochdoch at 1115 hours, marching six miles to Schieferstadt. We arrived at 1230. The pace was too fast and because of the heat and the weight of their equipment, there were a great number of stragglers and some men fell out. We had no more than eaten and gotten settled when orders came to prepare to move once again. That evening we entrucked and shuttled to Oggersheim, Germany, arriving at 2145, having traveled about eleven miles. We were informed that we were in Corps Reserve, and we waited to cross the Rhine.

Oggersheim, a suburb of Ludwigshaven, the I.G. Farben chemical company manufacturing center, was a fair-sized town with only one modern section. We had that section. The men were in high spirits for these were the best quarters they had ever had in Europe. They banged away at pianos in the 1st and 4th Platoon houses from morning until night and sang until they were hoarse. They found extra food in the houses and chicken coops so the "cook" of the 1st Platoon cooked all hours of the day and night.

We maintained some roadblocks near Ludwigshaven but our main mission was getting rest. In our six days at Oggersheim, we resupplied the company and conducted some training. The training consisted mostly of athletics, however. It was good for morale, and enhanced agility.

We spent a day practicing techniques for fighting in built-up areas. We used a street of houses for the work, climbing all over them and throwing colored smoke grenades. We were interested and serious about this training for they told us our job from now on would be, for the most part, fighting in exactly this sort of environment.

Those of us who were among the original men to enter combat with the company were now seasoned veterans. We had the confidence of experience, but yet felt that we had had enough. Any combat soldier knows that the odds are against him and that the more days one spends on the line, the greater are the odds of calamity.

We hoped that we had seen the hardest part of the war and that the rest would merely be a chase after the defeated *Wehrmacht*. After all, we were at the Rhine. . .

# 6

## Heilbronn Horror

*Heilbronn, Germany, 4 April 1945*

The company mounted tanks, as many as 15 men on each, and left Oggersheim at 0715 on 31 March. It was a beautiful day and the men had an exciting time roaring thru town after town. Riding on top of a tank is an experience incomparable to any other one. A tank lunges when it starts or stops. They can turn on a dime and usually do. If you don't hold on tightly and pay attention to what the tank is doing, you don't stay on very long. The roar of the engine and the clatter of the tracks is terrific, and the vibration becomes painful after a few hours. The dust is ever present.

We rolled through Ludwigshafen with sirens screaming. The people "fell out" to watch us although division after division had passed through there to cross the pontoon bridge on the Rhine at that point. C.W.S. (Chemical Warfare Service) had the entire bridge area smoked to screen the operation from enemy view. The traffic was so great over the bridge that you had to have a priority number to cross. Ours were chalked on each tank. We had been allotted a definite amount of time to cross and the column had to arrive at the bridge site at a specific hour.

Mannheim was on the other side of the Rhine. This huge city had also been severely bombed. A



Centurymen barrel into Germany aboard Sherman tanks of the 781st Tank Battalion, spring 1945. (SOC)

great number of the population of both Ludwigshafen and Mannheim still lived in the big public air-raid shelters because fire and high explosive bombs had leveled their apartments.

Arriving in Eppelsheim, we took quarters in civilian homes. Five tanks, separated from the column, got as far as Heidelberg, met reconnaissance elements of the 12th Armored Division, and decided the column wouldn't be found in enemy territory. Men in Company E have frequently remarked that Sundays and holidays were always days of unrest and danger for us. We could expect it as surely as we could expect the dawn. Our first attack, near Baccarat, France, was on a Sunday, and with a few exceptions, successive Sundays brought tough attack orders under unfavorable conditions. Some of our bitterest experiences were encountered on holidays. Remember Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day?

April 1st was April Fools' Day and also Easter Sunday. It was a holiday, so something was bound to happen. The Krauts had never let us down. At 0615, we left Eppelsheim for our LD (line of departure). Here we got into position for the attack. We cleared the LD, a stream, at 0800, guiding on the autobahn. Moving through an old-growth forest for several hundred yards, with our tanks in support, we crossed the autobahn and went cross country in a direct line toward the town of Wiesloch. We had hiked nearly 10 miles, without making contact with enemy or enemy artillery, when we reached a large clearing. There were about 1,500 yards of completely open ground and two obstacles to cross. A railroad embankment, elevated about 10 feet, was the first; and a deeply-cut stream the other. We crossed the clearing aggressively but uneasily, negotiated the obstacles, and started up the slope toward a wood.

We had reached a row of trees along a road when the enemy opened up on us with direct fire

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## The Enemy, From Bitche to Stuttgart . . .

From the time of the fall of Bitche on 16 March 1945 through the remainder of the 100th Infantry Division's combat service, it would be misleading to identify specific large units which fought against the Division. Rather, the 100th was opposed by hastily-organized, *ad hoc* amalgams of available units, often lacking significant armored, mortar, or artillery support.

When the 100th first burst through the lines beyond Bitche and headed through the Palatinate toward the Rhine at Mannheim/Ludwigshafen, it was opposed by scattered units of the 17th SS-Panzer Grenadier Division and by *Volkssturm*, or local defense, units. It is in these latter units that the "14-year-old boys and 70-year-old grandfathers" that so many Century-men remember as their quarries during the war's final phase were assigned.

There were sometimes, however, also fanatical members of the Hitler Youth in these outfits, and they could make life difficult for both their fellow *Volkssturm* members (who might be inclined toward surrender) and attacking Century-men. The *Volkssturm*, however, were strictly last line of defense outfits, members of which were often clad in a sad sack mixture of German Army, *Luftwaffe*, police, and even *Reichswehr* (the pre-Nazi era German armed forces) uniforms, and equipped with odd lots of rifles, machine pistols, and, of course, the ubiquitous *Panzerfaust* anti-tank rocket launcher.

The last semblance of organized resistance met by the 100th was at Heilbronn, from 4–12 April 1945. Although the German defenders were truly remnants of regular infantry and other units, the mixed bag of *Volks-Grenadiers*, *SS-Panzer-Grenadiers*, infantrymen, and training unit troops that were brought together to resist the Division's crossings of the Neckar gave a good account of themselves during more than a week of ferocious fighting in and around the city.

The following list of German units and related information was gathered by the late Dr.

Günther Beck of Beilstein from American PW records (especially the 100th G-2's) available in the US National Archives.

Without doubt, the most well-organized and highly-motivated defenders of the Heilbronn area were the elements of SS-Panzer-Grenadier Regiment 38 of the 397th's old nemesis from Rimling, the 17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division. The better part of two weakened, but hard-fighting battalions of this regiment opposed the 398th Infantry along the Neckar. In fact, they were the same two battalions that attacked Rimling in early January.

Combat Group (*Kampfgruppe*) Bodendörfer (built around a remnant of Grenadier Regiment 689 of the 246th Volks-Grenadier Division) fought in the city center and industrial quarter, opposing the 3d/398th and the 397th Infantry Regiment. It counted among its ranks soldiers from a confusing array of combat and training units. The core unit, Grenadier Regiment 689, was originally activated as an integral part of the 337th Infantry Division, which was raised in November 1940 in Bavaria. After performing occupation duties in France, it was transferred to the 246th Infantry Division in combat in the Soviet Union in late 1941. After over 2½ years of fierce combat there, the 246th was transferred to Germany, reorganized as a *Volks-Grenadier* division and committed in the ferocious fighting in the Hürtgen Forest. After being brought back up to strength with the addition of many former *Luftwaffe* personnel and participation in the Ardennes Offensive in December, it was committed to defensive operations in Germany.

Combat Group Bodendörfer also apparently included remnants of Grenadier Regiment 223, formerly of the 16th Volks-Grenadier Division, veterans of fighting in the High Vosges and Colmar Pocket; a company-sized element of the 2nd Mountain Division's Mountain Infantry Regiment 136, veterans of three years of fighting above the Arctic Circle against the Soviets near Petsamo; and part of the 553rd Volks-Grenadier Division's Grenadier

Regiment 1121, which had fought in the Saverne Gap in November and counterattacked across the Rhine during *NORDWIND* in January. Several of the non-combat units pressed into defensive service, also evidently under Combat Group Bodendörfer's command, included the locally-stationed Training (*Ausbildungs-und-Ersatz*) Regiment 525, Flak Regiment 42, and even Punishment Battalion 292, a penal unit for errant German soldiers. Several of these units disappeared after the 100th seized the Heilbronn area, but Combat Group Bodendörfer continued to exist as an identifiable entity and withdrew toward Beilstein where it continued its defensive operations until destroyed.

