



**Citizen Soldiers**  
by Stephen E. Ambrose

There were some unusual junior officers on the front. One was Lieutenant Ed Gesner of the 4th Infantry Division. He knew survival tricks that he taught his platoon, such as how to create a foxhole in frozen ground: he shot eight rounds into the same spot, dug out the loose dirt with his trench knife, placed a half stick of TNT in the hole, lit the fuse, ran, hit the dirt, got up, ran back, and dug with his trench shovel. Within minutes a habitable foxhole.

The junior officers coming over from the States were another matter. Pink cheeked youth, they were bewildered by everything around them.

## Prologue

FIRST LIGHT came to Ste. Mere-Eglise around 0510. Twenty-four hours earlier it had been just another Norman village, with more than a millennium behind it. By nightfall of June 6, 1944, it was a name known around the world-the village where the invasion began and now headquarters for the 82nd Airborne Division.

At dawn on June 7 Lieutenant Waverly Wray, executive officer in Company D, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), who had jumped into the night sky over Normandy 28 hours earlier, was on the northwestern outskirts of the village. He peered intently into the lifting gloom. What he couldn't see, he could sense. From the sounds of the movement of personnel and vehicles to the north, he could feel and figure that the major German counterattack-the one the Germans counted on to drive the Americans into the sea, the one the paratroopers had been expecting-was coming at Ste. Mere-Eglise.

It was indeed. Six thousand German soldiers were on the move, with infantry, artillery, tanks, and self-propelled guns-more than a match for the 600 or so lightly armed paratroopers in Ste. Mere-Eglise. A German breakthrough to the beaches seemed imminent. And Lieutenant Wray was at the point of attack.

Wray was a big man, 250 pounds, with "legs like tree trunks," in the words of Lieutenant Colonel Ben Vandervoort, commanding the 505th. "The standard-issue army parachute wasn't large enough for Wray's weight, and he dropped too fast on his jumps, but the men said. Hell, with his legs he don't need a chute. He was from Batesville, Mississippi, and

was an avid woodsman, skilled with rifles and shotguns. He claimed he had never missed a shot in his life. A veteran of the Sicily and Italy campaigns, Wray was, according to Vandervoort, "as experienced and skilled as an infantry soldier can get and still be alive."

Wray had Deep South religious convictions. A Baptist, each month he sent half his pay home to help build a new church. He never swore. His exclamation when exasperated was "John Brown!"-meaning abolitionist John Brown of Harpers Ferry. He didn't drink, smoke, or chase girls. Some troopers called him the Deacon, but in an admiring rather than critical way. Vandervoort had something of a father son relationship with Wray, always calling him by his first name, Waverly.

On June 7, shortly after dawn, Wray reported to Vandervoort-whose leg, broken in the jump, was now in a cast-on where he expected the Germans to attack and in what strength. Vandervoort took this in, then ordered Wray to return to the company and have it attack the German flank before the Germans could get started.

"He said, 'Yes Sir,' saluted, about-faced, and moved out like a parade ground Sergeant Major," Vandervoort later wrote.

Wray passed on the order. As the company prepared, he took up his M-1, grabbed a half-dozen grenades, and strode out, his Colt .45 on his hip and a silver-plated .38 revolver stuck in his jump boot. He was going to do a one-man reconnaissance to formulate a plan of attack.

WRAY WAS going out into the unknown. He had spent half a year preparing for this moment, but he was not trained for it. Wray and his fellow paratroopers, like the men at Omaha and Utah beaches, had been magnificently trained to launch an amphibious assault. By nightfall of June 6 they had done the real thing successfully. But beginning at dawn, June 7, they were in a terrain completely unfamiliar to them. In one of the greatest intelligence failures of all time, neither G-2 (intelligence) at US First Army nor the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEP) G-2, nor any division S-2 (special staff intelligence) had ever thought to tell the men who were going to fight the battle that the dominant physical feature of the battlefield was the maze of hedgerows that covered the western half of Normandy.

The hedgerows dated back to Roman times. They were mounds of earth raised about each field, about two metres in height, to keep cattle in and to mark boundaries. Typically, there was only one entry into the small field enclosed by the hedgerows, which were irregular in length as well as height and set at odd angles, with beeches, oaks, and chestnut trees on the summit. On the sunken roads, which were shut in by clay banks, the brush often met overhead, giving a feeling of being trapped in a leafy tunnel.

How could the various G-2s have missed such obvious features, especially as aerial reconnaissance clearly revealed the hedges? Because the photo interpreters, looking straight down at them, thought that they were like English hedges-the kind fox hunters jump over-and they had missed the sunken nature of the roads entirely. "We had been neither informed of them or trained to overcome them," was Captain John Colby's comment. The GIs would have to learn by doing, as Wray was doing on the morning of June 7.

The Germans, meanwhile, had been going through specialized training for fighting in hedgerows. They had also pre-sited mortars and artillery on the entrances into the fields. Behind the hedgerows they dug rifle pits and tunnelled openings for machine-gun positions in each corner.

WRAY MOVED up sunken lanes, crossed an orchard, pushed his way through hedgerows, crawled through a ditch. Along the way he noted concentrations of Germans in fields and lanes. He reached a point near the N-13, the main highway into Ste. Mere-Eglise from Cherbourg, where he could hear guttural voices on the other side of a hedgerow. They sounded like officers talking about map coordinates. Wray rose up, burst through the brush obstacle, swung his M-1 to a ready position, and barked "Hande hochf" to eight German officers gathered around a radio.

Seven instinctively raised their hands. The eighth tried to pull a pistol from his holster. Wray shot him instantly between the eyes. Two German grenadiers in a slit trench 100 metres to Wray's rear fired bursts from their Schmeisser machine pistols at him. Bullets cut through his jacket. One cut off half of his right ear.

Wray dropped to his knee and began shooting the other seven officers one at a time as they attempted to run away. When he had used up his

clip, Wray jumped into a ditch, put another clip into his M-1, and dropped the two German soldiers with the Schmeissers with one shot each. He made his way back to the command post (CP)-with blood down his jacket, a big chunk of his ear gone-to report on what he had seen. Then he started leading. He put a 60-mm mortar crew on the German flank and directed fire into the lanes and hedgerows most densely packed with the enemy. The Germans broke and ran. By midmorning Ste. Mere-Eglise was secure, and the potential for a German breakthrough to the beaches was much diminished.

THE NEXT day Vandervoort, Wray, and Sergeant John Rabig went to examine the German officers Wray had shot. Unforgettably, their bodies were sprinkled with pink-and-white apple blossom petals from an adjacent orchard. It turned out that they were the commanding officer (CO) and his staff of the 1st Battalion, 158th Grenadier Infantry Regiment. The maps showed that it was leading the way for the counterattack. The German retreat was in part due to the regiment's having been rendered leaderless by Wray.

Vandervoort later recalled that when he saw the blood on Wray's jacket and the missing half ear, he had remarked, "They've been getting kind of close to you, haven't they, Waverly?"

With just a trace of a grin Wray replied, "Not as close as I've been getting to them, Sir."

At the scene of the action Vandervoort noted that every one of the dead Germans, including the two grenadiers more than 100 metres away, had been killed with a single shot in the head. Wray insisted on burying the bodies. He said he had killed them, and they deserved a decent burial, and it was his responsibility.

Later that day Sergeant Rabig commented to Vandervoort, "Colonel, aren't you glad Waverly's on our side?"

BEFORE THE battle was joined, Hitler had been sure his young men would outfight the young Americans. He was certain that the spoiled sons of democracy couldn't stand up to the solid sons of dictatorship. If

he had seen Lieutenant Wray in action in the early morning of D-Day plus one, he might have had some doubts.

The campaign in northwest Europe, 1944-45, was a tremendous struggle on a gigantic stage. It was a test of many things, such as how well the Wehrmacht had done in changing its tactics to defend the empire it had seized in blitzkrieg warfare, how well the assembly lines of the Allies and the Axis were doing in providing weapons, the skill of the generals, the proper employment of aeroplanes, and how well a relative handful of professional officers in the US Army in 1940 had done in creating an army of citizen soldiers from scratch. Because of the explosive growth of the army—from 160,000 in 1939 to over 8 million in 1944—America had the numbers of men and weapons and could get them to Europe, no question about it. But could she provide the leaders that an 8 million-man army required—leaders at the people level, primarily captains, lieutenants, and sergeants?

US Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall had created the US Army of World War II to take on the Wehrmacht, to drive it out of France and destroy it in the process. The success of D-Day was a good start, but that was yesterday. The Allies had barely penetrated Germany's outermost defences. The Wehrmacht was not the army it had been three years earlier, but it was an army that had refused to die, even after Moscow, Stalingrad, and Kursk.

That the Wehrmacht kept its cohesion through these catastrophes has been attributed to the superior training of its junior officers. They were not only grounded in detail and doctrine but were encouraged to think and act independently in battle. They also made a critical contribution to the primary bonding—the Kameradschaft—that was so strong and traditional in the German army at the squad level.

Could the American junior officers do as well? Could the American army defeat the German army in France? The answer to the second question depended on the answer to the first.

## Chapter One

Expanding the Beachhead: June 7-30, 1944

ON THE morning of June 7, Lieutenant Wray's foray had broken up the German counterattack into Ste. Mere-Eglise before it got started. But by noon the Germans were dropping mortar shells on the town. That afternoon E Company, 505th PIR, moved out to drive the Germans further back. Those who participated included Sergeant Otis Sampson, an old cavalry soldier with ten years in the army, by reputation the best mortarman in the division; Lieutenant James Coyle, a platoon leader in the 505th; and Lieutenant Frank Woosely, a company executive officer.

The company had two tanks attached to it. Coyle's order was to take his platoon across the field and attack the hedgerow ahead, simple and straightforward enough. But Coyle explained to his CO that the Germans dug into and hid behind the hedgerows, and they would exact a bloody price from infantry advancing through a field, no matter how good the men were at fire and movement.

Coyle received permission to explore alternative routes. Sure enough, he found a route through the sunken lanes that brought the Americans to a point where they were looking down a lane running perpendicular to the one they were on. It was the main German position, inexplicably without cover or observation posts on its flank.

The German battalion had only arrived at the position a quarter of an hour earlier (which may explain the unguarded flank) but already had transformed the lane into a fortress. Communication wires ran up and down. Mortar crews worked their weapons. Sergeants with binoculars peered through openings cut in the hedge, directing the mortar fire. Other forward observers had radios and were directing the firing of heavy artillery from the rear. German heavy machine guns were tunnelled in, with crews at the ready to send crisscrossing fire into the field in front.

That was the staggering firepower Coyle's platoon would have run into had he obeyed his original orders. Because he had successfully argued his point, he was now on the German flank with his men and tanks behind him. The men laid down a base of rifle and machine-gun fire, aided by a barrage of mortars from Sergeant Sampson. Then the tanks shot their 75-mm cannon down the lane.

Germans fell all around. The survivors waved a white flag. Coyle told his men to cease fire, stood up, and walked down the lane to take the surrender. Two grenades came flying over the hedgerow and landed at his feet. He dove to the side and escaped, and the firing opened up again.

The Americans had the Germans trapped in the lane, and after a period of taking casualties without being able to inflict any, the German soldiers began to take off, bursting through the hedgerow with hands held high, crying "Kamerad!"

Soon there were 200 or so men in the field, hands up. Coyle went through the hedgerow to begin the rounding-up process and promptly got hit in the thigh by a sniper's bullet-not badly, but he was furious with himself for twice not being cautious enough. Nevertheless, he got the POWs gathered in and put under guard. He and his men had effectively destroyed an enemy battalion without losing a single man.

It was difficult finding enough men for guard duty, as there was only one GI for every ten captured Germans. The guards therefore took no chances. Corporal Sam Applebee encountered a German officer who refused to move. "I took a bayonet and shoved it into his ass," Applebee recounted, "and then he moved. You should have seen the happy smiles and giggles that escaped the faces of some of the prisoners, to see their Lord and Master made to obey, especially from an enlisted man."

E COMPANY'S experience on June 7 was unique, or nearly so-an unguarded German flank was seldom again to be found. But in another way, what the company went through was to be repeated across Normandy in the weeks that followed. In the German army, slave troops from conquered Central and Eastern Europe and Asia would throw their hands up at the first opportunity, but if they misjudged their situation and their NCO was around, they were likely to get shot in the back. Or the NCOs would keep up the fight even as their enlisted men surrendered.

Lieutenant Leon Mendel, with military intelligence, interrogated the prisoners Coyle's platoon had taken. "I started off with German," Mendel remembered, "but got no response, so I switched to Russian, asked if they were Russian. 'Yes!' they responded, heads bobbing eagerly. 'We are Russian. We want to go to America!'"

"Me too!" Mendel said in Russian. "Me too!"



The Wehrmacht in Normandy in June of 1944 was an international army. It had troops from every corner of the vast Soviet Empire-Mongolians, Cossacks, Georgians, Muslims, Chinese-plus men from the Soviet Union's neighbouring countries, men who had been conscripted into the Red Army, then captured by the Germans. In Normandy in June 1944 the 29th Division captured enemy troops of so many different nationalities that one GI blurted to his company commander, "Captain, just who the hell are we fighting, anyway?"

By no means were all the German personnel in Normandy reluctant warriors. Many fought effectively; some fought magnificently. The 3rd Fallschirmjäger Division was a full-strength division-15,976 men, mostly young German volunteers. It was new to combat, but training had been rigorous and emphasized initiative and improvisation. The equipment was outstanding.

Indeed, the Fallschirmjäger were perhaps the best-armed infantrymen in the world in 1944. So in any encounter between equal numbers of Americans and Fallschirmjägers, the Germans had from six to twenty times as much firepower.

And these German soldiers were ready to fight. A battalion commander in the 29th remarked, "Those Germans are the best soldiers I ever saw. They're smart and don't know what the word 'fear' means. They come in and they keep coming until they get their job done or you kill 'em."

These were the men who had to be rooted out of the hedgerows. One by one. There were, on average, fourteen hedgerows to the kilometre in Normandy. The enervating, costly process of making the attack, carrying the attack home, mopping up afterwards, took half a day or more. And at the end of the action there was the next hedgerow, 50 metres away. All through the Cotentin Peninsula, from June 7 on, GIs heaved and pushed and punched and died doing it-for two hedgerows a day. It was like fighting in a maze. Platoons found themselves completely lost a few minutes after launching an attack. Squads got separated. Just as often, two platoons from the same company could occupy adjacent fields for hours before discovering each other's presence.

Where the Americans got lost, the Germans were at home. The German 352nd Division had been training in Normandy for months. Further, they were geniuses at utilizing the fortification possibilities of the hedgerows. In the early days of battle many GIs were killed or

wounded because they dashed through the opening into a field, just the kind of aggressive tactics they had been taught, only to be cut down by pre-sited machine-gun fire or mortars (mortars caused three quarters of American casualties in Normandy).

American army tactical manuals stressed the need for tank-infantry cooperation. But in Normandy the tankers didn't want to get down on the sunken roads, because of insufficient room to traverse the turret and insufficient visibility. But staying on the main roads proved impossible: the Germans held the high ground inland and had their 88-mm cannon sited to provide long fields of fire along highways. So into the lanes the tanks went. There they were restricted. They wanted to get out into the fields, but they couldn't. When they appeared at the gap leading into a field, mortar fire, plus panzerfausts (handheld antitank weapons), disabled them—often, in fact, caused them to "brew up," or start burning. The tanks had a distressing propensity for catching fire.

So tankers tried going over or through the embankments, but the hedgerows were almost impassable obstacles to the American M-4 Sherman tank. The Sherman wasn't powerful enough to break through the cementlike base, and when it climbed up the embankment, at the apex it exposed its unarmoured belly to German panzerfausts. Further, coordination between tankers and infantry was almost impossible during battle, as they had no easy or reliable way to communicate with one another.

Lieutenant Sidney Salomon of the 2nd Ranger Battalion, one of the D-Day heroes, found that out on June 7. He was leading the remnants of his battalion, which had come ashore at Omaha and been involved in a daylong firefight on D-Day, westward along the coastal road that led to Pointe-du-Hoc. Three companies of the 2nd Rangers had taken the German emplacement there and destroyed the coastal guns, but they were under severe attack and had taken severe casualties. Salomon was in a hurry to get to them.

But his column began taking well-placed artillery shells. Salomon could see a Norman church, its steeple the only high point around. He was certain the Germans had an observer spotting for their artillery in that steeple. Behind Salomon a Sherman tank chugged up. Salomon wanted it to blast that steeple, but he couldn't get the crew's attention, not even when he knocked on the side of the tank with the butt of his carbine. "So I ultimately stood in the middle of the road directly in front of the tank,

waving my arms and pointing in the direction of the church. That produced results. After a couple of shots from the cannon and several bursts from the .50-calibre machine gun, the artillery spotter was no more."

Salomon's daring feat notwithstanding, it was obvious that the army was going to have to work out a better system for tank-infantry communication than having junior officers jump up and down in front of tanks. Until that was done, the tanks would play a minor supporting role to the infantry-following the GIs into the next field as the infantry overran it. So as the infantry lurched forward in the Cotentin, following frontal assaults straight into the enemy's kill zones, the tankers began experimenting with ways to utilize their weapons in the hedgerows.

BEGINNING AT daylight on June 7, each side had begun to rush reinforcements to the front. The Americans came in on a tight schedule, long since worked out, with fresh divisions almost daily. The Germans came in by bits and pieces because they were improvising, having been caught with no plans for reinforcing Normandy. Further, the Allied air forces had badly hampered German movement from the start.

The German air force (the Luftwaffe) and the German navy were seldom to be seen, but still the Germans managed to have an effect on Allied landings through mines and beach obstacles. The most spectacular German success came at dawn on June 7.

The transport USS Susan B. Anthony was moving into her off-loading position off Utah Beach. Sergeant Jim Finn was down in the hold, along with hundreds of others in the 90th Infantry Division, set to enter the battle after the ship dropped anchor. Landing craft began coming alongside, and the men started climbing up onto the transport's deck, preparing to descend the rope ladders. Finn and the others were loaded down with rifles, grenades, extra clips, BARs (Browning automatic rifles), tripods, mortar bases and tubes, gas masks, leather boots, helmets, life jackets, toilet articles, baggy pants stuffed with cigarettes, and more.

"There was a massive 'boom!'" Finn recalled. "She shook. All communications were knocked out. All electricity was out. Everything on the ship went black."

The Susan B. Anthony, one of the largest transport ships, had hit a mine. She was sinking and burning. Panic in the hold was to be expected, but as Finn recalled, the officers took charge and restored calm. Then, "We were instructed to remove our helmets, remove our impregnated clothing, remove all excess equipment. Many of the fellows took off their shoes." They scrambled onto the deck.

A fire-fighting boat had pulled alongside and was putting streams of water onto the fire. Landing craft began pulling to the side of the ship. Men threw rope ladders over the side, and within two hours all hands were safely off-minutes before the ship sank.

Sergeant Finn and his platoon went into Utah Beach a couple of hours late and barefoot, with no helmets, no rifles, no ammo, no food. But they were there, and by scrounging along the beach they were soon able to equip themselves from dead and wounded men. Thanks to the fire-fighting boat—one of the many specialized craft in the armada—even the loss of the ship hardly slowed the disembarking process. The US, Royal, and Canadian navies ruled the English Channel, which made the uninterrupted flow of men and supplies from England to France possible. The fire-fighting boat that saved the men on Susan B. Anthony showed what a superb job the three navies were doing.

AT OMAHA, too, reinforcements began coming into the beach before the sun rose. Twenty-year-old Lieutenant Charles Stockell, a forward observer (FO) in the 1st Division, was one of the first ashore that day. Stockell kept a diary. He recorded that he came in below Vierville, that the skipper of the LCI (landing craft infantry) feared the underwater beach obstacles and mines and thus forced him to get off in chest-deep water, that he saw equipment littering the beach, and then: "The first dead Americans I see are two GIs, one with both feet blown off, arms wrapped about each other in a comradely death embrace." He was struck by the thought that "dead men everywhere look pathetic and lonely."

Stockell didn't get very far inland that morning. The front line, in fact, was less than a quarter of a mile from the edge of the bluff at Omaha, along a series of hedgerows outside Colleville. That was as far inland as Captain Joseph Dawson, CO of G Company, 16th Regiment, 1st Division, had got on D-Day—and Dawson had been the first American to reach the top of the bluff. On June 7 he was fighting to secure his

position outside Colleville, discovering in the process that he had a whole lot to learn about hedgerows.

The 175th Regiment of the 29th Division came in on schedule at 0630, June 7, but two kilometres east of its intended target, the Vierville exit through the Atlantic Wall. In a loose formation the regiment began to march to the exit, through the debris of the previous day's battle. To Captain Robert Miller the beach "looked like something out of Dante's Inferno."

Continual sniper fire zinged down. "But even worse," according to Lieutenant J. Milnor Roberts, an aide to the corps commander, "they were stepping over the bodies of the guys who had been killed the day before and the guys were wearing that 29th Division patch; the other fellows, brand-new, were walking over the dead bodies. By the time they got down where they were to go inland, they were really spooked."

But so were their opponents. Lieutenant Colonel Fritz Ziegelmann of the 352nd Division was one of the first German officers to bring reinforcements into the battle. At about the same time the American 175th Regiment was swinging up towards Vierville, Ziegelmann was entering Widerstandsnest 76, one of the few surviving resistance nests on Omaha. "The view from WN 76 will remain in my memory for ever," he wrote after the war. "Ships of all sorts stood close together on the beach and in the water, broadly echeloned in depth. And the entire conglomeration remained there intact without any real interference from the German side!"

A runner brought him a set of secret American orders captured from an officer, which showed the entire Omaha invasion plan. "I must say that in my entire military life, I have never been so impressed," Ziegelmann wrote, adding that he knew at that moment that Germany was going to lose this war.

AT DAWN, all along the plateau above the bluff at Omaha, GIs shook themselves awake, did their business, ate some rations, smoked cigarettes, got into some kind of formation, and prepared to move out to broaden the beachhead. But in the hedgerows, individuals got lost, squads got lost. German sniper fire came from all directions. The Norman farm homes and barns, made of stone and surrounded by stone walls, made

excellent fortresses. Probing attacks brought forth a stream of bullets from the Germans.

Brigadier General Norman "Dutch" Cota, assistant division commander of the 29th, came upon a group of infantry pinned down by some Germans in a farmhouse. He asked the captain in command why his men were making no effort to take the building.

"Sir, the Germans are in there, shooting at us," the captain replied.

"Well, I'll tell you what, Captain," said Cota, unbuckling two grenades from his jacket. "You and your men start shooting at them. I'll take a squad of men, and you and your men watch carefully. I'll show you how to take a house with Germans in it."

Cota led his squad around a hedge to get as close as possible to the house. Suddenly he gave a whoop and raced forward, the squad following, yelling like wild men. As they tossed grenades into the windows, Cota and another man kicked in the front door, tossed a couple of grenades inside, waited for the explosions, then dashed into the house. The surviving Germans inside were streaming out the back door, running for their lives.