Combat Group Krebs (built around a remnant of the 719th Volks-Grenadier Division) fought primarily around the south of Heilbronn, near Sontheim and Flein. The 719th was organized as an infantry division in 1941 in the Brandenburg region, in and around Berlin. It performed three years of occupation duty in the Netherlands and coastal defense duties along the North Sea coast. In September of 1944, it fought British and Commonwealth forces in the Netherlands and Belgium before being redesignated as a Volks-Grenadier Division and transferred to the Saar to fight US Third Army units.

Combat Group Mockros (principally Grenadier Regiment 423 of the 212th Volks-Grenadier Division) also fought in the southern districts of the city and its surroundings. Another unit raised in Bavaria, the 212th, had been activated in early 1939 as an infantry division and took part in the invasion of France in 1940. After three years of combat in the Soviet Union, it was transferred to Germany, quickly refurbished and reorganized as a Volks-Grenadier division, and thrust into the Ardennes as part of the massive German offensive there in December 1944. Coincidentally, most of the division ended the war in its home region of Bavaria after a long series of defenses and withdrawals across much of Germany.

By the end of the fighting in Heilbronn, both Combat Groups Mockros and Krebs had ceased to exist as recognizable units, and they were incorporated in the 559th Volks-Grenadier Division, known to the 100th from the fighting

in January around Bitche. Elements of the 559th, namely the company-sized Combat Group Maier, also fought in the Heilbronn area against units of the 100th, but further participation by this old foe of the Century Division is unconfirmed. The 559th withdrew toward Backnang and Münsingen, finally surrendering in those areas in late April.

Even as the 100th settled into occupation duties in the closing days before and just after the German unconditional surrender, there was one last foe with which Centurymen had to contend. Having viewed the havoc caused by partisans against the German armed forces in occupied lands, Heinrich Himmler and his SS had created a network of guerillas intended to hamper Allied and Soviet conquerors if and when they set foot on German soil. Called the "Werwolf" movement, these highly-motivated irregulars were to perform the full gamut of guerilla tasks, from gathering and communicating intelligence on the enemy, to ambushes, sabotage, and even intimidation and terror against German "collaborators" who may have lapsed into cooperation (read "not resisting against") the Allied and Soviet occupiers of their local regions.

Ultimately, the *Werwolf* concept did not live up to Nazi hopes, and lost momentum significantly after the final German surrender. In fact, many incidents that were attributed to the *Werwolf* by the Allied side turned out to be simple criminal acts by unconnected individuals. However, terror and crime incidents—especially violence against Allied soldiers, retribution against German "collaborators," and black marketeering aimed at raising funds for the movement—did continue sporadically all the way to 1947.

Overall, however, like the "Alpine Redoubt" in which high-ranking Nazis were supposedly going to carry on the war indefinitely, the *Werwolf* movement was a Nazi pipe dream which a demoralized and thoroughly defeated German population was too exhausted and too poor to support.



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from an 88mm and a 75mm antitank gun. They were located in a little town at the top of the ridge and so close you could almost hear them feed the shells into the breeches. They opened fire on our light tanks from the 781st Tank Battalion that had scooted to the row of trees and bushes for concealment. One tank bogged down in the middle of the field and, being a perfect target, the crew scrambled out as fast as they could. For some reason, however, the enemy didn't fire on that tank. We were sure a couple of their rounds were direct hits among the tanks in the row of trees, but found later that the hits were not direct and only tore off parts of the tanks. One tank section leader was killed, however, while in front of his tank, directing it into a firing position.

Most of Company E was caught in the open in a very vulnerable position. All we could do was try to run faster than they could traverse their artillery pieces—which we did. At that moment, they fell back on their old stand-by—the deadly tree bursts. They caught Company F just entering the woods, severely wounding a large number of men in the headquarters group, including the company commander.

Then the enemy turned on us with their artillery. It seemed as though they couldn't miss because we were spread all over the field like ducks in a shooting gallery. Shell after shell fell in our midst and the dispersion of fragments was terrific.

Most of the men hit the ground every time they heard the searing screech of a shell coming in at close range. Before they were down, the shell had detonated and they were up again running. Up and down, up and down, really running for their lives, and it was the longest 600 yards any had ever run. Shell fragments tore a walkie-talkie radio out of a runner's hand; another man would lose his helmet every time he hit the mud. Still another man crawled on his stomach across the field in a 12-inch-deep drainage ditch filled with water. We reached the woods that, of course, did not afford protection, but at least concealed us from direct observation.

The men fell into shallow drainage ditches trembling with exhaustion. We were all out of formation. The company was disorganized so we immediately checked casualties and reorganized. We found that we had lost contact with the 3rd Platoon and one squad of the 1st Platoon that

were with the company commander. Shells smacked in occasionally, but there wasn't time to duck. The company was split and that was dangerous. Then the first sergeant of the company on our left contacted us and said his company commander was badly wounded and he couldn't find an officer. "What should I do?" he asked. We got him to reorganize his company and told him to follow us when we moved out. Presently, a wicked firefight developed and we knew the 3rd Platoon had made contact with German infantry and was probably in trouble.

A civilian ran in on our flank. A soldier almost shot him for he waved no white flag of any sort. The enemy fired on his back from high ground on our right flank. He got to us without a scratch and with a sweep of his arm exclaimed in Polish, "German soldiers all over that high ground." From what he said and the occasional rifle fire from that direction, it looked like they were going to envelop us, so we built up a firing line to watch for them. We moved some elements of the company forward a few hundred yards closer to the sound of the firefight in which the 3rd Platoon was engaged. We could see nothing of them, however, through the dense underbrush. A party was sent forward to contact them and learn the situation. It would have been foolish to blindly commit the rest of the company in the same firefight if we could use them to maneuver around the German positions. Artillery began screaming overhead. It came from the direction of our artillery, was falling ahead of us, and had the noise of our 105s, but it barely skimmed the tree-tops and was uncomfortably close.

In the meantime, we had established radio contact with the company commander. He said our artillery was playing hell with the squareheads and that he had sent a runner back to guide us into position. By the time we reached the 3rd Platoon, the enemy had fled. We learned that our artillery observer had directed some daring missions; he had had the gunners drop some of the rounds within 50 yards of our troops' positions, but that had done the trick and scared off the enemy. We occupied the high ground that the Germans had located, and from it, we could look down into the town of Wiesloch. There were several homes on the peak of the ridge from the attics of which we planned our attack of Wiesloch. Through our field glasses, we could see the Krauts scrambling half way up the slope of the

ridge, beyond the far side of town. There was also activity in the trees at the crest of the ridge. It looked very much like they were going to leave the town for us. Our artillery observer radioed for concentrations and plastered the ridge. They used a lot of white phosphorous. Jerry threw some shells our way, but they struck behind us.

The right half of town, as we looked at it, was our responsibility for clearing. It was a big town and there was a lot of work ahead of us. The area was divided into four parts and each platoon had its zone to clear. By dusk, all platoons had reported "all clear" and established strong points around the perimeter of our end of town. The town was taken with but one casualty to Company E. We picked up about ten prisoners, mostly walking wounded. Battalion said we could expect hot chow to get up to us, so we settled down, worn out and hungry, to await it. Before very long, orders came from battalion that they were consolidating the battalion into the center of town. Leaving our newly-occupied quarters, we moved into the area designated by battalion, "harassing" more civilians to quarter the company. Chow arrived just as we got to our new quarters. The supply sergeant had come along and brought up sleeping bags for the men.

Wiesloch was a hospital town with several large hospitals and thousands of *Wehrmacht* casualties. One hospital had four Yank prisoners who were liberated when our battalion took the town. They had been working in the hospital. Their story was the same as was all of our soldiers'. The closer the American army came, the better the treatment they had received from the Germans.

The next morning, we guarded one of the larger hospitals. No one was allowed out and only

doctors and nurses were allowed in. It was very evident that there were hundreds of German soldiers limping around there with nothing more wrong with them than an unrelenting fear of the United States Army. The head surgeon was furious with us because we wouldn't let him go home. He was brazenly intoxicated and his nose indicated he had been in that condition a long time. He was much quieter after we shoved him against the wall and barked at him. Later he turned his rage on his staff with all the dramatics of a cheap movie. He was a little Göring, from his pompous attitude to his ostentatious uniform.

That afternoon, we left Wiesloch for Sinsheim. The battalion marched about 10 miles along a highway with tanks dispersed in the column. We drew close enough to see Sinsheim and took cover on both sides of the road. Elements of the Division Cavalry Recon Troop contacted us and said as far as they could see the town was clear of enemy. We waited while this was confirmed. As we were waiting, enemy artillery shelled us. They lobbed rounds in, up, and down our long column from a great range. Because of the range, our tanks were unable to locate the German artillery and deliver counter-battery fires.

Although the Germans' fire wasn't concentrated, they did demolish a jeep in the battalion and wounded a man near it. They harassed us all the way as we rushed into the outskirts of Sinsheim and took cover in the first few buildings we encountered.

Our quartering party found a newer section of town and evicted the tenants. By the time the Company was ready to move to their quarters for the night, the shelling had ceased and it was almost dark.



An M-18 "Hellcat" tank destroyer of the 824th TD Battalion blasts German positions in support of the 2d/397th's advance near Wiesloch, April 1945. (SOC)

The modern, luxurious homes in Sinsheim were comfortable. The next morning, when we hadn't gotten orders to move by 0800, we started some wishful thinking. By 1000, it seemed that we surely would not move that day. Shortly thereafter, however, attack orders came and by 1100, we were on the march with medium and light tanks and a few tank destroyers from the 824th Tank Destroyer Battalion. Our mission was to attack and clear the town of Hilbach south of Sinsheim. We passed through several small farm towns en route to our objective. The only obstacles were blown-out bridges; a minefield laid across the road that was detected and removed; and a sniper. The sniper shot at our backs just as we passed a small village, the people of which had waved at us as we passed. It was not unusual to be "shot in the back" after passing through a cheering, waving village. This sniper didn't hit anyone and an officer grabbed a BAR and emptied a magazine in the sniper's direction.

The clearing of Dubach was uneventful. We systematically searched all buildings in the portion of town assigned to us. We took some prisoners. One was caught discarding his uniform and donning the garb of a farmer. Having completed clearing the town, we sat down to eat and rest while we awaited further orders. The town baker gave bread to the GIs and civilians passed around *Most* to those thirsty enough to drink it. *Most* is an apple cider-wine type of drink, used principally by the urbans, with practically no alcoholic content, and a flavor resembling stagnant horse urine (or what we imagined it would be). By our orders, the natives brought cameras, firearms, ammunition, and knives to our CP.

Our orders arrived within an hour. We were to backtrack to a point where there was an east-west road and then follow this road, in Battalion column, heading east. This was the beginning of another long record-breaking road march. We passed through town after town not bothering to clear them, since we met no resistance. The only breaks we got were on the occasions that we were held up by a roadblock. Hour after hour, we marched forward. By nightfall, as we would approach a town, the doughfeet would ask, "Is this the town?" But on and on we marched, one foot in front of the other in a stupid procession. As each hour passed, it seemed that they couldn't keep us going another hour. In the darkness, some men became too exhausted to march and

the tanks would stop while they climbed on for a ride. Our sweat from the heat of the day chilled us in the cold of night and, to add the ultimate to our misery, it began to rain. We had been marching since 1100, on our feet 14 hours for it was now 0100 and we were on the outskirts of a town called Furfeld. The column halted and quartering parties were called forward.

The troops were terribly exhausted and wet and anxious for a place to lie down, so the quartering party had to do a fast job. They did! Civilians were awakened from their deep slumbers to see American soldiers, dripping wet, with haggard faces, ordering them to go sleep with their friends, that American troops were occupying their house. Some people in typical German obstinacy tried to argue, but most of them, reading the urgency in our soldiers' faces, hurriedly dressed and vanished in the night. One old Kraut, probably with a guilty conscience, started down the street in his nightgown, barefooted, dragging his wife behind him. A soldier realized that he had been drinking and made him return and get his clothes. One prolific young lady fell her squad of infant Aryans onto the streets crying that she welcomed soldiers in her home, but that we were very inconsiderate. Apparently, the *Wehrmacht* had slept in the same house with her, but the Americans wouldn't.

Usually the platoon leaders decided whether the men were to sleep with their boots on. That was the big question every time we slept and took careful consideration. The situation was thoughtfully weighed and when the men slept with their boots, the situation was grave. This night, however, there were no questions asked. Boots were taken off to care for bloody, blistered feet and to rest throbbing arches. We had marched 20 miles through hilly country.

The men made beds where they had dropped, exhausted, in their houses. It was generally felt that after such a grueling day and night the command would not move the next day. We were there fore disbelieving when, early the next morning, we were alerted and told to be ready to make a motor march by 0800, after a hot breakfast brought up by our cook.

On 4 April 1945, Company E, entering its 154th day of combat operations with five officers and 147 enlisted men, advanced to the west bank of the Neckar River opposite the heavily fortified city of Heilbronn. The Company was assigned the

mission of spearheading the 2nd Battalion's attack on the city by first clearing the factory district to enable the remaining companies to attack into the city center. With very little prior artillery preparation, the Company jumped off at 1430, paddling in small assault boats across the swiftly flowing Neckar River under observation and direct fire by rockets, artillery, and mortars from a dominating ridge northeast of the city. Leading the Company's attack, the 2nd Platoon, despite murderous crossfire from automatic weapons and heavy mortar fire, overran the enemy dug in along the east bank, taking sixty prisoners and inflicting heavy casualties upon the enemy.

The Company then advanced over open ground to the factories lying two hundred yards to their front, but well situated automatic weapons closed all avenues of approach to the buildings, their fire being so heavy that the Company was pinned down and unable to gain cover or concealment. The enemy continued their devastating fire, inflicting heavy casualties upon Company E. The 2nd Platoon platoon leader finally reached one factory with a squad of men. There he started to adjust 81mm mortar fire on the hostile automatic weapon position. The enemy emplacement was so close to his own that several rounds were direct hits on his building. Unhesitatingly, he continued to fire on the enemy position, getting a direct hit. Still the remainder of the Company could not move without extreme casualties. The situation was desperate and it was decided to move the 1st Platoon of the Company around the right flank of the 2nd Platoon under the cover of dusk and assault the heavily fortified factory from which they were receiving fire.

Achieving complete tactical surprise, and with great daring of movement, the 1st Platoon penetrated enemy positions, gained control of the building and provided covering fire for the remaining platoons as they struck at another factory. Company "E" then received the order to push on and take the remaining buildings even though darkness was at hand and it was difficult to differentiate between friend from foe. At 0300 on 5 April 1945, the enemy mustered every available man and weapon and struck at the 1st Platoon positions, employing infantry in superior numbers estimated to be battalion strength. Under cover of heavy and accurate artillery fire, the Germans fought viciously and stubbornly in an effort to seize the positions. They killed the 1st

Platoon platoon leader during this assault and wounded many with grenades and panzerfausts.

Failing to take the position by physical force after three separate assaults, the enemy set fire to the buildings by using panzerfausts in numbers never encountered before. After this volley of antitank rockets, 34 Germans turned to assault the remaining platoon positions. Under the leadership of the Weapons Platoon Sergeant, the 1st Platoon, with one attached light machine gun squad, fought their way back into friendly positions. Although many men were wounded and injured by enemy fire and the burning building, the fighting courage of the men from the 1st Platoon could not be denied. Some, although wounded, carried, dragged and encouraged one another back to safety, bringing their weapons with them. What was left of the machine gun squad dragged their .30-caliber back with them, too.

Along with their platoon leader, several members of the 3rd Platoon were cut off by this attack. They had infiltrated to a position on the second floor of an adjoining building where they could observe the Germans assembling for a flanking attack on the Second and 3rd Platoons. They killed and wounded a score of the enemy by a coordinated surprise volley of automatic fire and a barrage of hand grenades. The enemy soon reorganized and attacked our handful of men by throwing hand grenades through the windows and shooting through the wooden floor on which they were standing. However, by crawling 75 yards on hands and knees over one iron catwalk between two factories, this small group managed to get back to positions occupied by the remainder of the platoon.

Although having observed the fate of the 1st Platoon, the 2nd and 3rd Platoons, along with machine gunners and mortar men acting as riflemen, grimly held their ground until support was brought by another company. The buildings they were holding were burning and direct hits from rockets and large artillery shells were landing every few seconds, but they still clung tenaciously to their hard won gains.