Cota returned to the captain. "You've seen how to take a house," said the general, out of breath. "Do you understand? Do you know how to do it now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I won't be around to do it for you again," Cota said. "I can't do it for everybody."

Normandy was a soldier's battle. It belonged to the riflemen, machine gunners, mortarmen, tankers, and artillerymen who were on the front lines. There was no room for manoeuvre. There was no opportunity for subtlety. There was a simplicity to the fighting-for the Germans, to hold; for the Americans, to attack.

Where they would hold or attack required no decision-making. It was 'always the next village or field. The real decision making came at the battalion, company, and platoon level: where to place mines, barbed wire, machine-gun pits, where to dig foxholes-or where and how to attack them.

The direction of the attack had been set by preinvasion decision-making. For the 1st and 29th divisions that meant south from Omaha towards St. Lo. For the 101st Airborne that meant east, into Carentan, for a linkup with Omaha. For the 82nd Airborne that meant west from Ste. Mere-Eglise, to provide manoeuvre room in the Cotentin. For the 4th and 90th divisions that meant west from Utah, to the Gulf of St. Malo.

The objective of all this was to secure the port of Cherbourg and to create a beachhead sufficiently large to absorb the incoming American reinforcements and serve as a base for an offensive through France. So strong a magnet was Cherbourg that the initial American offensive already in Normandy headed west, away from Germany.

Eisenhower and his high command were obsessed with ports. Only a large, fully operating port could satisfy supply needs, or so Eisenhower assumed. Therefore the planning emphasis had been on Cherbourg, and Le Havre next, with the climax coming at Antwerp. Only with these ports in operation could Eisenhower be assured of the supplies a final fifty-division offensive into Germany would require. Especially Antwerp.

The Germans assumed that the Allies could not supply divisions in combat over an open beach. The Allies tended to agree. Experience had not been encouraging. Churchill was so certain it couldn't be done he insisted on putting a very large share of the national effort into building two experimental artificial harbours. The harbours were moderately successful: their contribution to the total tonnage unloaded over the Normandy beaches was about fifteen per cent.

But as it turned out, it was the LSTs (landing ship tank), supported by the myriad of specialized landing craft, that did the most carrying and unloading. LSTs at every beach, their great jaws yawning open, disgorging tanks and trucks and jeeps and bulldozers and guns and mountains of rations and ammunition, thousands of jerry cans filled with gasoline, crates of radios and telephones, typewriters, and forms, and all else that men at war require. The LSTs did what no one had thought possible. The LST was in fact the Allies' secret weapon.

Through June the Germans continued in the face of all evidence to believe LSTs could not supply the Allied divisions already ashore, and therefore Operation Overlord was a feint, with the real attack scheduled for the Pas-de-Calais later in the summer. A continuing campaign of

misinformation put out by SHAEF reinforced this German fixed idea. So through the month, Hitler kept his panzer divisions north and east of the Seine River.

Hitler had recognized that his only hope for victory lay on the Western Front. His armies could not defeat the Red Army, but they might defeat the British and Americans, so discouraging Stalin that he would make a settlement. But after correctly seeing the critical theatre, Hitler completely failed to see the critical battlefield. He continued to look to the Pas-de-Calais as the site where he would drive the invaders back into the sea, and consequently kept his main striking power there. To every plea by the commanders in Normandy for panzer divisions in northwestern France to come to their aid, Hitler said no. In so saying, he sealed his fate. He suffered the worst humiliation of all—he had been outwitted.

THE MISSION of the 101st Airborne Division was to take Carentan and thus link Omaha and Utah into a continuous beachhead. One of the critical actions was led by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Cole, CO of the 3rd Battalion, 502nd PIR. Cole was 29, an army brat, and a 1939 West Point graduate, born and trained to lead. On D-Day he had gathered up seventy-five men, moved out to Utah Beach, and was at the dune line to welcome men from the 4th Division coming ashore. From June 7 on he had been involved in the attack on Carentan. The climax came on June 11.

Cole was leading some 250 men down a long, exposed causeway. At the far end was a bridge over the Douve River. Beyond that bridge was the linkup point with units from the 29th coming from Omaha. The causeway was a metre or so above the marshes on either side. On the far side of the inland marsh, about 150 metres away, there was a hedgerow occupied by the Germans.

Once Cole was fully committed along the causeway, the German machine guns, rifles, and mortars along the hedgerow opened fire. Cole's battalion took a couple of dozen casualties. The survivors huddled against the bank on the far side of the causeway.

They should have kept moving. But the hardest lesson to teach in training, the most difficult rule to follow in combat, is to keep moving when fired on. Every instinct makes a soldier want to hug the ground.



Cole's men did, and over the next hour the Germans dropped mortars on the battalion. The GIs were pinned down.

Then Cole could take no more and took command. He passed out an order seldom heard in World War II: "Fix bayonets!"

Up and down the line he could hear the click of bayonets being fitted to rifle barrels. Cole's pulse was racing. He pulled his .45 pistol, jumped onto the causeway, shouted a command so loud he could be heard above the din of the battle-"Charge!"-turned towards the hedgerow, and began plunging through the marsh.

His men watched, fearful, excited, impressed, inspired. First, single figures rose and began to follow Cole. Then small groups of two and three. Then whole squads started running forward, flashing the cold steel of their bayonets. The men began to roar as they charged, their own version of the Rebel Yell.

The Germans fired and cut down some, but not enough. Cole's men got to the hedgerow, plunged into the dugouts and trenches, thrusting, drawing blood and screams, causing death. Those Germans who dodged the bayonets fled to the rear. Paratroopers took them under fire and dropped a dozen or more.

Cole stood there shaking, exhausted, elated. Around him the men began to cheer. After the cheering subsided. Cole got his men down the causeway and over the bridge to the far side of the Douve River. There, the following day, Omaha and Utah linked up.

THROUGHOUT First Army, young men made many discoveries in the first few days of combat-about war, about themselves, about others. They quickly learned such basics as keep down or die, to dig deep and stay quiet, to distinguish incoming from outgoing artillery, to recognize that fear is inevitable but can be managed, and many more things they had been told in training but things that can only be truly learned by doing- in the reality of combat.

Captain John Colby caught one of the essences of combat, the sense of total immediacy: "At this point we had been in combat six days. It seemed like a year. In combat, one lives in the now and does not think much about yesterday or tomorrow."

Colby discovered that there was no telling who would break or when. His battalion commander had run away from combat in his first day of action, and his company CO was a complete bust. On June 12 the company got caught in a combined mortar-artillery barrage. The men couldn't move forward, they couldn't fall back, and they couldn't stay where they were-or so it appeared to the CO, who therefore had no order to give and was speechless.

Colby went up to him to ask for orders. The CO shook his head and pointed to his throat. Colby asked him if he could make it back to the aid station on his own, "and he leapt to his feet and took off. I never saw him again."

Another thing Colby learned in his first week in combat was "Artillery does not fire for ever. It just seems like that when you get caught in it. The guns overheat or the ammunition runs low, and it stops. It stops for a while, anyway."

He was amazed to discover how small he could make his body. If you get caught in the open in a shelling, he advised, "the best thing to do is drop to the ground and crawl into your steel helmet. One's body tends to shrink a great deal when shells come in. I am sure I have gotten as much as eighty per cent of my body under my helmet when caught under shellfire."

About themselves, the most important thing a majority of the GIs discovered was that they were not cowards. They hadn't thought so, they had fervently hoped it would not be so, but they couldn't be sure until tested.

After a few days in combat most of them knew they were good soldiers. They had neither run away nor collapsed into a pathetic mass of quivering jelly (their worst fear, even greater than the fear of being afraid).

They were learning about others. A common experience: the guy who talked toughest, bragged most, excelled in manoeuvres, everyone's pick to be the top soldier in the company, was the first to break, while the soft-talking kid who was hardly noticed in camp was the standout in combat. These are the cliches of war novels precisely because they are true. They also learned that while combat brought out the best in some

men, it unleashed the worst in others-and the distinction wasn't always clear.

On June 9 Sergeant Arthur "Dutch" Schultz of the 82nd Airborne was outside Montebourg. That morning he was part of an attack on the town. "I ran by a wounded German soldier lying alongside of a hedgerow. He was obviously in a great deal of pain and crying for help. I stopped running and turned around. A close friend of mine put the muzzle of his rifle between the German's still crying eyes and pulled the trigger. There was no change in my friend's facial expression. I don't believe he even blinked an eye."

Schultz was simultaneously appalled and awed by what he had seen. "There was a part of me that wanted to be just as ruthless as my friend," he commented. Later Schultz came to realize that "there but for the grace of God go I."

ALLIED FIGHTER pilots owned the skies over Normandy. On June 7 Eisenhower crossed the Channel by plane to visit Bayeux. Every aeroplane in the sky was American or British.

Thanks to air supremacy the Americans were flying little single-seat planes, Piper Cubs, about 300 metres back from the front lines and some 300 metres high. German riflemen fired at them ineffectively. When the Cubs appeared, however, German mortar and artillery firing stopped. As Sergeant Sampson described it, "They didn't dare give their positions away, knowing if they fired our pilot would call in and artillery would be coming in on them, pinpoint."

Air supremacy also freed Allied fighter-bombers, principally P-47 Thunderbolts, to strafe and bomb German convoys and concentrations. From D-Day plus one onward, whenever the weather was suitable for flying, the P-47s forced nighttime movement only on the Germans. During the day the Allied Jabos (from the German Jager bomber, or hunter bomber) would get them. Fifty years later, in talking about the Jabos, German veterans still have awe in their voices and glance up over their shoulders as they recall the terror of having one come right at them, all guns blazing. "The Jabos were a burden on our souls," Corporal Helmut Hesse said.

The B-26 Marauders, two-engine bombers, continued their all-out assault on choke points in the German transportation system, principally bridges and highway junctions. Lieutenant James Delong was a Marauder pilot with the Ninth Air Force who had flown in low and hard on D-Day over Utah Beach. On June 7 it was a bridge at Rennes. "We were being met with plenty of flak from enemy 88s," Delong recalled. "That whomp! whomp! sound just outside with black smoke puffs filling the air was still scary as hell, damaging, and deadly." But there were no Luftwaffe fighters. Most German pilots were on the far side of the Rhine River, trying to defend the homeland from the Allied four-engine bombers, and the Luftwaffe was chronically short on fuel.

In Normandy in June 1944 German soldiers became experts in camouflage to make themselves invisible from the sky, while the GIs laid out coloured panels and did all they could to make themselves plainly visible from the sky. They wanted any aeroplane up there to know that they were Americans, because they knew without having to look that the plane they heard was American.

German general Fritz Bayerlein of the 12th SS Panzer Division gave an account of how the Jabos worked over his division on June 7: "It was terrible. By the end of the day I had lost forty tank trucks carrying fuel, and ninety other vehicles. Five of my tanks were knocked out, and eighty-four half-tracks, prime movers and self-propelled guns." Those were heavy losses, especially for a panzer division that had so far not fired a shot.

The Jabos had a decisive effect on the Battle of Normandy. Without them the Germans would have been able to move reinforcements into Normandy at a better rate than they actually achieved. But air power alone could not be decisive. The Germans in Normandy were dug in well enough to survive strafing, rocket, and bombing attacks. They could move enough men, vehicles, and materiel at night to keep on fighting along the leaf-covered sunken lanes. The frequently foul weather gave them further respite. Low clouds, drizzle, fog-for the Germans, ideal weather to reposition units, and there were more of those days than there were clear ones.

OVER THE first ten days of the battle the Germans fought so well that the Allies measured their gains in metres. By June 16 the euphoria produced by the D-Day success was giving way to fears that the

Germans were imposing a stalemate in Normandy. These fears led to blame-assignment and recriminations among the Allies.

The difficulty centred around the taking of Caen. Field Marshal Montgomery had said he would take the city on D-Day, but he had not, nor did he do so in the following ten days. Nor was he attacking. The British Second Army had drawn the bulk of the panzers in Normandy to its front. It was at Caen that the Germans were most vulnerable, because a breakthrough there would put British tanks on a straight road, through rolling terrain with open fields, headed directly for Paris. Therefore the fighting north of Caen was fierce and costly, but there was no all-out British attack.

The Americans, frustrated by their glacial progress in the hedgerows, were increasingly critical of Montgomery. Monty sent it right back. He blamed General Omar Bradley, commanding US First Army, for Allied problems, saying that the Americans should have attacked both north towards Cherbourg and south towards Coutances, "but Bradley didn't want to take the risk."

At the top, through June, the Allied high command squabbled. At the front the soldiers fought through to Cherbourg on the twentieth. It took a week of hard fighting to force a surrender on the 27th, and even then the Germans left the port facilities so badly damaged that it took the engineers six weeks to get them functioning. Meanwhile, supplies continued to come in via LSTs.

With Cherbourg captured, Bradley was able to turn US First Army in a continuous line facing south. St. Lo and Coutances were the objectives of this second phase of the Battle of Normandy. To get them, the GIs had a lot of hedgerows to cross.

THE US First Army was growing to its full potential in Normandy. By June 30 the Americans had eleven divisions in the battle, plus the 82nd and 101st Airborne, which were to have been withdrawn to England but which were retained on the Continent through June. The British Second Army also had thirteen divisions ashore.

The Americans had evacuated 27,000 casualties. About 11,000 GIs had been killed in action or died of their wounds, 1,000 were missing in action, and 3,400 wounded had been returned to duty. The active-duty

strength of First Army was 413,000. German strength on the front was somewhat less, while German losses were 47,500.

In most cases the GIs were much better equipped than their foe. Some German weapons were superior; others inferior. In transport and utility vehicles the US was far ahead in both quality and quantity. The Germans could not compete with the American two-and-a-half-ton truck (deuce-and-a-half) or the jeep (the Germans loved to capture working jeeps but complained that they were gas guzzlers). German factories making their Vehicles were a few hundred kilometres from Normandy. Their American counterparts were thousands of kilometres from Normandy. Yet the Americans got more and better vehicles to the battlefield in less time.

The Americans were on the offensive in Italy and in the Pacific and were conducting a major air offensive inside Germany. But the Germans were fighting on four fronts, the eastern, western, southern, and home. They could not possibly win a war of attrition.

The senior German commanders in the West, Field Marshals Gerd Rundstedt and Erwin Rommel, were perfectly aware of that fact. Having failed to stop the Allied assault on the beaches, having failed to prevent a linkup of the invasion forces, completely lacking any air support, and chronically short on fuel sometimes of ammunition-taking heavy casualties, they despaired. On June 28 the two field marshals set off for Hitler's headquarters in Berchtesgaden. On the drive they talked. Rundstedt had already told Hitler's lackeys to "make peace." Now he said the same to Rommel.

"I agree with you," Rommel replied. "The war must be ended immediately. I shall tell the Ftihrer so clearly and unequivocally."

The showdown with Hitler came at a full-dress conference of the top echelon of the high command: Field Marshals Wilhelm Keitel, Alfred Jodi, and Hermann Goring, along with Admiral Karl Donitz and many lesser lights. Rommel spoke first. He said the moment was critical. He told his Ftihrer, "The whole world stands arrayed against Germany, and this disproportion of strength-"

Hitler cut him off. Would the Herr Feldmarschall please concern himself with the military, not the political situation. Rommel then gave a most gloomy report.

Hitler took over. He said the critical task was to halt the enemy offensive. This would be accomplished by the Luftwaffe, he declared. He announced that 1,000 new fighters were coming out of the factories and would be in Normandy shortly. He talked about new secret weapons—the V-2s—that would turn the tide. The Allied communications between Britain and Normandy would be cut by the Kriegsmarine, which would soon be adding a large number of torpedo boats to lay mines in the Channel, and new submarines to operate off the beaches. Large convoys of new trucks would soon be headed west from the Rhine towards Normandy.

This was pure fantasy. Hitler was clearly crazy. The German high command knew it, without question, and should have called for the men with the straitjacket. But nothing was done.

NUMBERS OF units and qualities and quantities of equipment helped make victory possible for the Americans, but out in the hedgerows those advantages weren't always apparent. Besides, all those American vehicles would be idle until the GIs managed to break out of the hedgerows. And that rested on the wits, endurance, and execution of the tankers, artillery, and infantry at the front.

## Chapter Two

### Hedgerow Fighting: July 1 -24, 1944

WITHIN THREE weeks of the great success of D-Day the ugly word stalemate was beginning to be used. "We were stuck," Corporal Bill Preston remembered. "Something dreadful seemed to have happened in terms of the overall plan. Things had gone awry. The whole theory of mobility that we had been taught, of our racing across the battlefield, seemed to have gone up in smoke." And while the American progress was excruciatingly slow, the British and Canadians remained stuck in place outside Caen. Big attacks followed by heavy losses for small or no gains, reminiscent of 1914-18, weighed on every mind.

So did Hitler's vengeance weapon, the V-1. Used for the first time a few days after D-Day, the radio-controlled aircraft were coming down by the hundreds on London. They were a terror weapon of little military value,

except to put an enormous strain on the British public. In June and July the V-1s killed more than 5,000 people, injured 35,000, and destroyed some 30,000 buildings. Worse, Allied intelligence anticipated that the Germans would soon have V-2s-the world's first medium-range ballistic missiles-in operation.

Naturally there was great pressure on the politicians to do something about the V-1s-a pressure that was naturally passed on to the generals. If nothing else, the public had to have a sense that somehow the Allies were hitting back. So big and medium bombers were pulled off other missions to attack the launch sites. Lieutenant James Delong of the Ninth Air Force, flying a B-26 on a strike against the sites in the Pas-de-Calais area, described his experience: "These were very difficult targets to destroy since they consisted mostly of a strong steel launching ramp. They were difficult to hit since the usual hazy visibility and broken cloud cover made them hard to find, leaving seconds to set the bombsight. They were always well defended."

The inability to knock out the sites was disheartening to the bomber pilots, and the terror bombings continued. The sites would have to be overrun on the ground to be put out of action. But the Allied armies were a long way from them.

In early July, according to Eisenhower's chief of staff, General Walter B. Smith, and Deputy Supreme Commander Air Vice Marshal Arthur Tedder, Montgomery was asked to launch an all-out offensive to open the road to Paris. When Monty responded to Eisenhower's plea to get going, he promised a "big show" on July 9 and asked for and got support from four-engine bombers. The attack, however, failed, and on July 10 Monty called it off.

Commander Harry Butcher, Eisenhower's naval aide, reported that the Supreme Commander was "smouldering," as were Tedder and Smith. So was General George S. Patton, Jr, commander of the US Third Army, still in England awaiting its entry into the battle. At Eisenhower's request Churchill put pressure on Monty "to get on his bicycle and start moving." On July 12 Monty told Eisenhower that he was preparing for an offensive in six days, code name Goodwood. "My whole eastern flank will burst into flames," he said as he demanded that the full weight of all the air forces be thrown into the battle. Expectations of a breakthrough ran high.



On July 18 Goodwood began with what Forrest Pogue, the official historian of SHAEF, called "the heaviest and most concentrated air attack in support of ground troops ever attempted." Goodwood got off to a good start, thanks to the bombardment, but ground to a halt after heavy losses, including 401 tanks and 2,600 casualties. Montgomery called it off. The British Second Army had gained a few miles and inflicted heavy casualties, but there had been nothing like a breakthrough.

Montgomery was satisfied with Goodwood's results. Eisenhower was not. He muttered that it had taken more than 7,000 tons of bombs (about half of the explosive power of the Hiroshima bomb) to gain seven miles and that the Allies could hardly hope to go through France paying a price of a thousand tons of bombs per mile. Not to mention sixty tanks and 400 casualties per mile.

Tedder was so angry he wanted Monty fired. But this was not an option. Monty was popular with the British press and public and, more important, with the troops. Besides, he had accomplished what he insisted was his objective-to pin down German armour on the eastern flank so as to give the Americans an opportunity to break out on the west. And it was not his fault that no one knew how to use heavy bombers in an artillery role. Those 7,000 tons of bombs caused havoc, misery, and considerable destruction, but after the bombs stopped falling, most German soldiers were able to come up out of their dugouts and man their weapons.

Goodwood showed that there would be no breakthrough on Monty's front. It was too heavily defended, by a too skilful and well-armed and numerous enemy. As that also appeared to be the case on the American front, every Allied leader was depressed and irritable. After seven weeks of fighting, the deepest Allied penetrations were some 45 to 50 kilometres inland, on a front of only 15 kilometres or so, hardly enough room to manoeuvre or to bring in the US Third Army from England.

DURING THE four weeks of hard fighting since D-Day, the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions took heavy casualties, close to 50 per cent overall, higher among junior officers. In the first week of July, when the 30th Division relieved the 82nd, Lieutenant Sidney Eichen reported that

he and his men stared in shock and awe at the paratroopers who had inaugurated the battle a month earlier.

"We asked them, 'Where are your officers?' and they answered, 'All dead.' We asked, 'Who's in charge, then?' and some sergeant said, 'I am.' I looked at the unshaven, red-eyed GIs, the dirty clothes and the droop in their walk, and I wondered. Is this how we are going to look after a few days of combat?"

Infantry in the line, advancing from hedgerow to hedgerow, also suffered brutally. In the 1st, 4th, 29th, and other divisions the turn-over in junior officers in the first month was almost total.

Major G.S. Johns of the 29th described a typical hedgerow action "with a machine gun being knocked out here, a man or two being killed or wounded there. Eventually the leader of the stronger force, usually the attackers, may decide that he has weakened his opponents enough to warrant a large concerted assault. Or the leader of the weaker force may see that he will be overwhelmed by such an attack and pull back. Thus goes the battle—a rush, a pause, some creeping, a few isolated shots, some artillery fire, some mortars, some smoke, more creeping, another pause, dead silence, more firing, a great concentration of fire followed by a concerted rush. Then the whole process starts all over again."

The Germans were able to inflict heavy casualties because they were on the defensive and also took advantage of their skill in warfare. Many of the German officers and NCOs were veterans of the Russian front, and nearly all were veterans of some battles, while this was the first for most of the GIs. The Germans were bolstered by a weapons system that was much better suited to hedgerow defence than the American weapons were to attack in such terrain.

The Germans had more mortars, and heavier ones, than the Americans. Their MG-42 machine guns fired 1,200 rounds a minute, the American counterpart less than half that. The handle on the German "potato masher" hand grenade made it easier to throw further. The Germans had the nebelwerfer, a multibarrelled projector whose bombs were designed to produce a terrifying wail when they flew through the air—sixty or seventy virtually simultaneously. The GIs called them Moaning Minnies. There was no American counterpart.

Then there was the panzer faust, which was far superior to the American bazooka. It did not have the range of a bazooka, but that

hardly mattered in hedgerow country. It was operated by a single soldier and was so simple that no special training was required, while the bazooka required a trained two-man team. The panzerfausts bomb had greater penetrating power than the bazooka's.