At 0700, 5 April 1945, Company E, despite a shortage of ammunition, no food, rapidly mounting casualties, and determined enemy pressure, attacked again and forced the enemy to withdraw, and the remnants of the company held the positions against repeated counterattacks.

Company E had weakened the defenses of the enemy to such an extent that the battalion's objective was attacked successfully with the remaining companies. During these two days' actions, Company E suffered 42 casualties, which included nine killed, 29 wounded, and four missing in action. Enemy casualties including an estimated 400 dead or wounded and 150 captured, plus losses of 200 rifles and automatic weapons, 150

panzerfausts, 100 miscellaneous pieces of ordnance and munitions, and large quantities of rifle ammunition. The fighting aggressiveness, intrepidity in battle and devotion to duty displayed by the officers and men of Company E, 397th Infantry, reflect the highest honor on the Army of the United States. The 2nd Battalion received the Presidential Unit Citation for its capture of Heilbronn.

# Objective Heilbronn

by William J. Law

On April 4, 1945 Company E, 397th was on the road to Neckargartach with the mission to clear the area on our way to the Neckar River. That morning a big ball of dust came rolling toward our rear. It was Captain MacAlister, our battalion S-3 (Operations Officer), driving madly in a jeep. He was in a hurry to get me to General Burress for a meeting. I turned the company over to my Executive Officer, Lieutenant Craig Davison, and climbed into the jeep for the ride to Neckargartach. It was then that MacAlister told me that the town had been taken by elements of the 10th Armored Division and was secure.

In the middle of the town, we met Major General Burress, members of his staff, and the CG of the 10th Armored Division, Major General William H. H. Morris. Pointing at Heilbronn on the wall map, and with tension evident in his voice, General Burress told me of the situation that was generating Company E's mission. The 3rd Battalion, 398th Infantry had crossed the Neckar River near Neckargartach, established a beachhead, but had been counterattacked by larger German forces and extremely accurate artillery. In fact, they were facing our old adversaries from Rimling, elements of the 17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division. Unless supported quickly, they would be wiped out.

My mission was to assemble the company quickly, cross the river, and attack the glass factory area on the 3rd/398th's right flank. This was to be done with no artillery or mortar support. I was assured the remainder of the battalion was enroute to support us. I then asked the 10th Armored Division's CG for a platoon of tanks to remain in Neckargartach and support us from there with their heavy firepower. He quickly answered "No." He insisted that enemy artillery was too hot in that area. He had tried to put a bridge across the river and it had been blown out. His division was headed north to explore other potential crossings. General Burress closed the meeting by wishing us luck and promising some kind of support as soon as possible. It was a bright, sunny day. Almost every movement drew

more German artillery fire. Nonetheless, I got MacAlister to drive me to the tallest house near the river. From the third floor of the house we could see the general location of the 3rd/398th, the power station and the glass factory area. The company hadn't arrived yet, so we went on to contact the 325th Engineers. With them we arranged for small rubber assault boats manned by engineers. We specified the location of the boats, routes to them, and our objective which was the powerhouse on the other side. It was selected because it was tall and wide and would give us the most protection even though the Germans could observe us at the boat loading area.

As soon as the company arrived, the men consumed their K rations. We were down to about 150 men and five officers (from the authorized strength of 187 and 6). The 60mm mortars were left behind for our supply sergeant to pick up. Their weight was too much for the boats and there wasn't enough room. The mortar men replaced their mortars and mortar ammo with rifles plus extra machine gun and rifle ammo.

Without prior training, the company was going to make a hazardous river crossing in heavily laden rubber boats under artillery and small arms fire. Soon, the 325th Engineers were at hand and ready with boats and had a smoke generator functioning. We started loading boats at 1400 hours on 4 April. The 2nd Platoon led, followed by my command group—first sergeant, runner, and radio operator. Next the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Platoons crossed, in that order. The machine gun sections crossed with the 1st and 2nd Platoons so that their firepower would be available when establishing the beachhead.

We had our first break—we crossed the ominous Neckar in very short order, without loss of personnel or equipment. As soon as the 2nd Platoon hit the west bank, they initiated their assault to the right of a coal pile, crossing an open yard toward the glass factory. The 1st Platoon attacked across open ground toward a house, probably the plant superintendent's. It was

located outside the factory compound of the power plant. They reached the house but could not move beyond it because of artillery and automatic small arms fire. The terrain was wide open and flat, extending back to hills that dominated the area. The hills afforded the Germans excellent observation into our area of operations.

After moving 300 yards from the bank of the river, the 2nd Platoon was pinned down by automatic fire from three directions.

In the meantime we had the mortar section, serving as riflemen, dig in just beyond and to the right of the coal pile. They would help hold a beachhead area for support troops when they arrived. We were pinned down on flat ground and suffering casualties. We were in trouble and needed artillery support. We didn't get it.

I had positioned our company CP group in the right rear corner of the powerhouse. It was full of people—two CPs from the 3rd/398th Infantry and their observer teams, plus a temporary aid station and a holding area for wounded. The 2nd platoon was still pinned down and unable to move forward. I ordered the 3rd Platoon to attack to the right of the 2nd to provide more firepower. Both platoons then moved forward, reaching the supply shed of the glass factory. This was a better position, but we still sustained some casualties.

The 1st Platoon, in the superintendent's house, couldn't move forward and the house was of little tactical use. I moved the platoon back to a position near the coal pile and power station. On the way back, they sustained artillery fire. Several were wounded. First Lieutenant Pete Petracco picked up one wounded man and carried him back to cover. In doing so he exposed himself to additional fire. He later received the Silver Star for this, which was also the first one awarded for valor in this action. Ultimately, he was the only man in the entire 397th Infantry to earn two Silver Stars (the other was awarded for his actions at Rimling).

Both the 2nd and 3rd Platoons were taking casualties every time they moved, mostly from the open plant yard area on the right. I sent the 1st Platoon to attack on the right to eliminate this flanking fire. They captured the administrator of the glass factory, and that eliminated the flanking fire for the time being. The mortar section maintained the "hold line" for the beachhead.

It was becoming dusk. German artillery and mortar fire never stopped falling on us. The

Battalion wire group was not sent to us, so we could not communicate with the three platoons by phone. I had lost radio contact with both the 2nd and 3rd Platoons, so I didn't know how far into the glassworks they had gotten. In desperation, I sent a runner to each and neither one returned.

As dusk turned to darkness, I heard from battalion. They said Company F was on its way to support us. By now, it had been four hours since we had crossed the river. I knew where the 1st Platoon was and decided to go there. I took my radioman with me. He didn't take his radio with him because the weight slowed him down. Crossing the open ground of the glass factory yard, running full speed, we reached the cover of a small shed. It was a little more than half the distance to the office building. As soon as we caught our breath, we began our run for the side entrance of the administration building. As we were running we could see men in open windows on the second floor. It was Lieutenant Petracco and several others who had come to the windows to cover us from fire on the right. That's when all hell broke loose.

The withering fire was coming from a house on the right at the edge of the yard. They let go with an incredible number of grenades in our direction. Although intended for us, the grenades hit the side of the office building and others went through the open windows. We heard calls for medics as we entered the door. We reached the second floor by taking steps two at a time. The room was dark. Walls were crumbled by the grenades. The dust was so heavy that it was difficult to breathe. We used a flashlight cautiously. There were wounded men, blinded by debris and men disoriented by the concussion intensified by a small room.

I found Pete Petracco. He lay mortally wounded. Pete died in my arms and his men fell silent. They knew from my anguish he was dead.

As the senior noncoms present were wounded or blind, I asked a junior noncom to take over the platoon. It was important to hold this position with what was left of the 1st Platoon. My runner and I returned, under cover of darkness, to our CP in the power station. There we learned that there was still no word from the 2nd and 3rd Platoons. There was also no word from battalion HQ. We found a forward observer from the Company H mortar platoon who called in fire on



The rubble-strewn streets of Heilbronn provided excellent cover and concealment for the German defenders. Here, Centurymen advance under fire in the Division's last major battle of the war. (SOC)

the house and row of buildings from which the grenades had come. We could not use him to hit any other areas because we did not know where the two lost platoons were.

I thought about the junior noncom I temporarily put in charge of the 1st Platoon. They needed a strong leader, so I sent Technical Sergeant Tom Convery, the 4th (Weapons) Platoon platoon leader, up to the 1st Platoon with my runner, Private First Class Bert Schleisman. I told Tom to reorganize the platoon, set up a defensive position, and to hold the administration building at all costs. I knew if we lost it, the Germans could outflank our position and drive us into the river. Between 2200 and midnight, Company F arrived. Because it was so dark they took a position in the first shelter of the glass factory yard. There they prepared to attack in the early morning.

The Germans counterattacked at about 0300 on 5 April, focusing their attention on the administration building. They fired automatic weapons, and panzerfausts, and used plenty of grenades, both fragmentation and incendiary. This set the building on fire.

The building was soon an inferno. Sergeant Convery told his men to abandon the building, and that each man was to get back across the open yard to our final defense line, held by the 4th Platoon. In the process, a number were wounded, burned or temporarily blinded. Most reached our final defensive position and were evacuated back across the river as soon as boats were obtained. Sergeant Convery was seriously wounded, as were others. He stopped the litter carriers at the CP to apologize to me for not holding the building. It was not necessary. He had done all he could. Then he said he had to leave five dead soldiers in that burning building. Much

later we found out that one of those soldiers, Private First Class Victor H. Nash, found his way into a subbasement where he survived the artillery and fire and came out two days later when the action advanced past the area.

We soon had the support of our artillery and heavy mortars. With what remained of Company E, we forced the Germans to suspend their attacks. Not long afterward, Company F passed through Company E to continue the attack. Companies G and H then crossed the Neckar to support the 2nd Battalion's attack. In its devastated condition, Company E was unable to continue offensive operations. Not knowing what had happened to the two platoons, it appeared that we had lost three officers and fifty-four men since crossing the river.

As Company F continued its slow, building to building advance in the industrial compound, they picked up parts of our Company's 2nd and 3rd Platoons. This group was returned to the CP which was now located in the glass factory. The two lieutenants were OK, as were most of the men in both platoons. I asked the officers how they got out of contact with the CP. They said they were in a vulnerable position and did not want to risk detection by using their radios.

Our corrected count of soldiers present for duty was thus four officers and fewer than a hundred men. We were very tired and very hungry. None of us had eaten since noon on April 4th. We were ready to go back across the river and revert to battalion reserve.

We started the reorganization of the company, changing assignments, appointing new squad and platoon noncoms, and assimilating replacements. We were now in a position to renew our support of the block by block attack on the city.

All of the Division's infantry units had crossed the Neckar River. Company E was given the mission of clearing pockets of resistance including the fortified high ground that 3rd/398th had failed to eliminate. We met strong resistance, but now we had heavy mortar and artillery to pin the enemy down. By dusk we had taken the high ground. It was a German observation post that had given all of us a hard time before and during the battle for the city. We finally silenced our nemesis.

\* \* \*

The five men who lost their lives in the administration building of the glass factory were Lieutenant Peter F. Petracco, Sergeant Earl H. Leland, Technician 5th Grade Olan Dabbs, and Privates First Class Harold E. Miller and William A. Brenahan. They were cremated in the fire of the burning building. All that was found were their dog tags. Their remains were buried initially in a common grave in France. Later they were moved to Arlington National Cemetery. I have visited them there many times. Along with the rest of the 2nd Battalion, the soldiers of Company E received a unit Presidential Citation for outstanding accomplishments, plus Silver Stars for Lieutenant Petracco, Technical Sergeant Convery

and Lieutenant Knighton in addition to numerous Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts.

Observers of the initial struggle for Heilbronn have said that more awards were earned than awarded. Comments have also been made that casualties would have been lower if artillery had been available.

### **Bill Law**

When asked what the most memorable experience of his life was, Bill Law said "Heilbronn." He then provided a picture perfect account from memory of what happened on Wednesday and Thursday, 4 and 5 April, 1945. At that time he agreed to also provide a written account and did so on January 26, 1993. William J. Law is the author of "Objective Heilbronn."

Bill Law was the Commanding Officer of Company E, the outfit that led the attack on Heilbronn. He was a First Lieutenant promoted to Captain after the battle.

He is now a retired major living comfortably in Greensboro, North Carolina with his wife. He keeps in touch with WWII comrades and participates in various military and veterans' group functions, including extensive support of the 100th Infantry Division Association.

## **The Distinguished Unit Citation for the 2nd Battalion, 397th Infantry Regiment**

*authorized by War Department General Order 101-46*

The 2d Battalion, 397th Infantry Regiment, is cited for outstanding accomplishment in combat during the period 4 to 12 April 1945, at Heilbronn, Germany. On 4 April the 2d Battalion launched its frontal assault against Heilbronn, key German rail center and defensive bastion of the Neckar River line. Ferrying assault forces across the Neckar under intense concentrations of artillery and mortar shelling as well as small-arms fire, advance elements overran entrenched enemy positions on the east bank, inflicted heavy casualties, and established a precarious bridgehead. For 7 consecutive days, the 2d Battalion then fought its way forward street-by-street, house-by-house, and even room-by-room, overcoming fanatical enemy resistance and repulsing counterattack after counterattack as the enemy struggled desperately to hold Heilbronn at all costs. Enemy artillery fire on dominating hills surrounding the city pounded the river crossing site with unabated savagery, preventing the bridging of the stream and making it necessary to ferry supplies and casualties across the Neckar throughout the battle. Attempts to float armor across the river failed when improvised rafts capsized, and lacking tank support, the 2d Battalion doggedly inched its way forward until, on 11 April, final remnants of the defending forces were routed from high ground behind the city. Thus the 2d Battalion, 397th Infantry Regiment, by dint of resolute, unfaltering courage displayed by every man and the perfect coordination of all elements, crushed fanatical enemy resistance, breached the formidable Neckar defense line, and made possible the present drive. into Austria.. (General Orders 260, Headquarters 100th Infantry Division, 29 September 1945.)

# Military Government Occupation Germany

by Major William Law, Army  
Captain Craig Davison, Army

They walk through the woods at a wary but fast pace. They did not intend to lose the two soldiers who were leading them along a nearly invisible trail. They were quiet and absorbed in thought. They knew they were headed into a horrific battle, and that their destination was Company E. Their combat gear was new and clean. They looked young. They heard the sound of thunder in the distance. It was artillery shells detonating—theirs and ours.

The 65 replacement soldiers entered Heilbronn. The buildings had been pulverized by mortar and artillery fire. There was the stench of burned buildings and worse, and choking smoke reaching high into the sky. They followed over debris, under it, and around it in the factory area of the city. They reached the partially standing walls of a factory building. A piece of roof remained for cover. This, they were told, was the Company E command post. It was too small to enter. They were very uncomfortable standing outside hearing small arms fire and the artillery shells exploding near enough to shake the earth under their feet. Their CO, Captain Bill Law, introduced himself and then his executive officer, Lieutenant Craig Davison. The faces of both officers showed the strain of several days and nights of intensive combat and the pain of seeing their men wounded and killed. The replacements were taken to their platoon leaders. For them it was a time of terror and confusion: the time for their baptism of fire and the unknown that follows.

It was called "Observation Hill." From its height, the German artillery spotters had had almost unrestricted fields of observation across the Neckar River Valley and the city of Heilbronn. Company E led the 2nd Battalion out of Heilbronn, leaving the First and Third Battalions to secure the city. Our objective was to seize Observation Hill. Our attack formation was the 2nd and 3rd Platoons in the lead, with the 1st and 4th platoons following.

We began moving across 1000 yards of open ground. The company was immediately pinned down by artillery and mortar fire. This was the baptism of fire for the 65 replacements. They became temporarily immobile. Experienced men advanced to get out of the beaten zone, but the green replacements did the natural thing and froze where they were. Captain Law and the other company leaders pleaded, urged and kicked them to get the new men advancing. They had to move off the open field to the slope of the hillside. They were less likely to be hit there.

Eventually we scaled the high ground in the face of harassing fire from automatic weapons. Near the hilltop there was silence. By that time the Germans had moved away. The company occupied the high ground at the edge of a densely wooded ridge, and established a defensive perimeter. The Company dug in in anticipation of the expected German counterattack. It was 1500 hours.