In heavy artillery the Americans generally outgunned the Germans in quantity, but long-range gunnery wasn't effective in the close quarters imposed by the hedgerows. The German 88-without doubt the best artillery piece of the war, in the opinion of every GI-was a high-velocity, flat-trajectory weapon that could fire armour-piercing shells down the lanes and roads or be elevated and fire airburst shells against bombers. The shell travelled faster than the speed of sound; one heard it explode before one heard it coming.

But the American .50-calibre machine gun, mounted on tanks, had no equal in penetrating power, and the American M-1 Garand was the best all-purpose military rifle in the world. Overall, however, GIs in Normandy gladly would have traded weapons with the Germans. Especially the tankers. There was a barely suppressed fury among American tankers about the inferiority of the Sherman tank (32 tons) to the German Panther (43 tons) and the Tiger (56 tons). German tanks had heavier armour, too heavy for the Sherman's 75-mm cannon to penetrate, while the Panther and Tiger, armed with 88s, easily penetrated the Sherman.

But one thing about the Shermans-there were a lot more of them than there were Panthers or Tigers. Quantity over quality and size was General Marshall's deliberate choice. He wanted more and faster (and thus lighter) tanks, in accord with American doctrine, which held that tanks should exploit a breakthrough, not fight other tanks. By the end of 1944 German industry would produce 24,630 tanks, only a handful of them Tigers. The British would be at 24,843. The Americans would have turned out the staggering total of 88,410 tanks, mainly Shermans.

For all their shortcomings the Shermans were a triumph of American mass production techniques. They were wonderfully reliable, in sharp contrast to the Panthers and Tigers. And GIs were far more experienced in the workings of the internal combustion engine than their opposite numbers. The Americans were infinitely better at recovering damaged tanks and patching them up. The Germans had nothing like the American maintenance battalions.

Indeed, no army in the world had such a capability. Kids who had been working at gas stations and body shops two years earlier had brought their mechanical skills to Normandy, where they replaced damaged tank tracks, welded patches on the armour, repaired engines. Even the tanks beyond repair were dragged back to the maintenance depot and stripped for parts. The Germans just left theirs where they were.

The American maintenance crews worked as they did back in the States rebuilding damaged cars-that is, the men on the shop floor made their own decisions, got out their tools, and got after the job. One of their officers. Captain Belton Cooper, commented, "I began to realize something about the American Army I had never thought possible. Although it is highly regimented and bureaucratic under garrison conditions, when the Army gets in the field, it relaxes and the individual initiative comes forward and does what has to be done. This type of flexibility was one of the great strengths of the American Army in World War II."

Besides numbers, the Shermans had other advantages. They used less than half the gasoline of the larger tanks. They were faster and more manoeuvrable, with double and more the range. A Sherman's tracks lasted for 2,500 miles; the Panther's and Tiger's more like 500 miles. The Sherman's turret turned much faster than the Panther's or Tiger's. The narrower track of the Sherman made it a much superior road vehicle. But the wider track of the Panther and Tiger made them more suited to soft terrain.

And so it went. For every advantage of the German heavy tanks, there was a disadvantage, as for the American medium tanks. The trouble in Normandy was that the German tanks were better designed for hedgerow fighting. If and when the battle ever became mobile, then the much despised Sherman could show its stuff.

NORMANDY HAD its wettest July in 40 years. One Marauder bomber unit, the 323rd Group, had seventeen straight missions scrubbed during the first two and a half weeks of July. Others fared little better.

There was nothing the Americans could do about the weather, but they could go after their problems in getting tanks into the hedgerow fighting. Experiments involved welding pipes or steel teeth onto the front of the Sherman tank. Lieutenant Charles Green, a tanker in the

29th Division, devised a bumper made from salvaged railroad tracks that Rommel had used as beach obstacles. It was incredibly strong and permitted the Shermans to bull their way through the thickest hedgerows. In the 2nd Armoured Division, Sergeant Curtis Culin, a cabdriver from Chicago, designed and supervised the construction of a hedgerow cutting device made from scrap iron pulled from a German roadblock. The blades gave the tank a resemblance to a rhinoceros, so Shermans equipped with Culin's invention came to be known as rhino tanks.

Another big improvement was in communications. After a series of experiments with telephones placed on the tank, the solution was to have an interphone box on the tank, into which the infantryman could plug a radio handset. The handset's long cord permitted the GI to lie down behind the tank while talking to the tank crew, which, when buttoned down, was all but blind. Many of the tank commanders killed in action had been standing in the open turret to be able to see. Now, at least, the tank could stay buttoned up while the GI on the phone acted as an FO.

These improvements and others have prompted historian Michael Doubler to write, "In its search for solutions to the difficulties of hedgerow combat, the American army encouraged the free flow of ideas and the entrepreneurial spirit. Ideas generally flowed upwards from the men actually engaged in battle." They were learning by doing.

First Army worked on developing a doctrine as well as new weapons for offensive warfare in the hedgerows. In late June the 29th Division held a full rehearsal of the technique it proposed. Attack teams consisted of one tank, an engineer team, a squad of riflemen, plus a light machine gun and a 60-mm mortar. The Sherman opened the action. It ploughed its pipe devices into the hedgerow, stuck the cannon through, and opened fire with a white phosphorus round into the corners of the opposite hedgerow, intended to knock out German dug-in machine gun pits.

White phosphorus was horror. Lieutenant Robert Weiss got caught in a German barrage of white phosphorus shells. He recalled the bursting of the shell, followed by "a snowstorm of small, white particles that floated down upon us. We looked in amazement, and eyes filled with instant terror. Where the particles landed on shirts and trousers they sizzled and burned. We brushed our clothing frantically, pushed shirt collars up. If any of the stuff touched the skin, it could inflict a horrible burn, increasing in intensity as it burrowed into a man's flesh. There was nowhere to hide, no place that was safe."

After firing the white phosphorus shells, the tank put systematic .50-calibre machine-gun fire along the entire base of the enemy hedgerow. The mortar team lobbed shells into the field behind the German position. The infantry squad moved forward across the open field, using standard methods of fire and movement—throwing themselves to the ground, getting up and dashing forward, firing, moving. As they got close to the enemy's hedgerow, they tossed grenades over the side. The tank, meanwhile, came on through the hedgerow either on its own power or after backing out and placing explosives in the holes. Infantrymen could plug into the phone and spot for the tank crew as it fired at resistance points. The tactics worked, were far less costly in casualties, and were soon adopted, with variations, throughout the European Theatre of Operations (ETO).

THE ENEMY was fighting with the desperation of a cornered, wounded animal. The German infantry was stretched thin. The frontline divisions were getting one replacement for every eleven casualties. By mid-July the Wehrmacht in Normandy had lost 117,000 men and received 10,000 replacements. For the Germans, rations and ammunition flows were adequate, if barely, but medical supplies were gone and artillery shells were severely limited.

Knowing that if the Americans broke through, there was nothing between them and the German border, so the Germans fought even harder. Rommel continued to direct the battle even as he went over and over in his mind a search for some way to convince Hitler to step aside so that the war could be concluded while Germany still had some conquered territory to bargain with (as in 1918) and before Germany herself was destroyed.

On July 16 Rommel sent Field Marshal Ginter von Kluge an ultimatum for Kluge to pass on to Hitler. It was a two-and-a-half-page document. Rommel opened by observing that the ultimate crisis was coming soon in Normandy. The American strength in tanks and artillery grew each day. Meanwhile, the Wehrmacht replacements who were arriving were inexperienced and poorly trained, which made them particularly likely to panic when the Jabos appeared. Rommel concluded: "It is necessary to draw the political conclusions from this situation." His aides argued that he should cross out the word political. He did, and signed.

The next day the Jabos got him. A British fighter shot up his staff car, and Rommel had a serious head injury. On July 20, a group of conspirators tried to kill Hitler. Rommel went home to recover. Three months later he was forced to commit suicide because of the assassination plot, even though he had not been directly involved.

The conspiracy and Hitler's retaliation against the officer corps put a severe strain on the German army, but, amazingly, it was not split asunder. Throughout the Nazi empire, from Italy to Norway, from Normandy to Ukraine, officers of the Wehrmacht did their duty despite the turmoil created by the assassination attempt. And they acceded to the demand made by the Nazi party that henceforth the salute would be given with an extended arm and a "Heil Hitler," rather than bringing the hand up to the cap brim.

Corporal Adolf Hohenstein of the German 276th Division later said that the enlisted men convinced themselves that shortages of supplies and ammunition were the fruits of treachery by their own officers. Actually, it was the Jabos. There is no evidence that during the Battle of Normandy any German officer gave less than his full ability to sustain the men in the line.

They needed it. Corporal Hohenstein watched morale ebb in his squad:

"The lack of any success at all affected the men very badly. You could feel the sheer fear growing. We would throw ourselves to the ground at the slightest sound, and many men were saying that we should never leave Normandy alive."

As if the Jabos were not effective enough as it was, the Americans were constantly improving their ground-to-air communications system. Solutions came because of Major General Elwood "Pete" Quesada, CO of Ninth Tactical Air Force, who went to Bradley to explore new methods. For example, Quesada said, artillery units have forward observers who radio target information to the gunners. Why don't we equip planes and artillery units with VHF radios so that they can spot for each other? They tried and it worked.

Why not put radio sets in tanks so the tankers could talk to the pilots? Quesada wondered. This too worked. So well, in fact, that by late July the radiomen on the ground could bring aircraft in as close as 500 metres. And it was an awesome amount of explosive a P-47 carried: two

five-inch by four-foot missiles under each wing, plus two 500-pound bombs, plus 6400 rounds of .50-calibre shells.

Major Gerhard Lemcke of the 12th Panzer Division testified to the effectiveness of the American improvements in communication. "Whenever a German soldier fired his panzerfaust," Lemcke complained, "all of the American tanks, artillery, mortars, and planes in the area concentrated their fire upon him. They would keep it up until his position was pulverized."

The US Army air-ground team in ETO continued to improve through to the end of the war. Its communication system was vastly superior to anything the Germans ever developed. Meanwhile, the Eighth Air Force B-17s continued to pound targets in France, particularly bridges and railroads, as did the Marauders of Ninth Air Force. But through July, 50 per cent of the missions for all planes in England and France had to be scrapped due to weather.

On the ground the Americans continued to advance, slowly but all along the front, except at St. Lo, the key crossroads city in lower Normandy. Outside St. Lo the 29th Division had been locked in a mortal embrace with the German 352nd Division since D-Day. In each division there was scarcely a man present for duty who had been there on D-Day.

To the defence of St. Lo the Germans devoted much of their strength, as Major Randall Bryant discovered in mid-July when he was walking across an orchard with his closest friend, Captain Charles Minton, beside him. The Germans laid on a TOT-time on target-an artillery shoot carefully coordinated to concentrate the fire of an entire battery or regiment on one spot at a precise moment. Bryant and Minton happened to be at the spot.

"Suddenly everything was exploding," Bryant related. "There was blood all over me, and a helmet on the ground with a head inside it. It was Minton's. Three young second lieutenants had just joined us, straight from the beach and Fort Benning. I had told them to sit down and wait to be assigned to companies. They were dead, along with six others killed and thirty-three wounded in a shoot that lasted only a matter of seconds."

General Charles Gerhardt, the CO, was under great pressure from Bradley to take St. Lo. So far he had already lost more men outside St. Lo than he had on Omaha Beach on D-Day. The 29th's rifle companies were close to 100 per cent replacements. But Gerhardt figured the Germans



were in worse condition and ordered a general assault to take St. Lo, putting all his strength into it.

Major Tom Howie, a mild-mannered teacher of English literature before the war, led the 3rd Battalion of the 116th Regiment. Linked to the 2nd Battalion, he was to drive right on into St. Lo. On July 17, an hour before dawn, the attack began. Howie limited each platoon to two men firing their rifles, and then only in emergency. The others were to use their bayonets and hand grenades. The idea was to achieve surprise, infiltrating by squads without artillery preparation.

In the predawn attack the infantry broke through or passed through the German line and took the high ground just one kilometre from St. Lo. The road into the city was open. Howie called the company commanders to a conference to give them their objectives. "We had just finished the meeting," Captain William Puntenney, Howie's executive officer, recalled. "The Germans began dropping a mortar barrage around our ears. Before taking cover in one of the foxholes. Major Howie turned to take a last look to be sure all his men had their heads down. Without warning, one of the shells hit a few yards away. A fragment struck the major in the back and pierced his lung. 'My God, I'm hit,' he murmured, and I saw he was bleeding at the mouth. As he fell, I caught him. He was dead in two minutes."

Captain Puntenney took over just as a counterattack from the Fallschirmjäger hit the battalion. Using the new communications techniques, the 29th called in artillery and a fighter-bomber strike. It broke up the attack, and the men began the charge into St. Lo.

As they crested the hill and started the descent into the town, the Americans were shocked by what they saw. St. Lo had been hit by B-17s on D-Day and every clear day thereafter. The place was a lifeless pile of rubble in which roads and sidewalks could scarcely be distinguished. As they moved into the fringe of town, they began to draw fire from some Fallschirmjäger in a cemetery. A macabre battle ensued, rifle and machine-gun bullets smashing into headstones. Rhino tanks came up through the hedgerows in support and drove the Germans off. The men of the 29th dashed into the town, guns blazing. There was still hard fighting to go before the town was completely cleared of the enemy, but \* finally St. Lo was in American hands.

At Gerhardt's insistence Howie's body was put on a jeep and driven into the town. Men from the 3rd Battalion draped the body with the Stars

and Stripes and hoisted it on top of a pile of stones that had once been a wall in the Saint Croix Church, a block from the cemetery. GIs and some of the few civilians remaining in the town adorned the site with flowers. "It was simple and direct, no fanfare or otherwise," Lieutenant Edward Jones recollected.

The story caught on with the press. Life magazine featured "The Major of St. Lo." Howie was famous, too late to do him any good. But he and the other men of the 29th had captured the high ground in that part of Normandy, putting First Army in a position to launch an offensive designed to break through the German line and out of the hedgerow country.

For that offensive Bradley was making plans to use the Allies' greatest single asset-air power, every bomber and fighter bomber that could fly-in a crushing bombardment that would blast a hole in the German line.

### Chapter Three

#### Breakout and Encirclement: July 25-August 25, 1944

ON JULY 24, seven weeks after D-Day, US First Army was holding an east-west line from Caumont to St. Lo to Lessay on the Channel. Pre-D-Day projections had put the Americans on this line on D-Day plus five.

Disappointing as that was, Bradley could see opportunities for his army. The enemy was sadly deficient in supplies and badly worn down. One of Bradley's chief problems was that he had not enough room to bring the divisions waiting in England into the battle-not to mention Patton. For the Germans the problem was the opposite-no significant reinforcements were available. A favourable factor for Bradley: six of the eight German panzer divisions in Normandy faced the British and Canadians around Caen.

Bradley was also encouraged by aerial photographs showing that behind the German lines the roads were empty. Behind American lines the roads were nose-to-tail armour, transport convoys, and troops. Huge supply dumps dotted the fields, with no need for camouflage. These were among the fruits of air superiority.

The Ninth Tactical Air Force had a dozen airstrips in Normandy by this time. Pilots could be over their targets in a matter of minutes. They were daredevil youngsters, some of them only nineteen years of age. (It was generally felt that by the time he reached his mid-twenties, a man was too sensible to take the chances required of a P-47 pilot.) They made up to five sorties per day. They dominated the sky and brought destruction to the Germans below.

Another plus for Bradley: his men were tactically much better equipped than they had been when the campaign began. By July 24 three of five First Army tanks had been fitted with a rhino. Ground-air communications were improving daily. Bradley had ruthlessly relieved incompetent division commanders. The frontline soldiers were a mix of veterans and replacements, with relatively good morale, although, like the Germans, badly worn down.

First Army had reached the limits of the worst of the hedgerows. Beyond lay rolling countryside. Roads were more numerous; many were tarred; a few were even four-lane. The front line ran close to the St. Lo-Periers road, which was an east-west paved highway, the N-800. Here the Panzer Lehr Division held the line for the Germans. Facing them were the American 9th, 4th, and 30th divisions.

Bradley decided he could use the St. Lo-Periers road as a marker for the strategic air forces and lay a carpet of bombs on Panzer Lehr by having the bombers fly parallel to the road—a landmark they couldn't miss. The area to be obliterated was six kilometres along the road and two kilometres south of it. Massed artillery would come after the bombardment, followed by a tank-infantry assault three divisions strong. If it worked, the Americans would break out of the hedgerow country and uncover the entire German left wing in Normandy, with Patton's Third Army ready to come in and exploit a breakthrough. Bradley gave the operation the code name Cobra.

On July 24 the weather appeared acceptable, and an order to go went out to the airfields, only to be rescinded after a third of the bombers had taken off. By the time the recall signal had gone out, one flight of B-17s had crossed the coast and released its load of 500-pound bombs through cloud cover. Most of the bombs fell short, causing casualties in the American 30th Division and leaving the infantrymen madder than hell.

Worse, the bombers had come in perpendicular to the line, not parallel. The airmen argued that they couldn't funnel all the bombers through the narrow corridor created by using a single marker. It would take hours for them to pass over the target-all the time exposed to antiaircraft fire from the 88s. By coming in perpendicular, spread out, the bombers would only be taking flak during the seconds it took to cross the line and drop the bombs. Bradley still wanted a parallel approach, but the airmen convinced him that it was too late to change the plan.

July 25 was clear. At 0938 some 550 fighter-bombers were guided in by radio messages from air controllers riding in tanks at the head of armoured columns. P-47s fired rockets and machine guns on German positions just south of the road and dropped 500-pound bombs that could be placed within 300 metres of the American lines.

Reporter Ernie Pyle wrote, "The dive bombers hit it just right. We stood in the barnyard of a French farm and watched them barrel nearly straight down out of the sky. They were bombing less than a half-a-mile ahead of where we stood. They came in groups, diving from every direction, perfectly timed, one after another."

After twenty minutes the P-47s gave way to 1,800 B-17s. Their appearance left men groping for words to describe it. Pyle did it this way: "A new sound gradually droned into our ears-a gigantic faraway surge of doomlike sound. It was the heavies. They came on in flights of twelve, three flights to a group and in groups stretched out across the sky. Their march across the sky was slow and studied. I've never known anything that had about it the aura of such a ghastly relentlessness."

They were 12,000 feet high. Captain Belton Cooper was on the ground. "Once they started, it was like some giant prehistoric dragon snake forming a long great continuum across the sky with its tail extended over the horizon." For a full hour their strike saturated the area just south of the road to a depth of 2,500 metres. The results for the Germans were near-catastrophic.

The bombed area looked like the surface of the moon. Entire hedgerows were blasted away. German general Fritz Bayerlein reported that he lost "at least seventy per cent of my troops, out of action-dead, wounded, crazed, or numbed."

During the second half hour of the bombardment the bomblines moved north. Dust and debris raised by the first waves were drifting on a south wind. The CO of Company B, 8th Infantry, 4th Division, described what happened: "The dive bombers came in beautifully, dropped their bombs right in front of us just where they belonged. Then the first group of heavies dropped theirs. The next wave came in closer, the next one closer, still closer. Then they came right on top of us. The shock was awful."

There were 111 GIs killed and 490 wounded by the shelling. Among the dead was General Lesley McNair, chief of the army ground forces, who was in the front line to witness the attack.

This bombardment was supplemented by artillery fire—1,000 guns in all. The gunners' initial task was to suppress German anti-aircraft fire. When the first wave of bombers appeared, 88s knocked three of them out of the sky. But little Piper Cubs were flying near enough to the German lines to spot the flashes and call in German positions to American artillery.

When the shells started coming down on them, the German artillerymen dove into their bunkers and the anti-aircraft fire ceased. Then, in a general hour-long barrage, the GIs fired 50,000 artillery shells. Overhead, as the B-17s departed, 350 P-47s swooped in for another twenty-minute strike against the narrow strip just south of the road, dropping napalm-filled drums. Their departure was the signal for the infantry and tanks to begin the ground attack. As they did so, 396 Marauders hit the rear of the German front line.

Altogether some 16,000 tons of bombs hit the Germans, supplemented by the artillery barrage. It was the greatest expenditure of explosives for a single attack in the army's history. Private Herbert Meier, a radioman, recalled, "So many planes over so little space, and the bombs rained down. I saw the bombs being released, and the way they shone in the sun for a moment, then fell to earth so fast that one could not see them. The explosions sent great geysers of earth into the air. I ran from hole to hole like a rabbit."

Everywhere there was death and destruction. Men not hit by shrapnel were bleeding from the nose, ears, mouth. The world seemed to be coming to an end. For Major Joachim Barth, CO of a German antitank battalion, it almost had. "When the shelling finally stopped," he recalled, "I looked out of my bunker. The world had changed. There were no

leaves on the trees. It was much harder to get around. We had wounded. We needed medics, but no ambulances could come forward."

The Americans had suffered, too, and when Bradley got the news of the shorts, he wrote that at his headquarters "dejection settled over us like a wet fog." But he remained determined to take immediate advantage of the shock to the Germans. He sent his energy down the line: Let's go!

The company CO of the 4th Division, who asked for a delay so that he could reorganize his shattered troops, was told, "No. Push off. Jump off immediately."

Lieutenant Sidney Eichen of the 30th Division had a similar experience. "My outfit was decimated," he reported, "our anti-tank guns blown apart. I saw one of our truck drivers, Jesse Ivy, lying split down the middle. Captain Bell was buried in a crater." But Eichen's regimental commander ran from company to company shouting, "You've gotta get going, get going!" So, Eichen said, "halfheartedly, we started to move."

On the German side, Major Joachim Barth remembered that as the shelling stopped, he told his men, "Get ready!" They were "digging people out, digging out the guns and righting them. Get ready! Get ready! Prepare your positions. They'll soon be here. Everyone knew what he had to do."

The first advancing GIs passed disabled German vehicles, shattered corpses, and disoriented survivors-but they also found veterans of Panzer Lehr "doing business at the same old stand with the same old merchandise-dug-in tanks and infantry," Captain Belton Cooper said. Private Gtinter Feldmann of Panzer Lehr later recalled that "the first words I heard from an American were 'Goddamn it all, the bastards are still there!' He meant my division."

German artillery fire on the GIs was also heavy, as some of the dug-in German artillery survived. As darkness came on July 25, little or no gain had resulted from the air strike. Cobra looked to be another Goodwood.

BUT IF THE GIs and their generals were discouraged. General Bayerlein of the 12th SS Panzer Division was in despair. When an officer came from army headquarters conveying Field Marshal von

Kluge's order that the St. Lo-Periers line must be held, that not a single man should leave his position, Bayerlein replied, "Out in front every one is holding out. Every one. My grenadiers and my engineers and my tank crews-they're all holding their ground. Not a single man is leaving his post. They are lying silent in their foxholes, for they are dead. The Panzer Lehr Division is annihilated."

July 26 was a day of suspense. The Americans attacked; the Germans held. On July 27 the thin crust of Panzer Lehr disintegrated.