The CO turned command of the company over to his Executive Officer and went with his runner, Bert Schliesman, to confer with Major Wisdom, the Battalion Commander. Battalion headquarters was located on a lower part of the lee of the hill. It was dark before they could return. They dug a foxhole and returned to the company position at dawn.

Captain Law told his officers our mission was to proceed toward Bad Canstatt at 0700. We went through miles of vineyards. Later we learned that there were over a 1,000 acres of vineyards in the region. We could see the 1st Battalion moving out of Heilbronn on our right and attacking in the same direction. We encountered intermittent harassing fire. We had firefights in two small towns. From that point on, although we remained in attack formation, and we weren't fired upon. The march from Heilbronn to Bad Canstatt was about 30 miles. We were surprised that the *Wehrmacht* had not adequately defended these towns.

The next morning, Captain Law asked Lieutenant Davison how he would like to manage Bad Canstatt. Normally, military government was the responsibility of specially trained civil affairs personnel. This was a sudden change from fighting skills to the administration of a city.

When the *Wehrmacht* left Bad Cannstadt, confused citizens returned to farms, stores and homes. With no training in military government we established a priority of tasks to be accomplished and began carrying them out. Having studied German, Lieutenant Davison could communicate with townspeople in a passable fashion. The first thing he did was to locate the former *Bürgermeister* (mayor) and put him back in his *Rathaus* (town hall). He knew how to run his city and we could then just supervise and enforce the rules. The *Bürgermeister* set up a dusk-to-dawn curfew. That included Germans and French and American personnel in the area. We started 24-hour jeep-mounted patrols of four soldiers with rifles and carbines ready for any emergency. Our men cleaned up and washed their jeeps to present the sharpest appearance possible, the German populace would undoubtedly be judging us, and we wanted to instill respect, as well as fear.

For a while, people broke curfew and there were other disturbances but soon there were few problems to report. We commandeered German vehicles so that the mayor could handle the distribution of food and garbage. We helped them rebuild their communication system and other public service utilities. Our behavior earned their appreciation and respect. They knew of the deeply seated hatred of the French and of the Russian propensity for brutality. At first they were cautiously fearful of us, but before long they were friendly and anxious to please us.



Centurymen advancing through southern Germany, April 1945 (SOC)

Captain Law and Sergeant Charles Martinotti visited the German commanding officer of a hospital in Bad Canstatt. They went there to make sure the commander understood the rules of the area and specifically that nobody was to leave the hospital without clearing it with our CO. Two German enlisted men were waiting in the hall leading to the commander's office. One was missing an arm, while the other was missing a foot. They stood at attention and saluted Captain Law as he passed; he returned their military greetings. Through the German Youth and Hitler Youth systems, Germans had been trained since boyhood to show respect for officers. They may also have been showing respect for a conqueror.

We had problems with French military units that were coming into Bad Canstatt from Stuttgart. It had originally been the 397th's mission to seize Stuttgart, but for political reasons, General Eisenhower allowed elements of the First French Army take the city and occupy it.

Frequently, the hospital CO would alert us to the location of an SS man who had returned home. We took them into custody and sent them to the proper authorities for trial. When the Germans realized the SS men were being put on trial for their crimes they began to inform about them. They were despised and feared by the people. Their power was so absolute they could imprison, torture and murder. They were in charge of intelligence, central security, police functions, and racial affairs, including the extermination of undesirables.

We left Bad Cannstadt in the hands of military government and road marched southeast as fast as we could in attack formation. We passed through Esslingen, Göppingen and Geislingen. We covered 60 miles without conflict and reached Ulm in three days.

On the walk to Ulm our senses were adjusted. The sights of war were gradually eradicated and the beauty of the countryside and the smells of budding spring emerged. We came back to reality at last. The tip of a church spire could be seen above the skyline. The spire gradually rose as we marched forward. Finally, we could see the church and the town surrounding it. We saw Ulm in the distance. Company headquarters was set up in the center of the city. We cleared the city of German soldiers then looked for the mayor. We found an intelligent and well-informed person. He knew the people to contact to build an organ-

ization and get the city functioning. He put the curfew into effect for us and was quick to get milk and vegetables to the citizenry. After two days in office, we learned he was a Communist.

The catholic Bishop spoke to Captain Law about the mayor's political persuasion and was adamant about having him replaced. Law replied that the bishop should find someone who can run the city for us. The Bishop phoned two days later saying the people he had in mind refused to take the mayor's job. The Communist did a good job running the city so we kept him in office. The military government people could solve this dilemma when they took over. We had other problems at the moment.

The most formidable challenges were caused by the situations of laborers from central and eastern Europe, including Poland, Yugoslavia, Lithuania, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Estonia. They had been brought to Germany to support the German war effort, sometimes as volunteers, but usually as forced labor. They lived in camps provided by the German Army. When the Germans left Ulm, they abandoned these laborers and they became, in official parlance, DPs (displaced persons). While many wanted nothing more than to return home, many others were reluctant to go, as the Red Army was now occupying their countries. Those who had willingly cooperated with the Germans—and those who might be falsely accused of such comportment—were truly “up the creek.”

We found them starving and in poor health. They were without means of obtaining food. We found food for them and gave them some of our rations, but we didn't have the means to provide as much as they needed. They were frequently violent, attacking German civilians, perhaps in retaliation for past abuses. They stole and didn't have much regard for curfew regulations. They were difficult to control because they didn't seem to understand German and were absolutely unable to comprehend English.

One DP camp was close to a large cheese factory where they worked. They constantly raided the factory for the cheese. When we first heard of a raid we put a guard on the factory. We evicted unauthorized people from the factory. They resisted. We used force and some DPs were injured, but none seriously. They had to obey the rules for citizens, but we were very sympathetic toward their condition.

The beautiful blue Danube flows southeast through Ulm. Many buildings in the old town were destroyed, but many remained. The former beauty of the city of 92,000 could be envisioned in the undamaged buildings surrounded by the city walls with their gates and towers.

Ulm possesses one of the most beautiful cathedrals in Germany, a fourteenth-century structure whose 528-foot tower is the highest church tower in the world. Inside the cathedral are wonderfully carved choir stalls. It took an accurate, considerate bombardier to spare that religious masterpiece. The mayor wanted us to know that Ulm was the birthplace of Albert Einstein. He also wanted us to know that at nearby Giengen there is a bust of President Theodore Roosevelt. The citizens placed it there because that is where the original Teddy Bear was made and named after him. The big news at that time was that the Russians were advancing rapidly on Berlin. We had a selfish but normal view about that news. The more they sacrificed, the less we had to.

A military government outfit moved into Ulm and we moved out. Our next move was back north-northwest about 30 miles to Göppingen. It was a beautiful spring day in May. As we marched, we could see people playing on the banks of the Danube. The Division was placed in corps reserve when we occupied Göppingen. From early November 1944 when we took over Baccarat, France from the 45th Division, except for what literally amounted to a few hours spent in reserve, we were in constant contact with the enemy without one day of relief up to the time we moved into Göppingen. That was almost six full months of action. Through it all, the backbone of our company were those men who had been with the outfit at Fort Bragg, who lasted through the war, and were often those who had been wounded and returned. Those combat E-men, and the replacements who joined us before Heilbronn and fought with us through that last major battle have a bond closer than brothers.

We found an Olympic-size swimming compound with a pool, bathhouses, tables, chairs and umbrellas. The Germans who ran the place told us that some Olympic events had been held there in 1936. Wearing swim trunks pool side, the artillery tattoos were noticeable on the exposed bodies of some of the men. A shrapnel scar appears jagged on the skin and is often large. We made a commercial building into an enlisted

men's recreation area and furnished it. The men called it the "Copcabaña East" after a then famous New York City nightclub. We set up baseball diamonds and played a lot of baseball and football, much to the entertainment of a lot of German spectators. There was not much military activity.

We patrolled the area and kept a 24-hour guard on our housing complex. We had forced some residents out of their houses which sometimes caused hard feelings and thus a possible problem. We allowed the owners into their houses one hour on one day each week. Women asked to clean our laundry. They did not want their currency (marks) but rather chocolate, cigarettes, sugar and canned food.

Göppingen had been the home of Heinrich Himmler. He was one of the most sinister figures in Nazi Germany. As head of the SS, he was in charge of the German Police, including the dreaded Gestapo. He was also responsible for the entire concentration and death camp systems, and as such, he ordered the deaths of millions of innocent people, including Germans as well as unfortunates from conquered territories. He committed suicide by taking poison after British troops captured him in 1945. Captain Law was given a letter signed by Himmler ordering an atrocity, and turned it over to the appropriate authorities.

Early on the morning of 8 May 1945, we received a radio message from Battalion HQ. They said the war with Germany was over. General Eisenhower would be on Armed Services Radio that night and the armistice would be signed the next day—which became known as Victory in Europe Day, or V-E Day. In anticipation of incautious exuberance we immediately called for non-imbibing volunteers to stand guard. This was the time to celebrate. Everyone dug into their bags and pulled out whatever they had to drink. Captain Law recalled the extremely unusual behavior of Sergeant Bill McKegney that day. He was an upstanding soldier who was never seen drinking and had been a respected friend of Law's since Fort Bragg. Sergeant McKegney sat under a kitchen table, a significant traffic area, and proceeded to drink most of a newly acquired bottle of whiskey. He sopped up the sauce like Prohibition was just around the corner. Hours later he was unconscious. We carried him out and put him in his bed.

Shortly afterward, we received orders to prepare to seize Stuttgart from the French Army. The

elements of the French 1st Army there were commanded by French officers, but the enlisted men consisted mostly of African colonial soldiers who were only paid half as much as their metropolitan French counterparts. They were pillaging and raping the citizenry of Stuttgart. General Eisenhower, who had curtailed our planned attack in the first place under political pressure from DeGaulle, got angry and ordered the French to withdraw and be replaced by the 397th Infantry Regiment. The French refused to evacuate, so he ordered the 397th to attack. Company E was to lead the attack against our erstwhile allies.

It was a 30-mile march, taking a day and a half to get to Stuttgart. By midday we got word from battalion HQ that the French were pulling out. They left hangers-on of remnants of various units who did not want to leave. When they saw us they pulled out that night and we occupied Stuttgart without firing a shot. Thus, what could have been a very serious rift in the embryonic western alliance was avoided.

After V-E Day we had a serious accident. Our jeep ran over an antitank mine, and two of our men were killed. They were driving on an unused, unpaved road. We found no other mines and the civilians knew of no mines planted in the city. This tragedy brought to reality what every occupation soldier continuously feared. The possibility existed that German fanatics could still cause problems for us. In addition to the possibility of booby traps and landmines being laid by these diehards, there was also the possibility of sniping, individual murders, and even ambushes by these members of the so-called "Werwolf" movement. Of course, the countryside was littered with unexploded ordnance and unswept minefields, too, which only added to the daily danger. After surviving six months of combat, a postwar casualty would be the worst that could happen.

Stuttgart was the capital of the German state of Württemberg located on the Neckar River. It is a large city with a population of over a half million. Being a manufacturing center, it had been bombed repeatedly. The railroad yard, military installations, and the factory district was destroyed. A 13th century moated castle was bombed. Daimler-Benz, the oldest automobile factory in the world was not then making Mercedes. It had been exporting half of their annual production to practically every country in the world. Stuttgart also possesses magnificent

gardens. Only 25 percent of its area is built over. It has parks, vineyards, orchards and gardens.

The Württemberg State Opera House was never hit by an aerial bomb. The beautiful mosaic ceiling of the great hall was badly scarred, however, by bullets from a vandal's machine gun. The ceiling was repaired before we left Stuttgart in 1945. One of the fine hotels in the city was the Graf Zeppelin, opposite the main train station. It was crippled by the war but still operating.

The 1st and 3rd Battalions remained in Stuttgart. They occupied a former German army cavalry barracks. It was a handsome two-story brick building which included spotless tile horse barns. The second battalion moved out of Stuttgart to a picturesque village called Ditzingen north of the city. We were called a permanent occupation force at that time. Our CP was in a large home owned by a dentist who had his dental office in his home. He stored his equipment in one room. We also had a store across the street from the mess hall which we used as an office. The first sergeant and runners worked in the office. The supply sergeant used a nearby building for equipment and supplies. He issued clean uniforms, which were badly needed.

We captured a number of SS men who were attempting to get to their families. They were identified by neighbors who no longer feared them. We set up checkpoints at various locations to control unnecessary or unauthorized traffic and DPs who sometimes wandered aimlessly. We received two new officers with no combat experience. The closely knit, experienced team of combat officers at that time consisted of Captain Law and Lieutenants Davison, Teiser, and Thena.

Early on in the Occupation, some guys got together and formed the "Society of the Sons of Bitche." Men who fought that battle were given a certificate. It read: "(Name of soldier) is A Legitimate Son Of Bitche. Duly Inducted Into The Exalted Society Of Sons Of Bitche For His Part In The Storm And Capture Of The Proud Citadel In The Maginot Line On March 16, 1945." The comical "ceremonies" that accompanied the formation of the organization was great for morale, and helped set the stage for a robust and highly active division veterans' association which would be founded in the years to come.

We conducted many military ceremonies in downtown Stuttgart, using with the complete regiment and regimental band. Often, these were held to honor men who were receiving

decorations, and the German people turned out in great numbers. Generations of Germans had grown up with military uniforms, marching, and martial music, and they liked ours as well. They were also curious. The Germans we got to know were nice people and they found our behavior acceptable.

Instructions for secret operations were circulated on 20 July throughout the 397th Infantry Regiment. The operation entailed the systematic search of all civilians and homes in the area and it was to come as a complete surprise. Company E had a specific zone with collecting points for contraband articles as well as for individuals picked up for infringement of occupation orders or lack of an identity card. Everyone was ordered to stay where they lived on the designated day.

Operation TALLY-HO started at 0700 and lasted until 1700. A fair amount of small pieces of German and American military equipment was confiscated, along with some Nazi propaganda literature. Much of it turned over voluntarily by the citizenry. The most fuss occurred when we took their hunting rifles and shotguns. Some of us sympathized with the displeasure of German families of quality when we saw their splendid shotguns dropped into the Neckar River. It was rumored that some pornographic literature was confiscated, too. It wasn't in the orders. None of it appeared at the collecting points.

"No-Fraternization" policies forbade association with German other than on a business basis. We were not to socialize with German women of *any* age. Over time, those rules were slackened and social contact was allowed. This largely welcome change of policy nevertheless brought some new difficulties, including medical problems. We had a good medical detachment that handled these incidents very capably. They prepared several hygiene classes that kept the men aware of their personal health responsibilities.

As the summer of 1945 wore on, with the war in the Pacific far from over, we received orders to initiate an intensive training program that included physical exercise, classroom work, and field training. It was obvious that the regiment was getting back into shape both mentally and physically. A rumor passed around that we were being tuned up for the invasion of Japan. Latrines were abuzz with speculation that the Division would be shipped back to the States for a short respite then refurbished and sent to the Pacific Theater. Captain Law checked with battalion HQ several

times because the company was noticeably depressed by the rumor. All he was told was that that was one possibility. This was difficult to tell the company, so he said nothing.

Captain Law decided to throw the enlisted men a Victory Dinner to temporarily distract them from the Pacific rumors. First Sergeant Stan Leach was a positive and decisive leader. He was a strict father figure for the enlisted men. He could get supplies to the company within channels quickly or, when necessary, knew how to work outside of channels to achieve results. He could obtain what was needed that a company commander couldn't or took too long to get through the chain of command.

Leach was the key figure in putting the Victory Dinner together. He enhanced the army rations with German baked goods and fresh vegetables from the local green grocer. Good German low alcohol beer was obtained, as well as high alcohol *Schnapps* and a donation of American whiskey from the officer's rations. Law said he had a friend at a nearby army field hospital who could bring a group of nurses to the Company E Victory Dinner. The dinner and drinks were great but as the enlisted men said later, the nurses were greater. The nurses knew what they were there for. They had made similar appearances. They really worked hard, getting around to visit or dance with everyone, even the shy men. Captain Law came to the Victory Dinner after desert had been served. The men saw him and became quiet expecting him to speak. His speech consisted of a few words of great importance to the men. He said, "I've just come from Regimental Headquarters where I was told that the 100th Division is going home." He started to say more but the immediate response was a wild uproar of cheering. Private First Class Allen Holderfield ran over to the CO with tears running down his cheeks. He grabbed the captain's hand and shook his arm strenuously. "I'm just the messenger," said the captain.