First Army had accomplished the breakthrough, in the process developing an air ground team unmatched in the world. Now, along with Third Army, it was finally going to get into a campaign for which it had been trained and equipped. Now the most mobile army in the world could capitalize on its mobility.

WITH AN OPEN road to Paris, Patton was activated, and all his pent-up energy turned loose. He had come over in time for Cobra, to set up Third Army headquarters. He took command of one corps in Normandy and had other divisions coming in from England. Meanwhile, General Courtney Hodges succeeded Bradley as First Army commander, while Bradley moved up to command Twelfth Army Group (First and Third armies). First Army pressed south as German resistance collapsed.

The Wehrmacht was out of the hedgerows, trying desperately to get away. Patton's tanks mauled them; the Jabos terrorized them. Destroyed German tanks, trucks, wagons, and artillery pieces, along with dead and wounded horses and men, covered the landscape.

Captain Belton Cooper described the Allied air-ground teamwork. When two Panther tanks threatened his maintenance company from across a hedgerow, the liaison officer in a Sherman got on its radio to give the coordinates to any Jabos in the area. "Within less than forty-five seconds, two P-47s appeared right over the treetops travelling like hell at three hundred feet." They let go their bombs 1,000 feet short of Cooper's location: he and his men dived into their foxholes.

The bombs went screaming over. The P-47s came screaming in right behind them, firing their eight .50-calibre machine guns. The bombs hit a German ammunition dump. "The blast was awesome," Cooper said.

"Flames and debris shot some five hundred feet into the air. There were wheels, tank tracks, helmets, backpacks and rifles flying in all directions. The tops of trees were sheared off and a tremendous amount of debris came down on us."

"I have been to two church socials and a county fair," said one P-47 pilot, "but I never saw anything like this before!"

THE RETREAT was turning into a rout, and a historic opportunity presented itself. As the British and Canadians picked up their attack, Patton had open roads ahead, inviting his fast-moving armoured columns to cut across the rear of the Germans-whose horse-drawn artillery and transport precluded rapid movement encircle them and destroy the German army in France, then end the war with a triumphal unopposed march across the Rhine and on to Berlin.

Patton lusted to seize that opportunity. He had trained and equipped Third Army for just this moment: straight east to Paris, then northwest along the Seine to seize the crossings, and the Allies would complete an encirclement that would leave the Germans defenceless in the west. Patton could cut off German divisions in northern France, Belgium, and Holland as he drove for the Rhine. That was the big solution. But neither Eisenhower nor Bradley was bold enough to risk it. They worried about Patton's flanks; he insisted that the Jabos could protect them. They worried about Patton's fuel and other supplies; he insisted that in an emergency they could be airlifted to him. But Ike and Bradley picked the safer alternative, the small solution. They wanted the ports of Brittany, so they insisted that Patton stay with the pre-D-Day plan with modifications. It had called for Patton to turn the whole of Third Army into Brittany: when he protested that he wanted to attack towards Germany, not away from it, Eisenhower and Bradley relented to the extent that they gave him permission to reduce the Brittany attack to one corps, leaving two corps to head east.

An entire corps of well-trained, well-equipped tankers, infantrymen, and artillery had been wasted at a critical moment. To Patton it was outrageous that his superiors wouldn't turn him loose. In the boxing analogy, Patton wanted to throw a roundhouse right and get the bout over; his superiors ordered him to throw a short right hook to knock the enemy off-balance. But the enemy already was staggering. He should have been knocked out.



HITLER KNEW his army was staggering. Should it fall back? Get out of Normandy and across the Seine while the getting was good? That was what his generals wanted to do because it made obvious military sense.

But Hitler hated to retreat and loved to take risks. Where his generals saw the jaws of a trap closing on them, he saw a once-only opportunity to go for the American jugular.

As Patton began his short right hook, swinging his divisions north, a glance at the map showed Hitler that the corridor through which Third Army received its supplies was exceedingly narrow (about 30 kilometres) and thus vulnerable. By bringing down more infantry and tankers from north of the Seine, Hitler told Kluge that he would have ample troops to cut that corridor. With these fresh troops Kluge could mount a full-scale counteroffensive. It would start at Mortain, objective Avranches. Once the line had been cut, Patton could be destroyed in place. The Germans could force the fighting back into the hedgerow country, perhaps even drive the Americans back into the sea.

Kluge and every soldier involved thought it madness. Beyond the problems of the Jabos and American artillery, these new divisions were not well equipped-few Panthers or Tigers-and anyway they were not fresh troops. Major Heinz-Giinter Guderian was with the 116th Panzer Division. He recalled, "Most of our people were old soldiers from the Eastern Front. Many of our wounded had returned. We also received parts of a training division, teenagers who had just been inducted and were not trained. To begin an attack with the idea that it is without hope is not a good idea. We did not have this hope." Hitler ordered it done.

Because Hitler mistrusted his generals, he took control of the battle, which forced him to use the radio, allowing Ultra-the British deciphering device-to reveal both the general plan and some of the details. So on August 5 Eisenhower knew what was coming: six German armoured divisions. Between them and Avranches stood one American infantry division-the 30th.

Despite the numbers, no one in the American high command doubted that the 30th, supported by Thunderbolts and British Typhoons and American artillery, could hold. Eisenhower told Patton to keep moving. In Eisenhower's view the Germans were sticking their heads in a noose. On the morning of August 7 he flew to Normandy and met with Bradley, who agreed to hold Mortain with minimal forces while rushing every available division south, through the corridor and out into the interior.

THE GERMAN attack had begun before dawn, tanks rolling forward through the night without artillery preparation. It had achieved tactical surprise and by noon was in Mortain. But the Germans could not dislodge the 700 men of the 2nd Battalion, 120th Infantry Regiment, 30th Division, from an isolated bluff. Hill 317, just east of the town. The GIs on the hill had a perfect view of the surrounding countryside, and forward observers with a radio system that allowed them to call in artillery and Jabos. The Germans had to take that hill before driving on to the coast.

Before dawn on the next day, August 8, one of the forward observers, Lieutenant Robert Weiss, heard, more than he saw, a concentration of German tanks milling around at a roadblock set up by the GIs the previous night. He had the coordinates already fixed and called in a barrage. "That kept them away," Weiss reported, "except for one tank which came through into our company territory, sniffing the dark like a nearsighted dragon. Our guys lay motionless, not a breath, not a sound. In the dark the tank found nobody to fight. It turned and went back to its lair."

With daylight German 88s began shelling the hill. At the top there was a rocky ridgeline. Weiss crawled up to it and lifted his head. He had a panoramic view, but there was the great danger that the Germans would spot him as he spotted them, especially as the sun was coming up and there was a reflection off his binoculars. He sucked in his breath, called his radio operator forward, and started crawling to the top of the crag. "We had to be quick," Weiss said. "The fire missions had to come with almost the speed of the shooting in a quick-draw western-and with comparable accuracy."

Sergeant Joe Sasser, tucked into the reverse slope, set up his radio:

"Ready, Lieutenant." Weiss called Sergeant John Corn to move up beside him before scrambling up the precipice to the top. The sun glared. Head low, body flattened, elbows stretched far apart and resting on the ground, binoculars up to his face, Weiss searched and waited.

The Germans began firing-88s and mortars. "Smoke from the muzzles of the German guns wreathed their position like smoke rings from a cigar," Weiss remembered. He called out to Sergeant Corn, "Fire Mission. Enemy battery," and gave the coordinates. Corn passed it on down to Sasser, who radioed in the coordinates.

Weiss could only wait in apprehension. Sasser called up softly, "On the way."

"A freight train roared by from the left side," Weiss said. "Almost instantly clouds of smoke broke near the German position. I shouted an adjusting command to Corn who passed it quickly to Sasser and on to battalion. The next salvos were right on target." That German battery was out of action.

Shells came in from the left from six enemy self-propelled guns. Weiss repeated the sequence with similar satisfactory results. Then a single tank and yet another battery fired on Hill 317. Weiss called in a barrage on the tank that set it ablaze, then turned his attention to the battery. The follow-up rounds were on target. "The enemy," Weiss noted with satisfaction, "had been neutralized."

Weiss called for some thirty fire missions that day, scrambling up the ridge each time the Germans began firing. Some half-dozen other observers were doing similar work that day.

EVEN AS THE Mortain offensive began, Patton's forces had overrun Le Mans and turned northwest, towards Argentan. Montgomery and Bradley agreed that the Americans should halt outside Argentan to await the Canadians (with the Polish 1st Armoured Division in the lead) coming down from Falaise. When they met, the entire German army in Normandy would be encircled.

The men of the 2nd Battalion of the 30th Division were on their own. By not reinforcing Hill 317, Bradley tempted the Germans to keep on pushing west. But how long could the men on the hill hold out? For

five days the hill was surrounded. While the Americans and Canadians were closing the envelopment behind them, the Germans continued the offensive. They threw tank columns into the attack: American artillery, responding to Lieutenant Weiss and the other observers, broke them up.

On August 9, German light tanks tried again. There were five attacks in the first hour that morning. Weiss, who had not eaten or slept for 48 hours, was operating on adrenaline. He was 21 years old and filled with the wonderful feeling that he was making a difference in a crucial battle. The frantic activity-shooting up tanks, troops, guns, and vehicles-cut through his fatigue and masked it. He was exhilarated. On the third day, still without rest, he sent this message: "As sleepy, tired and hungry as I am, I never felt so good as I feel right now."

The observers were calling up to P-47s and British Typhoons whenever they saw German tanks on the road. Meanwhile, elements of the 4th, 9th, and 35th divisions hammered the German flanks. As on Hill 317, forward observers on high ground called in fire missions. Eighteen-year-old Private Robert Baldrige was in the 34th Field Artillery Battalion, 9th Division. He recalled, "The visibility from the top of this hill was excellent. What a change it was from the narrow confines of the hedgerows. We saw some twenty miles distant, even the spires of Mont-St. Michel."

That day the leading elements of the American forces got into Alençon. Argentan was but 40 kilometres to the northwest. But the GIs were meeting stouter resistance because the Germans were awakening to their danger. Major Charles Cawthorn, an infantry battalion CO in Patton's army, recalled that this was not "a game of Allied hounds coursing the German hare," as the press was reporting it, but rather the hunt after "a wounded tiger into the bush; the tiger turning now and again to slash at its tormentors, each slash drawing blood." Kluge, meanwhile, was pleading with Hitler to allow him to retreat to the east while the gap was still open.

ON HILL 317 the position was precarious-no food, ammunition running low, and worst of all, the radio batteries were dying. Sergeant Sasser retrieved discarded batteries and set them out on rocks. The sun restored some life. He switched batteries several times a day,

restoring one set while using another. Even so, by the end of the fourth day, it was doubtful that he could keep them going.

The GIs had long since cleaned out the chicken coops and rabbit pens around the half-dozen farms on the hill, along with the fruit and vegetable cellars, and were eating raw vegetables gathered from the gardens-when they got anything to eat. Medical supplies had long since run out. After the fourth day Weiss reported, "We could see no end." Incoming radio messages told the 2nd Battalion to hold on, help was coming. But when?

Lieutenant Ralph Kerley commanded E Company of the 2nd. After four days and nights of fighting, he was exhausted, discombobulated, but he kept at his work. At midmorning of the fifth day, studying the panorama below him through binoculars, he spotted a German mortar crew served by a half-dozen men.

"Sergeant," he called out to the leader of his own mortar team, "how many rounds do you have left?" "One, sir."

Kerley paused, thought about what relief it would bring if he could put that mortar out of action, thought about the danger he would be in if he was out of shells. "Do you think you can hit the son of a bitch?"

"Yes, sir. I reckon I can."

"Then blow his ass off."

The sergeant gathered up his crew and brought the 60-mm mortar assembly forward. Kerley watched the enemy mortar crew loafing, lying around, sunbathing, laughing. Occasionally one man would stroll back into the bushes and emerge with a shell, drop it down the tube, and shortly thereafter the shell would explode to the right or left, showering Kerley with rocks and dirt.

Kerley studied his map, turned to the sergeant, pointed, and said, "Put it right here."

The sergeant made his own survey with his binoculars. A private, his M-1 slung across his back, clutched the sole remaining mortar shell for dear life against his belly. Kerley and the sergeant talked quietly about wind, distance, elevation, made adjustments on the elevating screw. One last consultation, one minor adjustment.

Satisfied, the sergeant turned to the rifleman with the mortar shell. The private stretched his hands out to the sergeant as if passing off a newborn baby. The sergeant took the shell, kissed it, dropped it in, ducked, and called out, "On the way." Kerley steadied his glasses, peering intently, holding his breath.

Klaboom! The shell exploded less than ten metres from the enemy mortar team. Two of the men leapt up and dashed away. Two others grabbed their mortar and ran. Kerley started breathing again. "Nice work, Sergeant," he called out.

ON AUGUST 11 Kluge finally got Hitler's permission to break off the attack at Mortain and begin the retreat through the Falaise gap. It was a momentous, if inevitable, decision, because once the retreat began, there was no place to stop, turn, and defend short of the Siegfried Line at the German border. The line of the Seine could not be defended: there were too many bends in the river, too many potential crossing places to defend. Once the retreat began, the Battle of France had been won.

At 1430 on the fifth day of the siege of Hill 317, August 12, the 35th Division broke through the German lines and relieved the 2nd Battalion on Hill 317. Of the 700 GIs on the hill, some 300 were dead (including Sergeant Corn) or wounded. Lieutenant Weiss had called in 193 fire missions while the battalion had been surrounded. After eating and getting some sleep, he wrote his after action report on a typewriter, hunting and pecking. It was ten pages long. Summing up what he had learned from his five-day ordeal, Weiss wrote: "Although quite often beat back and silenced, at the slightest carelessness in exposing ourselves thereafter, the enemy would strike back at us. He doesn't quit. His aggressiveness demands a twenty-four-hour observation."

Then Weiss wrote a letter to his father: "Not much to write about from here."

THE SPECTACULAR performance by 2nd Battalion, aided by the remainder of the 30th Division, had stopped the German thrust to the coast. Altogether the Germans lost more than 80 per cent of the tanks

and vehicles they had thrown into the Mortain attack. Now their entire army in Normandy was threatened. The rush to get out, to get over the Seine and back to Germany, was on.

By no means did all the Germans participate. Slackers, defeatists, realists seized their opportunity to surrender, convinced that becoming a POW in British or American hands was their best chance of survival. Captain John Colby remembered: "One dark night we pulled off the road. One of our guys lay down to sleep beside an already sleeping German soldier who had become separated from his comrades and had lain down here for the night. When the German awoke the next morning he shook the American to arouse him and then surrendered to him."

But by no means were all the Germans surrendering. The toughest units and the most fanatical Nazis-panzer and Waffen SS troops-were determined to get out so as to fight another day.

On August 14 Eisenhower issued a rare order of the day (he sent out only ten in the course of the war), exhorting the Allied soldiers: "If everyone does his job, we can make this week a momentous one in the history of this war-a brilliant and fruitful week for us, a fateful one for the ambitions of the Nazi tyrants." The order of the day was broadcast over BBC and distributed to the troops in mimeographed form.

The following day Eisenhower held a press conference. There was great excitement among the reporters, who had earlier been gloomy about the stalemate in Normandy and were now optimistic about what lay ahead, as evidenced by the first question Eisenhower received: "How many weeks to the end of the war?"

Eisenhower, disturbed by the excessive optimism, exploded. He said such thoughts were "crazy." The Germans were not going to collapse. He predicted that the end would come only when Hitler hanged himself, but warned that before he did, he would "fight to the bitter end," and most of his troops would fight with him.

IF NOT MOST, enough. The Canadians did not get to Falaise until August 17 and then failed to close the gap between Falaise and Argentan. The German army still had an escape route open. For sheer ghastliness in World War II nothing exceeded the experience of the Germans caught in the Falaise gap. They were in a state of total fear day and night. They

seldom slept. They dodged from bomb crater to bomb crater. "It was complete chaos," Private Herbert Meier remembered. "That's when I thought. This is the end of the world."

German army, corps, and division headquarters got out first and headed towards the Siegfried Line. Most junior officers felt like the enlisted men- it was every man for himself.

"It was terrible," Lieutenant Giinter Materne recalled, "especially for those lying there in pain. It was terrible to see men screaming 'Mother!' or 'Take me with you; don't leave me here! I have a wife and child at home. I'm bleeding to death!'"

Lieutenant Walter Padberg explained: "Honestly said, you did not stop to consider whether you could help this person when you were running for your life. One thought only of oneself."

"All shared a single idea," according to Corporal Friedrich Bertenrath of the 2nd Panzer Division. "Out! Out! Out!"

All this time, bombs, rockets, mortars, and machine-gun fire came down on the Germans. Along the roads and in the fields dead cows, horses, and soldiers swelled in the hot August sun, their mouths agape, filled with flies. Maggots crawled through their wounds. Tanks drove over men in the way-dead or alive. Human and animal intestines made the roads slippery.

Lieutenant George Wilson of the 4th Division was astonished to discover that the Wehrmacht was a horse-drawn army, but impressed by the equipment. He had been raised on a farm and "was amazed at such superb draught-horses and accoutrements. The leather was highly polished, and all the brass rivets and hardware shone brightly. The horses had been groomed, with tails bobbed, as though for a parade." His men mercifully shot the wounded animals.

By August 18 the 1st Polish Armoured Division had moved south, almost to the point of linking up with the US 90th Division to close the gap. Still, Germans escaped. One of them was Lieutenant Padberg. "When we made it out of the pocket," he recalled, "we were of the opinion that we had left hell behind us." He quickly discovered that the boundaries of hell were not so constricted. Once beyond the gap, Padberg ran into an SS colonel.



"Line up!" the colonel bellowed. "Everyone is now under my command! We are going to launch a counterattack." There were twenty or so men. The others shuffled into something like a line, Padberg said, "but unfortunately, I had to go behind a bush to relieve myself and missed joining the group behind the colonel."

Even in the bloody chaos of Falaise, a humane spirit could come over the young men so far from home. Lieutenant Hans-Heinrich Dibbern, of Panzer Grenadier Regiment 902, set up a roadblock outside Argentan. "From the direction of the American line came an ambulance driving towards us," he remembered. "The driver was obviously lost. When he noticed that he was behind German lines, he slammed on the brakes." Dibbern went to the ambulance. "The driver's face was completely white. He had wounded men he was responsible for. But we told him, 'Back out of here and get going. We don't attack the Red Cross.' He quickly disappeared."

An hour or so later, "here comes another Red Cross truck. It pulls up right in front of us. The driver got out, opened the back, and took out a crate. He set it down on the street and drove away. We feared a bomb, but nothing happened. We opened the box and it was filled with Chesterfield cigarettes."

ON AUGUST 20, at Chambois, the linkup of the Americans and Polish troops finally occurred. Captain Laughlin Waters recorded that over the next couple of days "the Germans attacked with all of the fury they could bring to bear, fuelled by their desperation to escape." Others were trying to surrender, many of them successfully-too many, in fact. Neither the Poles nor the Americans had the facilities to deal with them. Waters established a POW pen in Chambois. but it was badly overcrowded.

On August 23 the SHAEF G-2 summary declared, "The enemy in the West has had it. Two and a half months of bitter fighting have brought the end of the war in Europe within sight, almost within reach." Two days later American forces liberated Paris. General Charles de Gaulle was already there, along with elements of the French 2nd Armoured Division. Paris was overrun by reporters, led by Ernest Hemingway, and over the next few days had one of the great parties of the war.

THE BATTLE of Normandy had lasted seventy-five days. It cost the Allies 209,672 casualties, 39,976 dead. Two thirds of the losses were American. It cost the Germans around 450,000 men, 240,000 of them killed or wounded.

But between 20,000 and 40,000 Wehrmacht and SS soldiers got out. They had but a single thought: get home. Home meant Germany, prepared defensive positions in the Siegfried Line, fresh supplies, reinforcements. They had taken a terrible pounding, but they were not so sure as SHAEF G-2 that they had "had it."

## Chapter Four

To the Siegfried Line: August 26-September 30, 1944

THE LAST WEEK of August and the first week of September, 1944, were among the most dramatic of the war. The Allied Expeditionary Force (AEF) swept through France, covering in hours ground that had taken months, years, really, to take in World War I. The sons of the soldiers of the Great War crossed rivers and liberated towns whose names resonated with the Tommies and doughboys-the Marne, the Somme, Ypres, Verdun.

Romania surrendered to the Soviets, then declared war on Germany. Finland signed a truce with the Soviet Union. Bulgaria tried to surrender. The Germans pulled out of Greece. The Red Army's summer offensive liberated Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, eastern Poland, and reached Yugoslavia's eastern border. It destroyed twelve German divisions and inflicted 700,000 casualties.

American and French troops had landed in the south of France on August 15 and were driving up the Rhone Valley against scant opposition (they called it the Champagne Campaign). American reinforcements continued to come from England, enough for the creation of yet another army, the US Ninth, commanded by Lieutenant General William Simpson. British, Polish, and American paratroopers five divisions strong-in England were organized into the First Allied Airborne Army and constituted a highly mobile reserve capable of striking wherever and whenever needed.

The end of the war did seem at hand. Thoughts of November 1918 were in everyone's mind. General Bradley issued instructions to store the winter clothing that was coming in at Le Havre and over the beaches, in order to use the space on the trucks bringing supplies to the front for ammunition and gasoline. He figured the war would be over before winter clothing was needed.

THE GERMAN army in retreat was a sad spectacle. Occasionally a battery of 88s or what was left of a company of riflemen and machine gunners would try to throw up a roadblock, but when they did, a tremendous barrage from American artillery, Shermans, Jabos, and small-arms fire would quickly overwhelm them. Then it was every man for himself, with the wounded left behind.

"Making it home is the motor of the old soldier," Private Paul-Alfred Stoob, a driver of a Panther, observed. Their tank shot out from under them, Stoob and the crew commandeered a truck and took off for Belgium. Stoob recalled, "We had to scavenge for food, here a dog without a master, there a few eggs in a chicken coop. The houses were mostly empty. We found a field bakery. One room was packed to the ceiling with bread. So we filled our truck with bread and moved on."

The German rout was so complete that the retreating troops didn't even take the time to destroy supply dumps. Elements of Patton's Third Army captured tons of grain, flour, sugar, and rice, along with hundreds of carloads of coal, all of which the GIs distributed to the French civilian population. At another dump Patton's men captured 2.6 million pounds of frozen beef and 500,000 pounds of canned beef, which were distributed to the troops.

In the 4th Infantry Division, Lieutenant George Wilson felt he was engaging in "a wild, mad, exciting race to see which army could gain the most ground in a single day." To the men of the 743rd Tank Battalion, 2nd Armoured Division, it was "holiday warfare." There was occasional shooting but no casualties. Mainly this was because they had warning of trouble ahead. If the villages were bedecked with flowers and the people were lining the streets, holding out food and bottles of wine, the Germans had pulled out. If there was no reception committee, the Germans were still there.

On September 2 Shermans from the 743rd got to the crest of a hill overlooking Tournai, Belgium. Instead of moving down to be the first to cross the border, they sat there, because they were out of gasoline. The great supply crisis in ETO had hit the 743rd.

THE CRISIS was inevitable. It had been foreseen. It could not have been avoided. Too many vehicles were driving too far away from the ports and beaches. The Red Ball Express, an improvised truck transport system that got started in late August, made every effort to get fuel, food, and ammunition to the front lines. Drivers were on the road twenty hours a day. Between August 29 and September 15, 6,000 trucks carried 135,000 tons of supplies from St. Lo to a supply dump near Chartres. At the dump the supplies were picked up by other drivers and taken to the front. But the front line continued to move east and north, and the system couldn't keep up.

The 743rd stayed in Tournai for four days, waiting for fuel. On September 7 the battalion filled its vehicles and took off. The GIs got a wild welcome in the Belgian villages. According to the battalion history, "They cheered, and waved, and risked their lives to crowd up to the tanks in motion and in all the demonstrative ways of a happy people they showed their enthusiastic thanks." On September 12 the leading platoon of Charlie Company in the 743rd crossed into Holland, the first Americans to reach that country. The German border was but a few kilometres away.

Now there was opposition. German artillery boomed. Panzerfaust shells disabled a couple of Shermans. The other Shermans could still fire but not move-their fuel tanks were empty. And the Germans had got into the Siegfried Line. They had fuel problems, too, but they could dig their tanks in and use them as fortified batteries. Their supply lines had grown shorter-Aachen was just to the south, Dtisseldorf and Cologne just to the east.

They had reached home. Men who saw no point to fighting to retain Hitler's conquests in France were ready to fight to defend the homeland. The German officer corps began organizing the terrified survivors of the rout in France, and suddenly what had been a chaotic mob became an army again. Meanwhile, the armies of the AEF were coming to a halt. On September 2 Third Army requested 750,000 gallons of gasoline and got 25,390. The next day it was 590,000 with

49,930 received. After September 7 Patton got a trickle only. A handful of advance patrols had made it across the Moselle River north and south of Nancy, but Patton's men were still far short of the Rhine and the Siegfried Line protecting it.

On September 12 the 4th Division, First Army, to the north, managed to get through the Siegfried Line. Lieutenant George Wilson led a reconnaissance platoon into the defences. He saw a German soldier emerge from a mound of earth not 100 metres away. "I got a slight chill as I realized I might well be the first American to set eyes on a pillbox in the famous Siegfried Line."

Looking around, he saw mounds of earth everywhere, each of them a concealed machine-gun emplacement with cement walls one metre thick and roofs from three to four metres thick. They had large iron doors at the rear, which were mostly rusted and off their hinges. Almost all were unoccupied. The 4th Division could drive right on through the Siegfried Line, at least at this spot.

By September 14, elements of the division were fanning out on top of the Eifel hills, a heavily wooded rough country that was an eastward extension of the Ardennes. But the division was almost out of gasoline. It had to pull back.

ANOTHER problem: crossing northwest Europe's many rivers was causing delays. The Germans had not mounted any defence at all on the east bank of the Seine, but that still left the Meuse, Moselle, Sarre, Rhine, and their many tributaries to go. And the closer the Germans got to home, the more they drew on their last bit of strength and their experience.

Along the Moselle the Germans mounted an effective defence. It fell to Patton's 80th Infantry Division to defeat it. By September 11 the 80th was prepared to force its crossing near the village of Dieulouard. The leading companies began the crossing shortly after midnight. Nine battalions of artillery began shelling the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division, giving protection to the rubber-and-plywood assault boats. Resistance was spotty and ineffective. That afternoon engineers began building a pontoon bridge. They completed the work just before midnight.

At 0100, September 13, three battalions of German infantry, supported by tanks and assault guns, launched a counterattack. By daybreak the Germans had driven the GIs back to within 100 metres of the crossing site. Engineers threw down their tools, took up M-1s and machine guns, and joined the fight to defend their bridge. At 0600 the Americans stood fast. The Germans were too bloodied and tired to press on. A stalemate ensued.

On the west bank a council of war was held by four generals. Also present was Lieutenant Colonel Creighton Abrams, commanding the 37th Tank Battalion. Abrams, a 1936 graduate of West Point, was two days short of his 30th birthday.

The generals were worried about sending Abrams's tanks over the pontoon bridge. The bridge might be destroyed by German artillery. The tanks could be cut off. Besides, the bridgehead was so constricted the Shermans wouldn't be able to manoeuvre. They were short on fuel. Finally the generals asked Abrams for his opinion.

Pointing to the high ground on the other side, Abrams told his superiors, "That is the shortest way home."

At 0800 the Shermans rumbled over the bridge and began blasting the Germans with cannon and machine guns. Infantry from the 80th Division crossed and joined the attack. By nightfall they had regained the position held the previous day.

But this was a different German army from the one that had pulled out of France so ignominiously. By that afternoon six German battalions were on the march towards Dieulouard. Over the next three nights the Americans held their ground, but they could not expand the bridgehead.

CAPTAIN Joseph Dawson, G Company, 16th Infantry, 1st Division, had been the first company commander to get his men up the bluff at Omaha on D-Day. By now he had been in battle for one hundred days. He was 31, son of a Waco, Texas, Baptist preacher. He had lost 25 pounds off his already thin six-foot-two-inch frame.

On September 14 Dawson led his company into the border town of Eilendorf, southeast of Aachen. Although it was inside the Siegfried Line, the fortifications were unoccupied. The town was on a

ridge 300 metres high, 130 metres long, which gave it excellent observation to the east and north. Dawson's company was on the far side of a railroad embankment that divided the town, with access only through a tunnel under the railroad. Dawson had his men dig in and mount outposts. The expected German counterattack came after midnight and was repulsed.

In the morning Dawson looked east. He could see Germans moving up in the woods in one direction, in an orchard in another, and digging in. In the afternoon a shelling from artillery and mortars hit G Company, followed by a two-company attack. It was the Germans who were attacking, the Americans who were dug in. Dawson was short on ammunition, out of food. His supporting tanks were out of gasoline. If he was going to go anywhere, it would be to the rear. The US Army's days of all-out pursuit were over.

The weakened Allied thrust and stiffening German resistance forced the Allied high command to make some difficult choices. Up to September 10 or so, it had been a case of go-go-go, until you run out of gas- and then keep going forward on foot. Every commander, not just Patton, urged his men forward. But on a front that stretched from the Swiss border to the English Channel, dependent on ports now hundreds of kilometres to the rear, it just wasn't possible to continue to advance on a broad front.

So Patton said to Eisenhower. Stop Monty where he is, give me all the fuel coming into the Continent, and I'll be in Berlin before Thanksgiving. Monty said to Eisenhower, Stop Patton where he is, give me all the fuel coming into the Continent, and I'll be in Berlin before the end of October

The German army had not yet ended a retreat that had begun six weeks earlier and turned into a rout. Everything in the situation cried out for one last major effort to finish off the enemy. A narrow thrust to get over the Rhine would do it. Should it be by Montgomery, north of the Ardennes, or Patton, to the south?

Eisenhower had moved SHAEF headquarters to the Continent and taken control of the land battle. The decision was his to make. He told Montgomery to go ahead with Operation Market-Garden.

MARKET-GARDEN was Montgomery's idea, enthusiastically backed by Eisenhower. In addition to the irresistible impulse to keep attacking, Eisenhower had the German secret weapons in mind. On September 8 the first of the long-dreaded V-2 rockets hit London. They had been launched from Holland. The only way to stop them was to overrun the sites.

Montgomery's plan was to utilize the Airborne Army-the Allies' greatest unused asset-in a daring operation to cross the Lower Rhine in Holland. The plan called for the Guards Armoured Division to lead the way for the British Second Army across the Rhine, on a line from Eindhoven to Arnhem. The British tanks would move north, following a carpet laid down by American and British paratroopers, who would seize and hold the many bridges between the start line, in Belgium, and Arnhem.

The British 1st Airborne Division, reinforced by a brigade of Polish paratroopers, would jump into Holland at the far end of the line of advance, at Arnhem. The US 82nd Airborne would take Nijmegen. The US 101st Airborne's task was to jump north of Eindhoven, with the objective of capturing that town and its bridges.

It was a brilliant but complicated plan. Success would depend on almost split second timing, hard fighting, and luck, especially with the weather. If everything worked, the payoff would be British forces on the north German plain, with an open road to Berlin. It could well lead to a quick German collapse. But the operation was a roll of the dice, with the Allies putting all their chips into the bet.

SEPTEMBER 17 was a beautiful end-of-summer day, with a bright blue sky and no wind. No resident of the British Isles who was below the line of flight of the hundreds of C-47s carrying three divisions into combat ever forgot the sight. Nor did the paratroopers. Sergeant Dutch Schultz of the 82nd was jump master for his stick of eighteen paratroopers; he stood in the open door as his plane formed up and headed east. "In spite of my anxiety," he recalled, "it was exhilarating to see thousands of people on the ground waving to us as we flew over the British villages and towns." It was even more reassuring to see the fighter planes join the formation.



When the air armada got over Holland, Schultz could see a tranquil countryside. Cows grazed in the fields. There was some antiaircraft fire, but no breaking of formation by the pilots. The jump was a dream. A sunny midday, little opposition on the ground, ploughed fields that were "soft as a mattress."

General James Gavin led the way for the 82nd. His landing wasn't so soft; he hit a pavement and damaged his back. Some days later a doctor checked him out, looked Gavin in the eye, and said, "There is nothing wrong with your back." Five years later, at Walter Reed Hospital, Gavin was told that he had two broken discs.

Some veterans can't remember their division commanders' names because there were so many of them, or because they never saw them; others don't want to remember. But veterans of the 82nd get tongue-tied when I ask them how they feel about General Gavin, then burst into a torrent of words bold, courageous, fair, smart as hell, a man's man, trusted, beloved, a leader.

Gavin (USMA, 1929) was 37, the youngest general in the US Army since George Custer's day, a trusted and beloved division commander. His athletic grace and build combined with his boyish looks to earn him the affectionate nickname of Slim Jim. After landing in Holland, Dutch Schultz saw Gavin come down, struggle to his feet in obvious pain, sling his M-1, and move out. "From my perspective," Schultz wrote, "it was crucial to my development as a combat soldier seeing my Commanding General carrying his rifle right up on the front line. This concept of leadership was displayed by our regiment, battalion, and company grade officers so often that we normally expected this hands-on leadership from all our officers. It not only inspired us but saved many lives."

There were but a handful of enemy troops in the drop zone (DZ) area. Lieutenant James Coyle recalled, "I saw a single German soldier on the spot where I thought I was going to land. I drew my .45 pistol and tried to get a shot at him but my parachute was oscillating. I was aiming at the sky as often as I was aiming at the ground. When I landed, the German was no more than fifteen feet away, running. Just as I was about to shoot him he threw away his rifle, then his helmet and I saw he was a kid of about seventeen years old, and completely panicked. He just ran past me without looking at me. I didn't have the heart to shoot him."

Sergeant D. Zane Schlemmeer of the 82nd had developed a "soft spot in my heart" for the cows of Normandy because whenever he saw them grazing in a hedgerow enclosed field, he knew there were no land mines in it. In Holland he had another bovine experience. His landing was good, right where he wanted to be. He gathered up his men and set out for his objective in Nijmegen. He spotted two cows. He had plenty of rope, so "we commandeered the cows and hung our mortars and equipment on them. They were very docile and plodded right along with us.

"As we neared Nijmegen, the Dutch people welcomed us. But while pleased and happy to be liberated, they were quite shocked to see paratroopers leading two cows. The first question was, 'Where are your tanks?' We were not their idea of American military invincibility, mobility and power. We could only tell them, 'The tanks are coming.' We hoped it was true."

THE GERMANS had been caught by surprise but were waking up. They got units to the various bridges to defend them or blow them if necessary. The GIs started taking casualties.

As the troopers moved towards their objectives, gliders bearing soldiers and equipment began coming into the DZs. One crash-landed on the edge of a wooded area and was under German small-arms fire coming from the tree line. Captain Anthony Stefanich (Captain Stef to the men) called out to Sergeant Schultz and others to follow him, and headed towards the German position.

Stefanich was one of those officers brought up by General Gavin. Schultz remembered Stefanich as a man "who led through example rather than virtue of rank. He was what I wanted to be when I finally grew up."

Stefanich got hit in the upper torso by rifle fire, which set afire a smoke grenade he was carrying. Lieutenant Gerald Johnson jumped on him to put the fire out, then carried the wounded captain back to where an aid station had been set up.

But it was too late. Just before he died, Stefanich whispered to Lieutenant Johnson, "We have come a long way-tell the boys to do a good job." The medic, a Polish boy from Chicago, stood up beside the

body. He was crying and calling out, "He's gone, he's gone. I couldn't help him." It was, Schultz said, "a devastating loss. It was the only time in combat that I broke down and wept."

BY THE END of September 17 the Americans had achieved most of their objectives. The British 1st Airborne, meanwhile, had landed north of Arnhem and secured the area for reinforcements to come in the next day. One battalion, led by Colonel John Frost, went into Arnhem and took the east end of the bridge. The British Second Army failed to reach its objectives but had made progress.

On September 18, however, almost everything went wrong. German 88s, assembled in woods on either side of the raised road the British were using, began firing with devastating effectiveness. It was easy shooting, looking up at the tanks against the skyline. Soon disabled vehicles blocked the road, causing gigantic traffic jams. The weather in England turned bad-rain, fog, mist-grounding all aeroplanes. There would be no reinforcements, no supply drops.

Over the Continent the weather was good enough for the Jabos to fly. Colonel Cole, commanding the 3rd Battalion of the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment, got on the radio. A pilot asked him to put orange identification panels in front of his position. As Cole was placing the panels on the ground, a German sniper shot and killed him. Two weeks later the army awarded him the Medal of Honour for his bayonet charge near Carentan on June 11. His widow accepted his posthumous award on the parade ground at Fort Sam Houston, where Cole had played as a child. In Mrs Cole's arms was the eighteen-month-old son Cole had never seen.

ON SEPTEMBER 19 the British Second Army struggled forward, linking up with the 82nd outside Nijmegen. In Arnhem, Colonel Frost held his isolated position at the bridge, but his situation was desperate. He was going into a third day with most of his battalion wounded (as was he), under attack from German tanks, with nothing but small arms to fight back with, out of food and medicine.

To get to Frost, the Guards Armoured Division had to get across the Waal River. Before that could happen, Gavin had to take the railroad and

highway bridges at Nijmegen. The 82nd had taken much of the city, but the bridges were still well defended.

Lieutenant Waverly Wray-the man who had killed ten Germans with a single shot each on June 7 at Ste. Mere-Eglise-led an assault on the railway bridge. "The last I saw of him," one trooper reported, "he was headed for the Germans with a grenade in one hand and a tommy gun in the other." As Wray raised his head over the track embankment, a German sniper firing from a signal tower killed him with a single shot in the middle of his head.

ON THAT afternoon Gavin met with British Lieutenant General Brian Horrocks, commanding the Guards Armoured Division. Horrocks said he could provide tank support for an attack on the bridges, and he could have trucks bring forward assault boats for a crossing of the river downstream from the bridges. Gavin decided to hit the western ends with Lieutenant Colonel Ben Vandervoort's 2nd Battalion, 505th PIR, and to give the task of crossing the river in boats to Major Julian Cook's 3rd Battalion, 504th PIR.

The trucks carrying the boats were promised for late that afternoon, but they were delayed because the Germans were putting heavy fire on the single road running back to the start point in Belgium. So effective were these attacks that the GIs were calling the road Hell's Highway. Hitler authorized one of the Luftwaffe's final mass raids on the clogged road: 200 bombers hit Eindhoven, while another 200 went after the troops and vehicles jamming Hell's Highway. The trucks went in reverse.

At 1530 on September 19 Gavin flung Vandervoort's battalion at the bridges. Vandervoort's men rode into the attack on the backs of more than forty British armoured vehicles. They got to the centre of Nijmegen without much difficulty. There Vandervoort split the regiment, sending half for the railroad bridge and the other half for the highway span. Both attacks met fierce opposition.

Lieutenant Coyle and Sergeant Sampson's platoon led one assault. As two Sherman tanks in front of Coyle moved across a traffic circle, hidden 57-mm antitank guns fired. The tanks shook, stopped, began to flare up. The tank beside Coyle backed into a street leading to the traffic circle. Coyle had his platoon retreat into houses, then take up positions on the second floors.

From there the GIs could see Germans on foot and bicycle coming across the bridge. The men wanted to set up their machine guns in the windows and fire at the enemy, but Coyle ordered them to stay back because he didn't want the Germans to know he was there, not until those antitank guns had been found and knocked out.

Looking out, Coyle saw the Germans manhandling an antitank gun from behind some bushes in the park, bringing it forward, and pointing it up the street. Just then Vandervoort came into the room. Coyle showed him the German gun and said he wanted to coordinate an attack with the British tanks. Vandervoort agreed. He told Coyle to open up in five minutes; then he dashed downstairs to find the tanks and put them into the attack. But before Vandervoort could get the tankers organized, someone opened fire from a building adjacent to Coyle's. The Germans started firing back. Private John Keller fired a rifle grenade at the antitank gun in the street and knocked it out. Then Coyle pulled his platoon out of the house and occupied the cellar of another. By now dark had come on. Coyle received orders to button down and wait for morning.

DAWN, September 20. One mile downstream from the bridges, Major Cook's men were ready to go, but the assault boats had not arrived. Vandervoort's battalion, meanwhile, was unable to drive the Germans out of the park, despite great effort. Sergeant Sampson was badly wounded that morning by shellfire.

While Cook's battalion waited for the boats. Cook went to the top of a tower at a nearby power station to survey the opposite bank of the Waal River. A young captain with Cook, Henry Keep, wrote in a letter home, "What greeted our eyes was a broad, flat plain void of all cover or concealment . . . some three hundred metres, where there was a built-up highway where we would get our first opportunity to get some protection. We could see all along the Kraut side of the river strong defensive positions, a formidable line both in length as well as in depth-pillboxes, machinegun emplacements."

Ten British tanks and an artillery battery were lined up along the river to give covering fire when Cook crossed. But not until 1500 did the trucks arrive. They brought only twenty-six assault boats, instead of the thirty-three that had been promised. And they were the frailest of craft-six

metres long, of canvas, with a reinforced plywood bottom. There were only three paddles per boat. The Waal was almost 400 metres wide, with a swift current of about ten kilometres per hour.

The paratroopers pushed off into deep water, thirteen men to a boat, plus three British engineers with the paddles. As they got out into the current and headed for the far bank, the Germans opened fire. Cook and Keep were in the first boat. "It was a horrible picture, this river crossing," Captain Keep wrote to his mother, "set to (lie deafening roar of omnipresent firing. It was fiendish and dreadful. Defenceless, frail canvas boats jammed to overflowing with humanity, all striving desperately to cross the Waal as quickly as possible, and get to a place where at least they could fight."

Some boats took direct hits, leaving nothing but flotsam. The flotilla came on. Only eleven boats made it to the far shore, but when they did, the paratroopers who had survived the ordeal had their blood up. They were not going to be denied.

"Nobody paused," a British tank officer wrote. "Men got out and began running towards the embankment. My God what a courageous sight it was!"

Cook led the way. Captain Keep commented, "Many times I have seen troops who are driven to a fever pitch-troops who, for a brief interval of combat, are lifted out of themselves, fanatics rendered crazy by rage and the lust for killing, men who forget temporarily the meaning of fear. However, I have never witnessed this human metamorphosis so acutely displayed as on this day. The men were beside themselves. They continued to cross that field in spite of all the Kraut could do, cursing savagely, their guns spitting fire."

In less than a half hour his men had reached the top of the highway embankment and driven the Germans out. The engineers, meanwhile, had paddled back to the west bank and returned with a second wave. Altogether it took six crossings to get Cook's battalion over.

As those crossings were being made. Cook led the first wave in an assault on the bridges. His men came on fast. Meanwhile, Vandervoort's people on the west side had finally overrun the park. The Germans scrambled frantically for the plungers to set off explosives on the bridges, but Cook's men did what they had been trained to do-wherever they saw

wires on the ground, they cut them. The German engineers hit the plungers, and nothing happened.

Cook's men set up defensive positions at the bridges, facing east. As the British tanks with Vandervoort started across the highway bridge, their crews saw the Stars and Stripes go up on the other end. Of Cook's men forty were killed, a hundred wounded, but he had the bridges. There were 267 German dead on the railroad bridge alone, plus many hundreds wounded and captured. It was one of the great feats of arms of World War II.

Darkness was descending. Arnhem was but eleven kilometres away. Frost's battalion was still barely holding the eastern end of the bridge. But General Horrocks decided to set up defensive positions for the night. The Guards began to brew up their tea.

Cook's men were enraged. They yelled and swore at the Brits, told them those were their countrymen in Arnhem and they needed help now. Horrocks commented, "This operation of Cook's was the best and most gallant attack I have ever seen carried out in my life. No wonder the leading paratroopers were furious that we did not push straight on for Arnhem. They felt they had risked their lives for nothing, but it was impossible, owing to the confusion which existed in Nijmegen, with houses burning and the British and US forces all mixed up."

On September 21 the tanks moved out, only to be stopped halfway to Arnhem by two enemy battalions with tanks and 88s. There were Jabos overhead, but the radio sets in the RAF ground liaison car would not work. That afternoon the 9th SS Panzer Division overwhelmed Frost's battalion. Some days later the survivors of 1st Airborne crossed the Rhine to safety. The division had gone into Arnhem 10,005 men strong. It came out with 2,163 live soldiers.

OVER THE next six months the front line in Holland hardly moved. For the 82nd and 101st that meant months of misery. They couldn't move by day, because the Germans held the high ground to the east and had enough 88 shells to expend at a single soldier whenever one was visible.

The American airborne troops had been trained as a light infantry assault outfit, with the emphasis on quick movement, daring

manoeuvres, and small-arms fire. Now they were involved in a static warfare that was reminiscent of World War I. And as in the Great War, the casualties were heaviest among the junior officers.

Stefanich gone, Cole gone, Wray gone, so many others gone. Reflecting on the losses, Dutch Schultz commented, "By the end in Holland, most of the officers trained by General Gavin had become battlefield casualties." The pain of the loss of these good men was compounded by the knowledge that nothing had been gained. At the end of September, Patton's Third Army was stuck; the supply crisis was worse than ever. Antwerp wasn't open. And Market-Garden had failed. What would be the consequences?

## Chapter Five

### The Siegfried Line: October 1944

As THE Americans reached the German border from Luxembourg north, they were entering country that had been fought over since Caesar's time. It was interlaced with ancient walled cities, and villages that made natural strongpoints.

The French region of Lorraine is south of Luxembourg. Since the beginning of European civilization it has been a battlefield. It was an invasion route for the Germanic tribes coming from Central Europe into France. Over the centuries there have been many fortifications in the area, which is bounded on the east by the Saar River and on the west by the Moselle River.