The delightful visit by the army nurses to the big Company E dinner drew memories of donut dollies from Lieutenant Davison's memory. One day on the front line we were dug into a defensive position. Things were quiet when a perimeter guard radioed the CP to say there were a bunch of girls at his position, equipped with donuts. We went to see if he was delirious. We found four girls in a jeep with a trailer. They were

escorted by two armed soldiers and a Red Cross officer in another jeep. We put them in a covered position and then pointed out nearby empty fox-holes for their use in case the enemy interrupted us. Four girls lined up beside their jeep and trailer dispensing coffee, donuts and delightful chatter. Small groups of soldiers passed slowly by holding out their aluminum cups and taking as many donuts as they could carry. It was a cold day for girl watching. The girls were bundled up in bulky clothes and wore helmets. There wasn't much girl showing but they had pretty faces and sweet girl voices. Their mission was completed in 40 minutes and they were on their way back to safety. Before they left the Red Cross Officer told Lieutenant Davison said they always spread their cheer to soldiers behind the front lines. This time they decided on an unauthorized trip to the front to visit combat soldiers. They were curious about the combat zone and compelled to extend their feminine charms where it was lacking. The CO and Exec were greatly relieved when the girls left without being fired upon during their visit.

Unfortunately, the plan to send any divisions back to the States was cancelled. We became what was called a "constabulary force." However, the good news was that the Japs surrendered in August, so even if our trips home were delayed, there would definitely be no detour to the Pacific. General Burrell relinquished command of the 100th Infantry Division on 22 September 1945, and stepped up to command VI Corps. He took Captain Law with him. Craig Davison assumed command of Company E in "the final stage of occupation operations."

The principal topic of conversation among the men then became "points." They were based on the amount of time served and the awards received by each man. The higher each man's accumulation of points, the sooner he was rotated home. After a period of time, the regiment was relieved of military duties in Stuttgart. As men were judged to have enough points, they were transferred to a homebound unit. The company gradually became unrecognizable by those who had been around it for a long time, but those of us without sufficient points waited our turn. After a long period of expectation, Company E daubed-cosmoline on their equipment for overseas shipment to the U.S. Units of the 397th Regiment started leaving Stuttgart on drafty 18 wheel trucks headed for Marseilles, France 600 miles to

the southwest. They reached the embarkation camps near the port in cold, wet weather after a long bumpy ride. They listened for incoming military ship arrival reports on Armed Services Radio. Finally, our group left for Marseilles, France bound for New York City on 7 January 1946.

Bill Law was assigned to the Corps Chief of Staff's section. He was responsible for collating a variety of reports for the CG. The "Occupation Reports" he put together allowed the CG and his staff to track incidents of sabotage, motor vehicle accidents, injuries, and the venereal disease rate of each subordinate unit. Graphs depicted the significant trends more dramatically than numbers. Bill Garden, Bill Law's Company E predecessor in command, was also assigned to VI Corps headquarters.

Bill Law assumed command of a field artillery battalion consisting of men who had the required

points to go home. They marched to the Stuttgart railroad yard where they waited for the station master. They entertained themselves by examining a line of very old freight cars. They learned that these were antique WWI freight cars called "forty and eights." They were designed to carry 40 men and 8 horses. Good enough for horses, Law supposed, but men in freight cars, he asked himself? When the stationmaster arrived he told Law that these cars are taking you and your men to Antwerp. Bill was shocked into utter disbelief. He was told this is the only rail transportation at this time at this place. The fragile 40 and 8's were slowly pulled 400 miles to Antwerp with absolutely no amenities. Rail-side buffets were served at towns along the way. Reasonably frequent countryside stops were made so the men could eliminate near the track.

A ship met them at the Port of Antwerp and they landed in New York City, 19 March 1946.

# **The Company "E" Anthem**

(to the tune of "Talk of the Town")

I can't show my face, it's a damn disgrace  
People stop and stare, because I cut my hair  
Just to please the Commander of Company "E."  
Every day we shave, then go out and slave;  
We come home at night, don't we look a sight,  
Just to please the Commander of Company "E."  
What an aggregation, filled with aggravation  
Marching along all day.  
But this aggregation will receive ovation  
On Armistice Day, what more can we say?  
So until that day, we've no time to play  
As we march along and sing this G. D. song  
Just to please the Commander  
Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha of Company "E."

# The Men of Company E

## In Memoriam

1st Lt Peter P. Petracco\*  
2nd Lt Donald W. Holland  
S/Sgt James P. Grimes  
S/Sgt John A. Miller  
S/Sgt Richard Polhemus  
S/Sgt Artur D. Shutskin  
S/Sgt Francis Wayte  
Sgt Earl H. Leland  
Pfc William A. Brenahan  
Pfc Robert Burlison

Pfc John Chillemis  
Pfc Donald Hildenbrand  
(PW)  
Pfc Murray Hornstein  
Pfc Herbert Hulmes  
Pfc Chester Merrill, Jr.  
Pfc Harold E. Miller  
Pfc Jason Miller, Jr.  
Pfc James C. Rembert  
Pfc John J. Speier

Pvt Abner C. Culbertson  
Pvt Olan Dabbs  
Pvt Robert L Hooper  
Pvt Lloyd Jester  
Pvt Philip Librone  
Pvt Harold E Miller  
Pvt Gene K. Neubold  
Pvt Stanley Thomas  
Pvt Garo Yazujian

William Garden  
William Law  
Dominic Cuccinello  
Craig Davision  
Oliver C. Knighton  
Peter P. Petracco  
Stanley Teiser  
Donald Holland  
John W. Mallory, Jr.  
Robert H. Thena  
Stanley J. Leach  
Joseph J. Bellavia  
Avis D. Hammond  
Virgil M. Kilgore  
Charles Martinotti  
Frank Outslay  
Ernest H. Blackwelder  
William M. Ditto  
Herman M. Duerr  
Philip C. Esslworth  
Loren Harrison  
Frederick Heinzmann  
Bronislaw Lis  
Daniel S. Lynch  
John J. Marcheterre  
Joseph P. Mudd  
Floyd D. Nemecek  
John Olejar

Edward J. O'Rourke  
Stanley J. Stetz  
David E. Thomas  
Rudolf Andrle  
Robert E. Dawson  
Joseph F. Dolan  
Harry C. Gratz  
Noramn L. Larson  
George W. Mays, Jr.  
William M. McKegney  
Kenneth A. Murton  
James R. Nance  
Michael G. Pappas  
John E. Thoma, Jr.  
George J. Walters  
David I. Watson  
Joseph J. Lake  
Keith T. Beegle  
Eugene J. Doffing  
Orville F. Dolan  
Abner G. Hinkle  
Jim M. Izett  
John J. Reardon, Jr.  
Seldon S. Ridenour  
Bernard U. Ritzert  
Robert G. Ross  
Robert W. Shaughnessy  
Elson L. Thompson  
Marshall E. Walker  
Marshall Buchanan

William A. Constantino  
Clifford Crandall  
James E. Ledbetter  
Frank M. Maniscalco  
Phillip Nassif  
Bradford C. Parsons  
Gascon M. Stuffield, Jr.  
Robert B. Abel  
Troy L. Adams  
Joseph P. Alfano  
George R. Apgar  
William B. Bailey  
Dale J. Balding  
Paul Barringer  
Jack O. Beams  
Robert L. Beehn  
Roy L. Bianchi  
Robert A. Billinger  
Robert G. Boyee  
Charles E. Bowman  
Virgil C. Braden  
Walter W. Bray  
Ralph Q. Broll  
Roy L. Brown  
Armand R. Burle  
Seccy L. Bucciarelli, Jr.  
Owen E. Bullock  
Robert L. Cain  
Marcus Campbell  
Russell Campbell

\*Battlefield Commission

John P. Cannavo	Charles W. Miller	Thomas H. Carey
Jesse V. Cawood	Paul R. Mell	R. J. Hartman
Richard E. Collins	Rollie R. Moore	Frank M. Lara
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Kermit W. Gray	Elmer A. Richardson	William D. Bailey
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Pedro Marez	Robert West	Samuel A. Cooper
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 Earl D. Davis  
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 Arthus T. Deluca  
 Anthony S. DeNigris  
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 Earl H. Leland  
 Richard P. Lenski  
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 Adrian L. Lindsey  
 Quentin H. Lynes  
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 Lucas C. Magpantay  
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 Andino Robbio  
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 George Sabtovic  
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