Metz is on the Moselle, 45 kilometres north of Nancy, the historic ruling city of Lorraine. Metz is perhaps the most heavily fortified city in the most heavily fortified part of Europe. Fifteen fortifications were built close around the city in the seventeenth century by the famous French military engineer Sebastien Vauban. The Prussians came through Metz in 1870, nevertheless. After the Franco Prussian War, Bismarck incorporated Lorraine into the new Germany, and the German army constructed a second, outer belt of twenty-eight forts, mainly north and west of the city. In 1918 Lorraine returned to France. Soon the French army was building the Maginot Line some twenty kilometres east and north of Metz, while the Germans built the Siegfried Line another



twenty kilometres to the east, along the line of the Saar River, the prewar border.

Hitler, whose faith in reinforced cement never wavered—a result of his World War I experiences—poured a lot of it into the Siegfried in this area. By 1940 the strongest part of the Siegfried faced the strongest part of the Maginot Line. In the summer of 1944, when the retreat from Normandy began, Hitler poured more cement, put more guns into the Siegfried and Metz forts, and waited.

Hitler had the weather on his side. Fall is the wet season in Lorraine, with an average monthly rainfall in autumn of 3 inches. In November 1944, 6.95 inches of rain fell during the month.

Patton cursed. His Third Army's mission was to take Lorraine, but in the sheets of cold rain, with the mud clinging to boots and tank treads, and the Moselle at flood stage, he couldn't do it. He lusted for Metz. To get it, he had to take Fort Driant. The fort stood on a dominating hill, with clear fields of fire up and down the Moselle. The Americans could not cross the river above or below Metz until Driant was theirs. Built in 1902 and later strengthened by both French and Germans, the fort covered 355 acres. It was surrounded by a 65-foot wide moat, which in turn was surrounded by a 65-foot band of barbed wire. It had living quarters for a garrison of 2,000. Most of the fortification was underground, along with food and ammunition supplies, enough for a month or more. The only way in was over a causeway. There were four outlying casement batteries and a detached fifth battery. Concealed machine-gun pillboxes were scattered through the area.

On September 27 Third Army made its first attempt to take Driant. Although they had only a vague idea of the fort's works, they figured that a pre-World War I fortress system couldn't possibly stand up to the pounding of modern artillery, much less air-dropped bombs of 500 to 1,000 pounds, not to mention napalm. From dawn to 1415 hours the Americans hit the fort with all the high explosives in their arsenal.

At 1415 the 11th Infantry Regiment began to move in on the fort. To their astonishment, when they reached the barbed wire surrounding the moat, Germans rose up from pillboxes all around and opened fire. Sherman's came forward to blast the pillboxes, but their 75-mm shells hardly chipped the thick concrete. The infantry ignominiously withdrew under cover of darkness.

Third Army now faced the oldest tactical-engineering problem in warfare-how to overcome a fortified position. It helped considerably that the Americans eventually got their hands on the blueprints of the fort, which showed a warren of tunnels. No amount of high explosive was going to knock the fort down. Infantry would have to get inside and take possession.

On October 3 the second assault on Driant began. Captain Harry Anderson of Company B led the way, tossing grenades into German bunkers as he ran across the causeway into Driant, where he established a position alongside one of the casements. An intense firefight ensued. Germans popped out of their holes like prairie dogs, fired, and dropped back. They called in their own artillery from other forts in the area. American engineers got forward with TNT to blast a hole in the casement, but the heavy walls were as impervious to TNT as to shells and bombs.

On top of the casement Private Robert Holmlund found a ventilator shaft. Despite enemy fire, he managed to open the shaft's cover and drop several bangalore torpedoes down the opening. Germans who survived evacuated the area, and Captain Anderson led the first Americans inside the fort. The room they had taken turned out to be a barracks. They quickly took an adjacent one.

The Germans counterattacked. The ensuing firelight was a new dimension of combat. It shattered nerves, ears, and lives with machine-gun fire and hand grenade explosions reverberating in the tunnels enclosed by thick, dripping masonry walls. The air was virtually unbreathable; men in the barracks room had to take turns at gulping fresh air from firing slits.

B Company was stuck there. It had neither the equipment nor the manpower to fight its way through the maze of tunnels. It couldn't go back; being on top of the fort was more dangerous than being in it. At dark, reinforcements accompanied by a half-dozen Shermans crossed the causeway and assaulted another casement, but they were badly shot up and forced to withdraw.

Captain Jack Gerrie, CO of G Company, 11th Infantry, led the reinforcements. On October 4 Gerrie tried to knock down the steel doors at the rear of the fort. Direct cannon fire couldn't do it, and protruding grillwork made it impossible to put TNT charges against the doors. The Germans again called down fire on Driant, which forced G Company

to scatter to abandoned pillboxes, ditches, anywhere for shelter. That evening Gerrie tried to reorganize his company, but the Germans came out of the underground tunnels-here, there, everywhere-fired, and retreated.

At dawn on October 5 German artillery commenced firing. After hours of this, Gerrie wrote a report for his battalion commander: "The situation is critical. A couple more barrages and another counterattack and we are sunk. We have no men, our equipment is shot and we just can't go on. We may be able to hold till dark but if anything happens this afternoon I can make no predictions. The enemy artillery is butchering these troops. We cannot get out to get our wounded and there is a hell of a lot of dead and missing. There is only one answer the way things stand. First either to withdraw and saturate it with heavy bombers or reinforce with a hell of a strong force, but eventually they'll get it by artillery too. This is just a suggestion but if we want this damned fort let's get the stuff required to take it and then go. Right now you haven't got it."

Written from a shell hole under fire by a man who hadn't slept in two days, it is a remarkable report, accurate and rightly critical of the fools who had got him into this predicament. It moved right up to the corps commander, who showed it to Patton and said the battalion commander wanted to withdraw. Never, Patton replied.

Over the next three days Third Army threw one more regiment into the attack, with similar ghastly results. The lowliest private could see clearly what Patton could not, that this fort had to be bypassed and neutralized because it was never going to be taken.

Patton finally relented. Still, not until October 13 were the GIs withdrawn. About half as many returned as went up. This was Third Army's first defeat in battle.

The only good thing about a defeat is that it teaches lessons. The Driant debacle caused a badly needed deflation of Patton's hubris. That led to a recognition of the need to plan more thoroughly, to get proper equipment. The next time, Third Army was going to get it right.

NORTH OF Luxembourg, at Eilendorf, just outside Aachen, Captain Dawson's G Company was holding its position on the ridge astride the Siegfried Line. By October 4, G Company had repulsed three German

counterattacks and endured 500 shells per day from 105 howitzers. The Germans came on in division strength, but again Dawson's company beat them back, with help from the artillery and air. "We had constant shelling for eight hours," Dawson remembered. "We had twelve direct hits on what was our command post."

An officer in Dawson's battalion, Lieutenant Fred Hall, wrote his mother on October 6, "This action is as rough as I have seen. Still the hardships are borne with little complaint." Hall told his mother, "In the lower echelons of command, faced with the realities of the situation, the feeling is that the war will not be over before the spring of 1945 at the earliest."

Because of the weather, planes could not fly, tanks could not manoeuvre, soldiers marched only with the greatest difficulty. Patton was stuck. Antwerp was what Eisenhower wanted, but Montgomery failed to open it. According to reports coming to Eisenhower, the Canadians trying to overrun the Schelde estuary were short on ammunition because Montgomery persisted in trying to widen the Market-Garden salient in Holland and had given priority in supplies to the British Second Army.

Eisenhower ordered Montgomery to put his full effort into opening the Schelde. But not until October 16 did Montgomery give priority to the Canadians. Not until November 8 were they able to drive the Germans out of the estuary. Then the mines had to be cleared and the facilities repaired. Not until November 28 did the first Allied convoy reach Antwerp's docks. By then the weather precluded major operations.

Under the circumstances, an obvious strategy would have been to abandon any offensive moves, create defensive positions facing the German border, go into winter camp, and wait for the supply situation to improve and the weather to clear. But Eisenhower gave no thought to winter quarters. With the V-2s coming down on London, with thousands dying daily in concentration camps, he could not. With the Red Army pushing into Central Europe, with the unknown factor of how the race for an atomic bomb was progressing, he could not.

Eisenhower urged his subordinates to offensive action. The campaign that resulted was one of the toughest of the war. The strategy was just to attack to the east. The terrain in the centre of the American line—the Eifel mountains and the rugged Ardennes and Hurtgen forests—dictated that the main efforts would take place to the north and south of

these obstacles. To the north, First and Ninth armies would head towards the Rhine along the axis Maastricht-Aachen-Cologne. The major obstacles were the Siegfried Line, the city of Aachen, and the northern part of the Hurtgen. To the south, Third Army would continue to attack through Lorraine and advance towards the Saar River.

To CARRY out those missions, the American army needed to overcome problems aplenty. For the first time since early August, when they had fled the hedgerow country, the Germans had prepared positions to defend. One of the first tasks they accomplished as they manned the Siegfried Line was to put S-mines-Bouncing Betties-in front of their positions. Thousands of them. When triggered by a trip wire or foot pressure, they sprang a metre or so into the air before exploding. The canister contained 360 steel balls or small pieces of scrap steel. They were capable of tearing off a leg above the knee or inflicting the wound that above all others terrified the soldiers.

Lieutenant George Wilson had joined the 4th Division at the time of St. Lo. By early October he had been in combat for nine weeks, but he had not yet seen an S-mine. On October 10, when he led a reconnaissance platoon into the Siegfried Line east of Malmedy, Belgium, suddenly they were everywhere. Engineers came forward to clear the mines and use white tape to mark paths through the fields. They set to probing every inch of ground, gently working trench knives in at an angle, hoping to hit only the sides of the mines. They began uncovering-and sometimes exploding-devilish little handmade mines in pottery crocks, set just below the ground. The only metal was the detonator, too small to be picked up by mine detectors. They blew off hands.

A squad to Wilson's right got caught in a minefield. The lieutenant leading it had a leg blown off. Four men who came to help him also set off mines, and each lost a leg. Wilson started over, but the lieutenant yelled at him to stay back. Then the lieutenant began talking calmly to the wounded men around him. One by one he directed them back over the path they had taken into the minefield. One by one, on hands and knee, dragging a stump, they got out. Then the lieutenant dragged himself out.

Wilson had seen a lot, but this was "horribly gruesome. Five young men lying there, each missing a leg." After the war he declared that the

S-mine was "the most frightening weapon of the war, the one that made us sick with fear."

Behind the minefields were the dragon's teeth. They rested on a concrete mat between ten and thirty metres wide, sunk a metre or two into the ground to prevent any attempt to tunnel underneath them and place explosive charges. On top of the mat were the teeth themselves, truncated pyramids of reinforced concrete about a metre in height in the front row, to two metres high in the back, staggered in such a manner that a tank could not drive through. Interspersed among the teeth were minefields, barbed wire, and pillboxes virtually impenetrable by artillery and set in such a way as to give the Germans crossing fire across the entire front. The only way to take those pillboxes was to get behind them and attack the rear entry. But behind the first row of pillboxes and dragon's teeth, there was a second, often a third, sometimes a fourth.

Throughout the length of the Siegfried Line, villages along the border were incorporated into the defence system. The houses, churches, and public buildings were built of stone and brick. The second floors of the buildings and the belfries on the churches provided excellent observation posts.

The US Army had no training for driving Germans out of villages where the streets were jumbled and tanks had difficulty manoeuvring, where gunners had crisscrossing fields of fire. It was going to have to learn such basic things as the first rule of street fighting-stay out of the streets-and the second rule-a systematic, patient approach works, while audacity and risk taking don't. Reconnaissance pilots, meanwhile, had taken tens of thousands of photographs, creating an intelligence picture almost as complete as that developed for the Normandy beaches. Commanders were given maps that plotted all known strongpoints.

FIRST ARMY'S mission was to break through the Siegfried Line. That route would be along the narrow Aachen corridor, between the fens of Holland to the north and the Hurtgen Forest and Ardennes to the south. To avoid getting caught up in the urban congestion of Aachen, breakthroughs would take place north and south of the city. When the two wings linked to the east, Aachen would be enveloped and could be neutralized.

Aachen had little military value. It was more a trading centre than a manufacturing site. But Aachen's psychological value was immense. It was the first German city to be threatened, symbolic enough by itself, and a city central to German civilization. The Romans had medicinal spring baths there, the Aquisgranum. It was the city where Charlemagne was born and crowned. It was the seat of the Holy Roman Empire-what Hitler called the First Reich.

Hitler was determined to hold the city and, to do so, sent in the 246th Volksgrenadier Division, about 5,000 boys and old men with a small assortment of tanks, assault guns, and artillery pieces. He ordered the CO, Colonel Gerhard Wilck, to hold the city "to the last man, and if necessary, allow himself to be buried under its ruins."

For six days prior to jump off, First Army's heavy artillery pounded forty-five known German pillboxes immediately in front of the American 30th Division. This stripped away camouflage, ripped up the barbed wire obstacles, set off hundreds of mines, and forced the Germans to take cover. Otherwise it had little effect except to let the Germans know where the attack was coming.

H-hour (the planned hour of attack) was set for 1100, October 2. At 0900 hours the American artillery shifted targets from the German front to antiaircraft batteries in the rear, sending up clouds of black smoke that hampered German visibility. Unfortunately, it also hampered American visibility. The 360 medium bombers and 72 fighter-bombers committed to the pre-assault bombing of German positions went astray. Only a half-dozen bombs fell in the target area-almost a total failure.

As the planes left, the artillery shifted targets back to the pillboxes. Mortarmen rushed to their positions and in a few hours fired 18,696 shells from 372 tubes. As the infantry moved forward, tanks put direct fire on the pillboxes to prevent German gunners from manning their weapons. Infantry platoons accompanied by engineer teams manoeuvred their way behind the pillboxes, where the engineers blew the rear doors with satchel charges, bangalore torpedoes, and bazookas.

By the end of the day, the 30th Division had breached the first line of pillboxes. The next day the 2nd Armoured joined the attack. By October 7 the Americans had made a clean break through the Siegfried Line north of Aachen. The 1st Division, meanwhile, broke through to the south. The two wings hooked up, and Aachen was surrounded. First Army was on the verge of a classic victory.

On October 10 First Army sent Colonel Wilck an ultimatum. When he rejected it, the 1st Division prepared to take the city. It fell to Lieutenant Colonel Derrill Daniel, CO of the 2nd Battalion of the 26th Infantry, to lead the attack. He got three Shermans, two towed antitank guns, and other weapons to support his rifle companies.

H-hour was 0930, October 13. The jump-off line was a high railroad embankment, with the German lines just on the other side. At 0930 every soldier in the battalion heaved a hand grenade over the embankment. Daniel's men came after the explosions, shouting and firing. Resistance was light. The tanks punched holes in the sides of buildings, through which infantry could move from one building into the next without exposing themselves in the street. The battalion was nearing the city centre as night came on.

In the morning German resistance stiffened. The battle grew desperate. The GIs brought wheeled artillery into the city and were able to fire parallel to the front, dropping their shells just beyond the noses of the American infantry. Building by building Daniel's men advanced. Colonel Wilck's men fought back from every conceivable hiding place. They used the city sewer system to mount counterattacks from the rear so effectively that the Americans had to locate and block every manhole to prevent further infiltration.

FOR CAPTAIN Dawson and G Company the task wasn't to attack but defend. Dawson and his men were holding high ground east of Aachen, which gave them observation posts (OPs) to call in targets to the gunners and pilots. The Germans were desperate to get him off that ridge.

At 2300 hours, October 15, an SS panzer division hit G Company. The first shots came as a surprise because the leading tank in the column was a captured Sherman with American markings. The battle thus joined went on for 48 hours. There was hand-to-hand fighting, with rifle butts and bayonets. It was surreal, almost slow-motion, because the mud was ankle-deep. Dawson called in artillery to within ten metres of his position. At one foxhole a German toppled dead over the barrel of an American machine gun, while in another a wounded American waited until the German who had shot him came up and looked down on him,



then emptied his tommy gun in the German's face. The two men died at the bottom of the hole in a macabre embrace.

INSIDE AACHEN the battle raged. The Germans fell back to the centre of the city, charging a price for every building abandoned. Rubble in the streets grew to monstrous proportions. The old buildings, made of masonry and stone, were almost impervious to tank cannon fire, so Lieutenant Colonel Daniel brought a 155-mm artillery piece into the city, using a bulldozer to clear a path. Daniel reported that its effects were "quite spectacular and satisfying."

On October 16 the battalion ran into a strong German position in the city's main theatre building. Daniel brought the 155-mm forward and fired more than a dozen shells, point-blank, into the theatre. It survived, but its defenders, dazed, surrendered.

For another four days and nights the Germans and Americans pounded each other while they destroyed Aachen. Finally, on October 21, Daniel's men secured the downtown area. Colonel Wilck dared to disobey Hitler and surrendered his 3,473 survivors. At his interrogation he protested bitterly against the use of the 155-mm in Aachen, calling it "barbarous" and claiming it should be outlawed.

American losses were heavy, over 5,000. The 30th and 1st divisions were exhausted, used up. They were in no condition to make a dash to the Rhine. German losses were 5,000 casualties and 5,600 prisoners of war. Aachen was destroyed, with the exception of the cathedral, which housed Charlemagne's coronation chair. It escaped major damage.

OUTSIDE AACHEN, Dawson's company continued to hold. After Aachen fell, there were fewer, less vigorous German attacks. On October 22 reporter W.C. Heinz of the New York Sun got to Dawson's headquarters to do an interview. Dawson summarized the action simply: "This is the worst I've seen. Nobody will ever know what this has been like up here."

Heinz arranged to stay a few days to find out. The dispatches he filed beginning October 24 give a vivid portrait of a rifle company commander

in action in World War II. Of them it can be truly said that they held the most dangerous and difficult job in the world.

Dawson's HQ was in a cellar in the village. There was a kerosene lamp, a table and some chairs, a radio playing classical music, and a couple of lieutenants. Heinz got Dawson talking about what it had been like. "And the kid says to me," Dawson related, " 'I'll take that water to that platoon.' And he starts out. He is about fifty yards from this doorway and I'm watching him. He is running fast; then I can see this 88 hit right where he is, and, in front of my eyes, he is blown apart."

Dawson spoke of other strains. "I had a kid come up and say, 'I can't take it anymore.' What could I do? If I lose that man, I lose a squad. So I grab him by the shirt, and I say, 'You will, you will. There ain't any going back from this hill except dead.' And he goes back and he is dead."

Dawson sighed. "He doesn't know why, and I don't know why, and you don't know why. But I have got to answer those guys."

He looked Heinz in the eye. "Because I wear bars. I've got the responsibility and I don't know whether I'm big enough for the job." He continued to fix his eyes on Heinz. "But I can't break now. I've taken this for the thirty-nine days we've held this ridge and I'm in the middle of the Siegfried Line and you want to know what I think? I think it stinks."

Dawson began to shed tears. Then he jerked his head up. "Turn it up," he said to a lieutenant by the radio. "That's Puccini. I want to hear it."

Two GIs came into the room. They were apprehensive because Captain Dawson had sent for them. But it was good news. "I'm sending you to Paris," Dawson announced. "For six days. How do you like that?"

"Thanks," one replied reluctantly.

"Well, you had better like it," Dawson said, "and you had better stay out of trouble, but have a good time and bless your hearts." The men mumbled thanks, and left.

"Two of the best boys I've got," Dawson told Heinz. "Wire boys. They've had to run new lines every day because the old ones get chopped up. One day they laid heavy wire for two hundred yards and by the time they got to the end and worked back, the wire had been cut in three places by shellfire."

Dawson told Heinz that he had men who had been wounded in mid-September, when he first occupied the ridge, who returned four weeks later. They had gone AWOL from the field hospital and made their way back, "and the first thing I know they show up again here and they're grinning from ear to ear. I know it must sound absolutely crazy that would want to come back to this, but it is true."

The following morning one of the lieutenants told Dawson, "Captain, those wiremen, they say they don't want to go to Paris."

"All right," Dawson sighed. "Get two other guys-if you can."

THE BATTLE of Aachen benefited no one. The Americans never should have attacked. The Germans never should have defended. Neither side had a choice. This was war at its worst-wanton destruction for no purpose.

Lieutenant Colonel John C. Harrison (who later became a justice of the Montana Supreme Court) was a 31-year-old Montana State University graduate, acting as liaison officer with corps headquarters. On October 22 he went into Aachen to report on the damage. He wrote in his diary, "If every German city that we pass through looks like this one the Hun is going to be busy for centuries rebuilding his country."

Harrison saw not one undamaged building. The streets were impassable. It made him feel good. "I thought how odd it is that I would feel good at seeing human misery but I did feel that way, for here was the war being brought to the German in all of its destructive horror. The war has truly come to Germany and pictures of these terrible scenes should be dropped over the entire country to show them what is in store for them if they continue."

## Chapter Six

Metz and the Hurtgen Forest:

November 1-December 15, 1944

NORTHWEST Europe in November and December was a miserable place. A mixture of sleet, snow, rain, cold, fog, and flood. The already poor roads were churned into quagmires by military vehicles; veterans speak of the mud as knee-deep and insist that it is true.

In the centre of the American line, in the Ardennes, portions of First Army did go into something like winter camp. It was a lightly held, quiet area, where divisions just coming into the line could be placed to give them some frontline experience. The terrain made it the least likely area the Germans might counterattack. All was quiet there. But north and south of the Ardennes, First and Third armies were on the offensive, the weather be damned.

Replacements were steadily coming onto the line from England. The new divisions were made up of the high school classes of 1942, 1943, and 1944. The training these young men had gone through stateside was rigorous physically but severely short on the tactical and leadership challenges the junior officers would have to meet.

Paul Fussell was a twenty-year-old lieutenant in command of a rifle platoon in the 103rd Division. He found the six months' training in the States to be repetitious and unrealistic. In the field, "our stock-in-trade was the elementary fire-and-flank manoeuvre hammered into us over and over at Benning. It was very simple. With half your platoon you establish a firing line to keep your enemy's heads down while you lead the other half around to the enemy's flank for a sudden surprise assault, preferably with bayonets and shouting. We all did grasp the idea," Fussell remembered, "but in combat it had one single defect, namely the difficulty, usually the impossibility, of knowing where your enemy's flank is. If you get up and go looking for it, you'll be killed." Nevertheless, Fussell saw the positive benefit to doing fire and movement over and over: "It did have the effect of persuading us that such an attack could be led successfully and that we were the people who could do it. That was good for our self-respect and our courage."

Fussell was a rich kid from southern California who had a couple of years of college and some professional journalism behind him. There were hundreds of young officers like Fussell, lieutenants who came into Europe in the fall of 1944 to take up the fighting. Bright kids. The quarterback on the championship high school football team. The president of his class. The chess champion. The lead in the class play. The wizard in the chemistry class. America was throwing her finest young men at the Germans.

AMONG THE fresh divisions was the 84th Infantry. It came into France on November 2, assigned to the new US Ninth Army, which had taken over a narrow part of the front. The 84th's K Company, 333rd Regiment, was outside Geilenkirchen, some twenty kilometres north of Aachen.

"K Company was an American mass-production item," one of its officers remarked, "fresh off the assembly line." It certainly was representative. There were men who could neither read nor write, along with privates from Yale and Harvard, class of 1946.

K company's first offensive was Operation Clipper. The 84th's mission was to seize the high ground east of Geilenkirchen along the Siegfried, in conjunction with a British offensive to the left (north). For Clipper the 84th was under the command of British general Brian Horrocks. To K Company what that meant, mostly, was a daily rum ration, about half a canteen cup.

For the first three days of Clipper, K Company did the mopping up in Geilenkirchen, taking 100 prisoners with no casualties. The company congratulated itself and relaxed. "Someone was playing a piano," Private Jim Sterner remembered. He looked into a house and found a half-dozen men and his CO, Captain George Gieszl, playing the piano with a British lieutenant. The song was "Lili Marlene," and "our guys were laughing and singing along with him. What I remember most is a feeling of total exhilaration. Boy, this is really great the way a war ought to be."

On November 21 it was K Company's turn to lead the attack. Sherman tanks with British crews showed up to support the GIs. The company advanced. It took possession of a chateau the Germans had been using as an observation post but had not tried to defend. It moved forward again but was soon held up by artillery fire. Sergeant Keith Lance led his mortar squad forward to provide support, but as he approached, "we started taking machine-gun and rifle fire from a stone farm building off to our right." A British officer in a tank gave the farmhouse three quick rounds. Thirty to forty Germans poured out, waving white flags.

The rifle platoons, meanwhile, were taking a pounding. The company autobiography describes it: "The concentration of German firepower was

absolutely overwhelming with its violence, surprise, and intensity. Artillery fire, 88s and 75s from hidden tanks, and 120 mortars with apparently limitless supplies of ammunition hit us. Machine-gun fire whipping in from pillboxes seemed almost an afterthought. The noise, the shock, the sensation of total helplessness and bewilderment, the loss of control, the sudden loss of every familiar assumption nothing in civilian life or training offered an experience remotely comparable. Our new-boy illusions of the past two days dissolved in a moment."

It was K Company's welcome to the Western Front. Every rifle company coming on the line that November had a similar experience and drew the same conclusion: there was no way training could prepare a man for combat. Combat could only be experienced, not played at. Training was critical to getting the men into physical condition, to obey orders, to use their weapons effectively. It could not teach men how to lie helpless under a shower of shrapnel in a field crisscrossed by machine-gun fire. They just had to do it, and in doing it, they joined a unique group of men who have experienced what the rest of us cannot imagine.

AT METZ, Patton remained steadfast for advance. The plan was to have the 5th Division attack to the northeast of Metz, while the 90th Division would break through the German lines to the south of the city. The two divisions would link up east of Metz, isolating it. Meanwhile, the 95th Division would push into the city itself, supported by the 10th Armoured Division.

Torrential rains and stiff German resistance held up the 5th and 90th divisions for a week, but by November 15 the encirclement was almost complete. Metz was finally within Patton's grasp.

It fell to Colonel Robert Bacon to take the city. On November 16 he began advancing in two columns, with tanks at the head. By dusk the next day the columns were near Fort St. Julien, four kilometres from the city centre. The old Vauban-designed fort had a garrison of 362 Germans. They had no heavy weapons, but with their machine guns and rifles they could prevent American movement on the roads. St. Julien was the one fort that had to be taken.

The assault began at dawn, November 18, in the fog. By noon the 95th had fought its way to the moat. At 1300 the infantry began to dash across

the causeway and two Shermans moved forward to spray enemy firing slits with their machine guns. But the GIs ran into an iron door that blocked access to St. Julien's interior. The Shermans fired point-blank at it, but the 75-mm shells just bounced off. A tank destroyer with a 90-mm gun fired six rounds at 50 yards. They had no effect. With the fire from the Shermans keeping the Germans back from the firing slits, a 155-mm howitzer was wheeled into place. The big gun slammed twenty rounds into the door's mounts. Finally the door collapsed inwards with a mighty crash. Infantry moved through the opening, bayonets fixed. They were met by Germans with their hands up.

The 155-mm had taken the place of the battering ram. This was an altogether new use of self-propelled artillery. It was part of what was becoming the essence of American tactics in ETO-whenver possible, use high explosives.

With the fall of St. Julien the 95th Division began to move to the centre of Metz. On November 22 Metz was secured-except that six forts around the city were still defiant. Soon enough they began to surrender. The last to give up was Fort Driant, which finally capitulated on December 8. Patton had taken Metz.

In August, Third Army had advanced almost 600 kilometres, from Normandy to the Moselle River. From September 1 to mid-December it advanced thirty-five kilometres east of the Moselle. The Siegfried Line was still a dozen or so kilometres to the east. Third Army had suffered 47,039 battle casualties.

UP NORTH of Aachen, K Company continued to attack, side by side with the British. Just south of Aachen lay the Hurtgen Forest. Roughly 50 square miles, it sat along the German-Belgian border. It was densely wooded, with fir trees twenty to thirty metres tall. They blocked the sun, so the forest floor was dark, damp, devoid of underbrush. The firs interlocked their lower limbs at less than two metres, so everyone had to stoop all the time. It was like a green cave, always dripping water-low-roofed and forbidding. The terrain was rugged, a series of ridges and deep gorges.

The Rur River ran along the eastern edge of the Hurtgen. Beyond it was the Rhine. First Army wanted to close to the Rhine, which General Hodges decided required driving the Germans out of the forest. Neither

he nor his staff noted the obvious point that the Germans controlled the dams upstream on the Rur. If the Americans got down into the river valley, the Germans could release the dammed-up water and flood the valley. The forest could have been bypassed to the south, with the dams as the objective, but the generals went for the forest. The Battle of Hurtgen was fought under conditions as bad as American soldiers ever had to face. Sergeant George Morgan of the 4th Division described it:

"The forest was a helluva eerie place to fight. You can't get protection. You can't see. You can't get fields of fire. Artillery slashes the trees like a scythe. Everything is tangled. You can scarcely walk. Everybody is cold and wet, and the mixture of cold rain and sleet keeps falling."

The 3rd Armoured Division and the 9th Infantry Division began the attack on September 19. The lieutenants and captains quickly learned that control of formations larger than platoons was nearly impossible. Troops more than a few feet apart couldn't see each other. There were no clearings, only narrow firebreaks and trails. Maps were almost useless. When the Germans, secure in their bunkers, saw the GIs coming forward, they called down pre-sited artillery fire, using shells with fuses designed to explode on contact with the treetops. When men dived to the ground for cover, they exposed themselves to a rain of hot metal and wood splinters. They learned that to survive a shelling in the Hurtgen, hug a tree. That way they exposed only their steel helmet.

Tanks could barely move on the few roads, as they were too muddy, too heavily mined, too narrow. The artillery could shoot, but not very effectively, as forward observers couldn't see ten metres to the front. The Americans were committed to a fight of infantry skirmish lines plunging ever deeper into the forest, with machine guns and light mortars their only support.

For the GIs it was a calamity. In their September action the 9th and 3rd Armoured lost up to 80 per cent of their frontline troops and gained almost nothing. In October the reinforced 9th tried again, but by mid-month it had suffered terribly. Casualties were around 4,500 for an advance of 3,000 metres.

Call it off! That's what the GIs wanted to tell the generals, but the generals shook their heads and said. Attack. On November 2 the 28th Infantry Division took it up. Major General Norman Cota, one of the heroes of D-Day, was the CO. The 28th was the Pennsylvania National Guard and was called the Keystone Division. Referring to the



red keystone shoulder patch, the Germans took to calling it the Bloody Bucket Division.

It tried to move forward, but it was like walking into hell. From their bunkers the Germans sent forth a hail of machine-gun fire and mortars. Everything was mud and fir trees. "The days were so terrible that I would pray for darkness," Private Clarence Blakeslee recalled, "and the nights were so bad I would pray for daylight."

For two weeks the 28th kept attacking, as ordered. There were men who broke under the strain, and there were heroes. On November 5 the Germans counterattacked. An unknown GI dashed out of his foxhole, took a bazooka from a dead soldier, and engaged two German tanks. He fired from a range of 25 metres and put one tank out of action. He was never seen again.

By November 13 all the officers in the 28th's rifle companies had been killed or wounded. Most of them were within a year of their twentieth birthday. Virtually every frontline soldier was a casualty. Colonel Ralph Ingersoll of First Army staff met with lieutenants who had just come out of the Hurtgen: "They did not talk; they just sat across the table and looked at you very straight and unblinking with absolutely no expression in their faces, which were neither tense nor relaxed but completely apathetic. They looked, unblinking."

GENERALS Bradley and Hodges remained resolute to take the Hurtgen. They put in the 4th Infantry Division. It had led the way onto Utah Beach on June 6 and gone through a score of battles since. In the Hiirtgen the division poured out its lifeblood once again. Between November 7 and December 3, the 4th Division lost over 7,000 men, or about ten per company per day.

Sergeant Mack Morris was there with the 4th: "Hiirtgen had its firebreaks, only wide enough to allow jeeps to pass, and they were mined and interdicted by machine-gun fire. There was a Teller mine every eight paces for three miles. Hurtgen's roads were blocked. The Germans cut roadblocks from trees. They cut them down so they interlocked as they fell. Then they mined and booby trapped them. Finally they registered their artillery on them, and the mortars, and at the sound of men clearing them, they opened fire. Their strongpoints were constructed carefully, and inside them were neat bunks built of

forest wood, and the walls of the bunkers were panelled with wood. These sheltered the defenders. Outside the bunkers were their defensive positions."

First Army put the 8th Infantry Division into the attack. On November 27 it closed to the town of Hurtgen, the original objective of the offensive. It fell to Lieutenant Paul Boesch, Company G, 121st Infantry, to take the town. When he gave the signal, the company charged. "It was sheer pandemonium," Boesch recalled. Once out of that forest, the men went mad with battle lust.

Boesch described it as "a wild, terrible, awe-inspiring thing. We dashed, struggled from one building to another shooting, bayoneting, clubbing. Hand grenades roared, fires cracked, buildings to the left and right burned with acrid smoke. Dust, smoke, and powder filled our lungs, making us cough, spit. Automatic weapons chattered while heavier throats of mortars and artillery disgorged deafening explosions. The wounded and dead- men in the uniforms of both sides-lay in grotesque positions at every turn." The company took nearly 300 prisoners.

The 8th Division didn't get far beyond Hiirtgen. By December 3 it was used up. A staff officer from the regiment was shocked when he visited the front that day. He reported, "The men of this battalion are physically exhausted. The spirit and will to fight are there; the ability to continue is gone. These men have been fighting without rest or sleep for four days and last night had to lie unprotected from the weather in an open field. They are shivering with cold, and their hands are so numb that they have to help one another on with their equipment. I firmly believe that every man up there should be evacuated through medical channels."

IN LATE November the 2nd Ranger Battalion entered the forest. Following heavy losses at Pointe-du-Hoc and Omaha Beach on D-Day, and an equally costly campaign in Normandy, the battalion had been attached to various divisions and corps as needed. Although the battalion had taken more than 100 per cent casualties, the core of the force that Lieutenant Colonel James Earl Rudder had led ashore on June 6 was still there. Altogether the battalion had 485 enlisted men and 27 officers, less than half the size of a full-strength battalion.

The battalion was assigned to the 28th Division in the Hiirtgen. Lieutenant James Eikner and others were disappointed. Eikner explained, "We were a very specialized unit. All volunteers-highly trained in special missions-putting us out on a front line in a defensive position wasn't utilizing our skills and capabilities."

As the battalion moved into the line, it took casualties from mines and artillery. Then the men sat in foxholes and took a pounding. This wasn't the Rangers' idea of war at all.

On December 6 opportunity arrived. Hill 400 (named after its height in metres), on the eastern edge of the forest, was the objective of the campaign. It was the highest point in the area and provided excellent observation of the Rur River to the east and of the farmland and forest around it. The Germans had utilized it so effectively that neither GIs nor vehicles moved during the day, as the slightest movement in daytime would bring down 88s and mortars. The village of Bergstein huddled at the base of the hill.

First Army had thrown four divisions at Hill 400. Concentrated artillery fire and Jabo attacks preceded each attempt to drive the Germans off the hill. In every instance the Germans had stopped the advancing GIs. Hundreds had been sacrificed, with no gain.

Something new had to be tried. The desperate 8th Division commander asked for the Rangers. As Lieutenant Len Lomell put it, "Our Rangers tactics seemed to be needed, stealthful and speedy infiltration and surprise assaults where they were not expected, at first light. The bigger outfits were too visible. We could sneak into the line."

Shortly after midnight on December 7 the Rangers marched to Bergstein. As they approached. Sergeant Earl Lutz came out from the village to guide them in. "I was told to go to a certain road," Lutz recalled. "I got to the road but there was nothing to be seen, no sound, not even a cricket. I guess I swore a little, and the Rangers raised up all around me."

In town the Rangers replaced the 47th Armoured Infantry Battalion, 8th Division. There was no ceremony. Three Ranger lieutenants showed up at the 47th's CP Gerald Heaney wrote: "They asked for enemy positions and the road to take; said they were ready to go. We heard the tommy guns click and, without a word, the Rangers moved out. Our morale went up in a hurry."

By 0300 three companies of Rangers-A, B, and C-had dug in on the edge of a wood near the base of the hill. Companies D, E, and F took possession of Bergstein. The companies near the hill prepared to charge it at first light. They could hit the hill through open fields some 100 metres wide, exposing themselves to enemy fire. or try a flanking move through known minefields. Major George Williams chose the open field. Sergeant Bill Petty recalled that "tension was building up to the exploding point."

At first light, shouting "Let's go get the bastards!" and firing from the hip, the Rangers charged. They got through the snow-covered field and started up the rocky hill. Four machine guns were firing point-blank on the Rangers, who kept moving, yelling, and firing. Sergeant Bud Potratz remembered hollering, "Hi ho, Silver!"

The Germans were caught by surprise. Small-arms fire kept them pinned down, while other Rangers tossed grenades into the bunkers. When Sergeant Petty reached the top of the hill with another Ranger, named Anderson, he approached the main bunker and heard Germans inside. They pushed open the door and tossed two grenades inside. Just as they were ready to rush in and spray the room with their Browning automatic rifles, a shell exploded a few feet away-the Germans were firing on their own position. The explosion blew Anderson into Petty's arms. He was killed instantly by a big piece of shrapnel in his heart.

One squad chased the remaining Germans down the hill, almost to the river, then pulled back to the top. It was 0830. The shelling intensified. Rangers took shelter in the bunkers and waited for the inevitable counterattack. Petty recovered Anderson's dying brother and "had the dubious distinction of having hold of both brothers while they were in the process of dying within an hour's time."

At 0930 the first of five counterattacks that day began. They came mostly from the south and east, where woods extended to the base of the hill and gave the Germans cover almost all the way, in company-size strength. Months later Major Williams told Sergeant Forrest Pogue of the Historical Section, "In some cases Germans were in and around the bunker on the hill before the Rangers were aware of their presence. They used machine guns, burp guns, rifles, and threw potato masher grenades. Hand-to-hand fights developed in which some use was made of bayonets."

Through the day and into the night the Germans attacked Hill 400. At times, Lieutenant Lomell remembered, "we were outnumbered ten to one. We had no protection, continuous tons of shrapnel falling upon us, hundreds of rounds coming in." In 1995 he commented, "June 6, 1944, was not my longest day. December 7th, 1944, was my longest and most miserable day on earth during my past 75 years."

As Ranger numbers dwindled and ammunition began to run out, the American artillery saved the men. The field of vision was such that a forward observer, Lieutenant Howard Kettlehut from the 56th Armoured Field Artillery Battalion, could call in fire all around the hill. The Rangers later said Kettlehut was "the best man we ever worked with." During the night ammo bearers got to the top of the hill and brought down wounded on litters-terribly difficult on the snow, ice, and rocks. The combined strength of the three companies left on top was five officers and eighty-six men. Lomell was wounded.

Late on December 8 an infantry regiment and tank destroyer battalion relieved the surviving Rangers. A week and two days later, the Germans retook the hill. Not until February 1945 did the Americans get it back. The Rangers had suffered 90 per cent casualties.

WITH THE Battle of Hill 400, the Hirtgen campaign came to a close. The forest they held, for which they had paid such a high price, was worthless.

The Battle of Hirtgen lasted ninety days. Nine divisions plus supporting units on the American side were involved. There were more than 24,000 combat casualties, another 9,000 victims of disease or combat exhaustion. German general Rolf von Gersdorff commented after the war, "I have engaged in the long campaigns in Russia as well as other fronts and I believe the fighting in the Hirtgen was the heaviest I have ever witnessed."

On December 8, from Hill 400, Lieutenant Eikner remembered: "We could see across the Rur River to a town called Nideggen. Trains were puffing in there and bringing in troops and all."

They were heading south. Eikner had cause to feel discouraged. If, after all that pounding, the Germans were building a reserve somewhere to the south, why then it was the Germans, not the Americans, who had won

the battles of attrition in the fall of 1944. The Americans had no reserve at all, save the 82nd and 101st Airborne, which were near Reims, being brought up to strength after the Holland campaign. Every other division in ETO was committed to offensive action.

## Chapter Seven

### The Ardennes: December 16-19, 1944

WHEN THE Americans reached the German border, their best intelligence sources dried up. Inside Germany the Wehrmacht used secure telephone lines rather than radio, which rendered Ultra, the British deciphering device, deaf and blind. Weather kept reconnaissance aircraft on the ground. And in the Ardennes patrols were rare and seldom aggressive, as each side was willing to leave the other alone so long as things stayed quiet. There the line had been stagnant for two months.

In early December, Eisenhower reviewed the situation on the Western Front with Bradley. His overwhelming goal was to strengthen US First and Ninth armies to continue the winter offensive north of Aachen. Turning to the centre of his line, he and Bradley discussed the weakness in the Ardennes. Four divisions, two green, two so worn down by Hürtgen fighting that they had been withdrawn and sent to this rest area to refit, spread over a 150-kilometre front, seemed to invite a counterattack.

Bradley said it would be unprofitable to the Germans to make such an attack. Of course the Germans had sliced right through the area in May 1940, but that was against almost no opposition, in good weather. The generals agreed that the newly formed Volkssturm divisions were hardly capable of offensive action through the Ardennes on winter roads. So they told each other that an Ardennes attack would be a strategic mistake for the enemy.

Eisenhower and Bradley's thinking was logical. Every senior general in the German army agreed with them. Nevertheless, they were dead wrong. Had they looked at the situation from Hitler's point of view, they would have come to a much different conclusion.

Hitler knew Germany would never win the war by defending the Siegfried Line and then the Rhine. His only chance was to win a lightning victory in the West. If surprise could be achieved, it might work. Nothing else would. As early as September 25 Hitler had told his generals he intended to launch a counteroffensive through the Ardennes to cross the Meuse and drive on to Antwerp.

His generals objected, making the same points Eisenhower and Bradley had made. Hitler brushed them aside. When asked about fuel, he said the tanks could drive forward on captured American gasoline. He promised new divisions with new equipment and the biggest gathering of the Luftwaffe in three years.

Hitler said the German onslaught would divide the British and American forces. When the Germans took Antwerp, the British would have to pull another Dunkirk. Then he could take divisions from the west to reinforce the Eastern Front. Seeing all this, Stalin would conclude a peace, based on a division of Eastern Europe. Nazi Germany would not win the war, but it would survive.

Here was the old Führer, all full of himself, exploding with energy, barking out orders, back on the offensive. The remembrance of those glorious spring days in May 1940 almost overwhelmed him. It could be done again. It could! It was a matter of will.

To PROVIDE the will, Hitler counted on the children. The German soldiers of December 1944 were mostly born between 1925 and 1928. They had been raised by the Nazis for this moment, and they had that fanatical bravery their Führer counted on.

They were well equipped. Hitler brought men, tanks, and planes from the Eastern Front and assigned the greater portion of new weapons to the Ardennes. The Luftwaffe managed to gather 1,500 planes (although it never got more than 800 in the air at one time, and usually less than 60 per day). German manpower climbed in the west from 416,000 on December 1 to 1,322,000 on December 15.

Impressive though the German buildup in the eastward extension of the Ardennes known as the Eifel was, it was not a force capable of reaching its objectives on its own resources. It would depend on surprise, the speed of the advance once through the American lines, a slow

American response, captured American supplies, panic among retreating American troops, and bad weather to neutralize the Allied air forces. That was a long list.

Hitler had managed to achieve surprise. Using many of the same techniques the Allies had used to fool the Germans about the time and place of the cross Channel attack in June—the creation of fictitious units, false radio traffic, and playing on preconceptions that the German buildup was in support of a counterattack north of Aachen—Hitler gave the Americans a sense of security about the Ardennes. On the eve of the opening action in the greatest battle the US Army has ever fought, not a single soldier in that army had the slightest sense of what was about to happen.

ACROSS FROM the Eifel the American troops were a mixed lot. The 2nd Infantry Division, in nearly continuous battle since June 7, was moving through the 99th Division on its way to attack the Rur River dams from the south. The 2nd had been in Hiirtgen, so it had many more replacements than veterans, but it had a core of experienced company commanders and platoon leaders. The 99th and another newly arrived division, the 106th, placed to its right, had few experienced personnel. There was little or no unit cohesion, and most of the riflemen were only partially trained. But the 99th had spent sufficient time at the front to have toughened up. It ran patrols, made mistakes, learned from them. The general attitude, as expressed by one soldier, was, "The German troops facing us were of low quality and appeared to be of the opinion that if we didn't bother them, they would leave us alone."

The weather was cold, the days dreary and snowy. The men in the foxholes were eating snow because their canteens were empty and they could not build fires to boil water. Rations were cold. Clothes were World War I issue and entirely inadequate.

Always hungry, the men of Charlie Company, 395th Regiment, tried to supplement their diet with venison. Private Vernon Swanson went after the locally abundant deer with his BAR (Browning automatic rifle), a common practice for GIs in Belgium that winter. He dropped one, but the deer was only wounded. "We followed the blood trail for quite a distance into German territory and then discovered the Germans had stolen our deer. Fortunately cooler heads prevailed and we did not send a combat patrol to recover our deer."



But they weren't a bunch of guys out on a camping and hunting trip. The 99th Division had taken casualties, suffering 187 killed and wounded in November. The weather took a heavier toll-822 hospitalized for frostbite, pneumonia, and trench foot. In the front line, men of Charlie Company shivered in their holes as they tried to suppress their coughing. Private Swanson recalled: "We were completely on edge because of a mixture of hunger, cold and fear." The fear was caused by a rumour that German patrols were active.

Captain Charles Roland was a battalion executive officer in the 99th. Looking out of the headquarters bunker on the afternoon of December 15, he saw "fir forests whose cone-shaped evergreens standing in deep snow and sparkling with crystals formed a scene of marvellous beauty." He read the latest intelligence report from division: "The enemy has only a handful of beaten and demoralized troops in front of us and they are being supported by only two pieces of horse drawn artillery."

In fact, the American regiment was facing the I SS Panzer Corps, hidden in those beautiful firs.

As DARKNESS fell over the Eifel on December 15, a kilometre or so east of Captain Roland, a private in the Waffen SS wrote to his sister Ruth. "I write during one of the great hours before an attack-full of unrest, full of expectation for what the next days will bring. Everyone who has been here the last two days and nights (especially nights), who has witnessed hour after hour the assembly of our crack divisions, who has heard the constant rattling of panzers, knows that something is up and we are looking forward to a clear order to reduce the tension. Some believe in big wonders, but that may be shortsighted! It is enough to know we attack and will throw the enemy from our homeland."

Later, just before dawn, he added: "Overhead is the terrific noise of V-1, of artillery-the voice of war. So long now-wish me luck and think of me." He sealed the envelope and was about to hand it in when he added a scribble on the back: "Ruth! Ruth! Ruth! WE MARCH!!!"

The private was in the van of the 1st SS Panzer Division and had cause to feel elated, for he was part of a powerful reinforced armoured regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Jochan Peiper. Highly

regarded in the Germany army, Peiper was a veteran of the Eastern Front. Aggressive, he was single-minded in his pursuit of victory. Hitler counted on him to lead the dash to the Meuse.

Although designated a regiment, Peiper's force contained some 22,000 men and 250 tanks, 5 anti-aircraft half-tracks, a battalion of 20-mm guns, 25 self-propelled guns, a battalion of 105 howitzers and two companies of engineers. As soon as the infantry opened the roads Peiper would speed west.

Major Otto Skorzeny, the most daring commando in the German army, was accompanying Peiper, along with the 500 men in the 150th Panzer Brigade. They were wearing American and British uniforms. All of them spoke English; most of them had lived for some time in Britain or the United States. They had dog tags taken from corpses and POWs. They had twenty Sherman tanks and thirty deuce-and-a-half trucks. Once a breakthrough had been achieved, their mission was twofold: one group would dash ahead to the Meuse to seize bridges, while the other fanned out behind American lines to spread rumours, change signposts, and in general accelerate the panic that hits rear-echelon forces when they hear that the front line has broken.

Peiper had many worries for the man who would spearhead the greatest German army offensive since 1943. He had only learned of the attack on December 14. He was told he would make 80 kilometres the first day, all the way to the Meuse River, through rough terrain. Gasoline had been promised, but not delivered. The roads Hitler had assigned him, according to Peiper, "were not for tanks, but for bicycles."

At 0430 on December 16 Peiper briefed his troops. He stressed speed. He forbade firing into small groups of the enemy. He forbade looting. Just keep moving.

German company and battalion commanders gave upbeat briefings. For the older officers, going over to the offensive-whatever their reservations-was a heady reminder of the glorious days of 1940. For the enlisted men, striking back at the enemy to drive him from the homeland was exhilarating. Their commanders told them during the briefings that there were many American nurses in the various hospitals in Belgium, and mountains of American supplies. For many of them it sounded like they were about to enjoy the kind of campaign their older brothers, uncles, and fathers had experienced in 1940.

It was a scene they had seen in the newsreels as students. Everywhere there were new weapons and equipment in great quantity, and thousands of fine-looking troops. They marched smartly, singing lustily. Corporal Friedrich Bertenrath, a radioman with the 2nd Panzer Division, recalled:

"We had begun to act like a beaten army. Now, moving forward, the men were extremely happy and filled with enthusiasm. Everywhere there were signs of renewed hope." Still, he added, "I never thought this attack would change the tide of the war. But it was a moment to enjoy."

AT 0525 HOURS, December 16, German officers along a front of 80 kilometres were looking at their watches. There was snow on the ground, fog, and snow-laden clouds at almost ground level, perfect for the Wehrmacht. At 0530 division commanders who wanted surprise blew whistles, and their infantry began to move west in marching columns down the road, with no artillery preparation. Elsewhere, in areas where the commanders wanted pre-attack artillery, the sky vibrated with the glaring lights of thousands of V-ls, howitzers, 88s, 105s, and mortars being fired simultaneously.

At 0530 Captain Charles Roland of the 99th-which was at the critical point of the attack-was shaken by "a thunderclap of massed artillery fire amid the blinding mist." The bombardment lasted an hour. When it lifted, waves of infantry, supported by tanks, attacked. "Time appeared to stand still," Roland remembered. "My mind seemed to reject the reality of what was happening, to say it was all make-believe. One of our young lieutenants danced a rubber-legged jig as he twisted slowly, making the bullet hole between his eyes clearly visible. One moment our battalion chaplain and his assistant were kneeling beside their disabled vehicle. The next moment they were headless, decapitated by an exploding shell as if by the stroke of a guillotine." So far as Roland could tell, "the entire division was in peril of destruction."

So inexperienced were the men of the 99th Division that when the German barrage opened, they thought it was "outgoing mail," as they called American artillery firing on the Germans. They quickly discovered their mistake and jumped into their holes. As the massed firepower came down on them, Captain Roland remembered the division intelligence summary he had read, especially that part about the

enemy having only two horse-drawn artillery pieces opposite them. After an hour of nonstop shelling, he remarked, "They sure worked those horses to death."

In notes that he wrote later. Lieutenant Robert Dettor of K Company, 393rd Infantry, 99th Division, described what it was like for him:

"0540-0640-Artillery concentration on position. 0640-1230-Small arms fire fight. Sent runner to Company CP for reinforcements. Runner returned stating no reinforcements, stay on position and continue fighting. Communications to CP and outposts cut."

Dettor ordered all maps and papers burned. "Sgt. Phifer wounded by rifle bullet. Enemy closing in to within twenty feet of foxhole. Took last report of ammunition. Sgt. Phifer had one clip left. I had four rounds. Burp-gun to left rear firing at my foxhole hitting Hunter. Hunter dead. At approximately 1230 position overrun."

Lieutenant Dettor expected to be shot. Instead he was kicked, relieved of his watch and \$48 cash, then put to work carrying wounded German soldiers on stretchers. He got to see the German army on the move from the inside and described it vividly: "Many SS troops in vicinity. Pushed around by SS officer. Beautiful observation from enemy position. Firing still going on. Men being ushered into attack. Roads filled with vehicles, ammunition, staff cars, horse and wagons. Staff cars carrying German officer and ammunition trucks draped with large red crosses to disguise them as ambulances. Snow on ground-windy."

The Germans took Dettor's coat, gloves, and shoes, leaving him his overshoes, and put him in a column of POWs marching east. "Roads filled with heavy equipment coming to the front," Dettor noted. "Felt extremely depressed after seeing size of the attack." Then he began to cheer up as he observed, "German motor vehicles very poor. Many vehicles broken down."

LIEUTENANT Lyle Bouck commanded the Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I&R) platoon of the 394th Regiment, 99th Division. He had enlisted before the war, lying about his age. He was commissioned a second lieutenant at age eighteen. Informal in manner, he was sharp, incisive, determined-a leader. The only man younger than he in the platoon was Private William James. The platoon was near Lanzerath.

Bouck kept his men up all night, sensing that something was stirring somewhere.

Shortly before dawn on December 16, the sky was lit up from the muzzle flashes of one hundred pieces of German artillery. In the light of those flashes Bouck could see great numbers of tanks and other vehicles on the German skyline. He and his men were in deep, covered foxholes, so they survived the hour-long shelling without casualties. Bouck sent a patrol forward to Lanzerath. The men came back to report a German infantry column coming towards the village.

Bouck got through to battalion headquarters on the radio. When he reported, the officer at the other end was incredulous.

"Damn it," Bouck hollered. "Don't tell me what I don't see! I have twenty-twenty vision. Bring down some artillery, all the artillery you can, on the road south of Lanzerath. There's a Kraut column coming up from that direction!"

No artillery came. Bouck started pushing men into their foxholes. Including Bouck, there were eighteen of them. They were on the edge of a wood, looking down on the road into Lanzerath. Bouck, Sergeant Bill Slape, and Private James had their foxhole on the edge of the village, in a perfect position to ambush the enemy, and they had plenty of fire-power—a couple of .30-calibre machine guns, a .50-calibre on the jeep, a half-dozen BARs, and a number of submachine guns.

The German columns came marching on in close order, weapons slung. They were teenage paratroopers. The men of the I&R platoon were fingering the triggers of their weapons. Sergeant Slape took aim on the lead German. "Your mother's going to get a telegram for Christmas," he mumbled.

Bouck knocked the rifle aside. "Maybe they don't send telegrams," he said. He explained that he wanted to let the lead units pass so as to ambush the main body. He waited until about 300 men had passed his position and gone into the village. Then he saw his target. Separated from the others, three officers came along, carrying maps and binoculars, with a radioman behind—obviously the battalion CO and his staff. Private James rested his M-1 on the edge of his foxhole and took careful aim.

A little blonde girl dashed out of a house down the street. Later James recalled the red ribbons in her hair. He held his fire. The girl pointed quickly at the I&R position and ran back inside. James tightened his finger on the trigger. In that split second the German officer shouted an order and dove into the ditch. So did his men, on each side of the road.

The ambush ruined, the firefight began. Through the morning, Bouck's men had the Germans pinned down. Without armoured support the German infantry couldn't fire with much effect on the men in the foxholes. By noon the I&R had taken casualties, but no fatalities. Private James kept screaming at Bouck to bring in artillery. Bouck in turn was screaming over the radio. Battalion replied that there were no guns available.

"What shall we do then?" Bouck demanded.

"Hold at all costs."

A second later a bullet hit and destroyed the radio Bouck had been holding. He was unhurt and passed on the order to hold.

Private James was amazed at the German tactics. Their paratroopers kept coming straight down the road, easy targets. "Whoever's ordering that attack," James said, "must be frantic. Nobody in his right mind would send troops into something like this without more fire support." He kept firing his BAR. Germans kept coming. He felt a certain sickness as he cut down the tall, good-looking "kids." The range was so close James could see their faces. He tried to imagine himself firing at movement, not at men.

As the Germans, despite their losses, threatened to overrun the position, James dashed to the jeep and got behind the .50-calibre. Three Germans crawled up close enough to toss grenades at Private Risto Milosevich. Unable to swing the .50-calibre fast enough, James brought up the submachine gun slung around his neck and cut the three Germans down.

By midafternoon there were 400 to 500 bodies in front of the I&R platoon. Only one American had been killed, although half of the eighteen men were wounded. There was a lull. Bouck said to James, "I want you to take the men who want to go and get out."

"Are you coming?"

"No. I have orders to hold at all costs. I'm staying."

"Then we'll all stay."

An hour later they were both wounded, the platoon out of ammunition. They surrendered and were taken into a cafe set up as a first-aid post. James thought he was dying. He thought of the mothers of the boys he had mowed down and of his own mother. He passed out, was treated by a German doctor. When he came to, a German officer tried to interrogate him but gave it up, leaned over James's stretcher, and whispered in English, "Ami, you and your comrades are brave men."

At midnight the cuckoo clock in the cafe struck. Lieutenant Lyie Bouck, on his stretcher on the floor, turned twenty-one years old. "What a hell of a way to become a man," he mumbled to himself.

BOUCK AND his men had successfully blocked the Lanzerath road against a full strength German battalion for a day, inflicting catastrophic casualties of more than 150 per cent. Such heroism and combat effectiveness could hardly be equalled. But in many ways the I&R platoon's experience was typical.

In the 99th Division alone there were any number of junior officers, NCOs, and enlisted men who, although new to combat, stood to their guns, to the dismay of the Germans. At Losheimergraben railroad station Captain Neil Brown's Company L, 394th Infantry, held through the day. At one point, when a Tiger tank appeared. Lieutenant Dewey Flankers ran up to it and launched an antitank grenade up the bore of the cannon before it could fire. Scores of unrecorded actions were taken independently, as communication between platoons was poor, between companies and regimental headquarters nonexistent.

All along the front, from Monschau to the north down to Echternach in the south, German attacks passed through gaps in the line and surrounded the American positions. But the Americans in many cases fought back with every weapon available to them-usually just small arms. They stacked up German bodies and held the crossroads, preventing German tanks from bursting through.

With the few German units in which tanks accompanied the infantry, the Americans had less success. Private Roger Foehringer of the artillery was attached to the 99th, billeted on the outskirts of Bullingen, Belgium. At 0700 on December 16 he was put to work with two others carrying a case of grenades up a hill to a machine-gun pit. "We were not to the point where we could see over the hill, when down on us came a German Tiger." Foehringer jumped into a row of bushes along the road. He lost his rifle and helmet but was untouched by the tank's machine-gun bursts. It moved on, to be followed by another, then a half-track with infantry in the back.

"There is no feeling like being alone, being unarmed, and not knowing what to do," Foehringer recalled. Instinct told him to get back to where he came from, the farmhouse on the edge of Biillingen. He took off cross-country and made it. He found a guy who had fired at one of the German tanks and missed. As the tank began to swing its cannon at their position, Foehringer and his buddy ran for the farmhouse. They found two carbines and went up to the second floor, where they broke the windows and began firing at German troops spread across the field.

"It was real easy shooting," Foehringer said, "until we heard the rumble of a tank." As it began to fire, Foehringer ran down to the cellar, where he found a dozen or so GIs destroying their weapons. The tank shoved its cannon through the basement window, and a voice yelled, "Rausf Raus!"

Foehringer and the others gave up. They were marched east. In Hons-feld, Foehringer saw stark evidence of the kind of fight others in the 99th had put up. In the cemetery "there were frozen corpses behind head stones. You could see that they had fought, one guy at a headstone, another behind a headstone, and there they were frozen just as they had been shot." In the road there were uncountable German bodies-uncountable because so many tanks and trucks had run over them. "They were like pancakes. We tried to detour around them but the guards made us march over them."

Mainly the story of December 16 was one of thwarted German plans. Although they had infiltrated throughout the American line, nowhere had they taken the crossroads that would allow their tanks to roam free behind the lines. As night fell, Hitler's timetable was already falling apart, thanks to an unknown squad of GIs here, a platoon over there, fighting although surrounded and fighting until their ammunition gave out.



To THE SOUTH the 106th Division was penetrated in numerous places, as was the 28th. The Germans achieved surprise but not a breakthrough. General Hasso von Manteuffel, commander of the Fifth Panzer Army, later told interviewers that the GIs put up a "tenacious and brave resistance with skilfully fought combat tactics."

The army's official historian, Charles MacDonald, writes of one regiment of the 28th Division, "With only two battalions supported for part of the day by two companies of medium tanks, the 110th Infantry had held off four German regiments and had nowhere been routed. That was around two thousand men versus at least ten thousand." That sentence encompasses hundreds of stories of heroism, most of which will never be known.

LIEUTENANT Bouck's fight continued to shape the battle. Around midnight, December 16-17, Lieutenant Colonel Peiper reached the Lanz-erath area. The German infantry commanders told him of the strong resistance ahead. They had been repelled three times with terrible losses. Peiper took command. He put two Panther tanks in front of the column, followed by a series of armoured half tracks and then another half-dozen tanks, with thirty captured American trucks behind them, and sixteen 88s at the rear. At 0400 hours they roared off, only to discover the village was empty.

Peiper was now loose behind American lines. The only Americans in the vicinity were service troops, drivers, medical personnel-nothing to stop an armoured column with such firepower.

By 0800 Peiper had gassed up his vehicles with captured fuel. Then he headed west towards Malmedy. Peiper was running parallel to Elsenborn Ridge, the dominant physical feature of that part of the Ardennes. The nature of his thrust, meanwhile, was pushing men of the 99th and 2nd divisions back towards the ridge. The ridge was unoccupied, undefended. Whoever got there first would have the high ground and thus the decisive advantage.

Peiper's breakthrough was one of many that morning. The sheer weight of German numbers could not be denied. Americans continued to fight, but without ammunition resupply they couldn't do much. Many

surrendered. Two regiments of the 106th surrendered-7,500 men, the biggest mass surrender in the war against Germany. Everywhere Major Skorzeny's disguised, English-speaking units began to spread panic, issue false orders, switch road signs, and otherwise carry out their missions, but the units assigned to take the Meuse bridges failed in their task.

BRADLEY SPENT most of December 16 driving from Luxembourg city to Versailles, so he was out of touch. At the Trianon Palace Hotel, Eisenhower's headquarters, he found his boss in a good mood. Eisenhower had just received word of his promotion to the rank of five-star general. At dusk an intelligence officer arrived with news. There had been an enemy attack that morning in the Ardennes. Bradley dismissed it as of little consequence, just a local spoiling attack. But an hour later another report came in-there were at least twelve German divisions involved.

Bradley still thought it an irritant, nothing major. Eisenhower disagreed. Studying the map, he ordered Bradley to send the 7th Armoured Division to St. Vith on the northern flank and the 12th Armoured to Echternach in the south. The 12th was scheduled to attack east of Metz, Bradley reminded Eisenhower, and Patton would be furious at having to call off his offensive. "Tell him," Eisenhower replied, "that Ike is running this damn war."

Hitler was certain it would take Eisenhower two or three days to recognize the extent of the threat and assumed that he would not be willing to call off his offensives north and south of the Ardennes until he had checked with Churchill and Roosevelt. Eisenhower proved him wrong on both points. He saw that not only was this a major offensive but that it was the best thing that could happen. The Germans were out of their fixed fortifications, out in the open where American artillery, tanks, infantry, and fighter-bombers would be capable of destroying them.

On the morning of December 17 Eisenhower ordered the 101st and 82nd Airborne, then refitting in Reims, into the battle. He sent the 101st to Bastogne, a crossroads town in the centre of the German thrust. He wanted it held at all costs and ordered a command team from the 10th Armoured Division to join the 101st there. He sent the 82nd to the northern flank, near Elsenborn.

Hitler had thought that it would take Eisenhower days to move reinforcements into the Ardennes. He was wrong about that one too. The airborne divisions could not go to their position by plane, as the weather continued to be foggy, snowy, cold. But Eisenhower had trucks. He ordered the drivers in the Red Ball Express to use all their resources as troop carriers. On December 17 alone, 11,000 trucks carried 60,000 men, plus ammunition, medical supplies, and other materiel into the Ardennes. In the first week of the battle Eisenhower was able to move 250,000 men into the fray. This was mobility unprecedented in the history of war. Not even in Vietnam, not even in Desert Storm, was the US Army capable of moving so many men and so much equipment so quickly.

Still, it took time to recover from the initial blow and regroup. Meanwhile, hundreds of German tanks were loose behind the front lines, free to move in almost any direction.

ON DECEMBER 17 the sky over Belgium was overcast, but the Luftwaffe pilots flew between 600 and 700 sorties in support of the ground forces. A thousand and more Allied pilots were there to meet them over St. Vith and began a daylong dogfight.

Captain Jack Barendfeld led a twelve-plane squadron of P-47s. When he arrived on the scene, he "saw two or three fighters on fire, spiralling towards the ground both sides. I saw a Thunderbolt going down in flames. Enemy aircraft all over the place. Our controller, 'Organ,' is calm and calling in a prime target—a pontoon bridge across the River Rur. Many enemy vehicles backed up behind it. A great amount of flak coming up. Three or four of our aircraft received battle damage but no one aborted. We used our bombs and rockets on the vehicles and the bridge, then set up several strafing passes. There were burning vehicles and some damage to the bridge when we left after about 20 minutes."

On the ground the Germans made their major breakthrough in the centre, in the direction of Bastogne, but had their own problems. Armoured units flowed to the west not in an even stream, but irregularly from traffic jam to traffic jam. The road net in the Ardennes was just as Eisenhower had said it would be, inadequate. Much of the German artillery was horse-drawn, which added greatly to the congestion.

All through December 17 Peiper continued to drive west, avoiding Elsenborn Ridge, looking for bridges, gasoline dumps, ammunition dumps, blasting pockets of resistance out of the way when necessary. By 1600 hours Peiper had reached the outskirts of Stavelot. The town was clogged with American vehicles. He subjected it to a bombardment from his tanks, then sent his armoured infantry to attack the town. As darkness fell, American small arms repulsed the enemy. Through the night Peiper watched as the Americans pulled out their trucks, heading west.

Peiper's success in breaking through was heady stuff to the Germans. Even if he was behind schedule, it had been a glorious couple of days. Corporal Bertenrath recalled: "We enjoyed those first days of success, moving forward, taking prisoners and, above all, capturing the wonderful provisions we found in Allied vehicles: chocolate, cigarettes, potatoes, vegetables, meat, and even something for dessert. I asked my squad, 'My God, how do they manage such things?'" But being behind American lines gave Bertenrath a sense of impending doom, because "on one road through the forest were stacks of shells that stretched for, I would guess, two kilometres both left and right—we drove through an alley of shells. I had never seen the like of it. I told my squad, 'My God, their supplies are unlimited!'"

At dawn, December 18, Peiper instructed two Panther commanders to charge Stavelot at maximum speed. They drove around the curve, firing rapidly, and penetrated the antitank obstacle at the curve. The Germans followed up with other vehicles, and the Americans evacuated the town. Not, however, before destroying the gasoline dump at Stavelot. Sergeant Jack Mocnik and two others of the 526th Armoured Infantry Battalion drove a jeep up the hill to the gasoline dump, accompanied by two halftracks. Mocnik's party began firing .30- and .50 calibre machine-gun bursts into jerry cans of gas, and finally they got one to catch fire. As they scrambled away, "the darndest fire you ever saw flared up," Mocnik recalled. "The cans would explode and fly through the air like rockets trailing fire and smoke."

Frustrated, Peiper drove at top speed to get to Trois-Ponts (Three Bridges). Once across the Ambleve and Salm rivers, which flowed together in the village, he would have an open road to the Meuse.

IN SOME American headquarters, at supply dumps, and in the field there was confusion if not chaos. Men set to burning papers and maps, destroying weapons, and running to the rear. There was a breakdown in discipline, compounded by the breakdown of some colonels. Among many, fear drove all rational thought out of their mind. Go west as fast as possible was the only thought.

On December 17 the trickle of frightened men fleeing the battle began to turn into a stream. By December 18 the stream was becoming a flood. Waves of panic rolled westwards. In Belgium and northern France, American flags hanging from windows were discreetly pulled inside. In Paris the whores put away their English-language phrase books and retrieved their German versions.

On the third day of the attack, December 19, German armour began to acquire momentum; the greatest gains made by the armoured spearhead columns were achieved that day. As the Germans straightened out their traffic jams behind the front, the Americans in retreat were colliding with the reinforcements Eisenhower had sent to the battle, causing a monumental traffic jam of their own.

The US Army in retreat was a sad spectacle. When the 101st Airborne got to Bastogne on December 19, the columns of reinforcements marched down both sides of the road towards the front. Down the middle of the road came defeated American troops, fleeing the front in disarray, mob-like. Many had thrown away their rifles, coats, all encumbrances. Some were in a panic, staggering, exhausted, shouting, "Run! They'll murder you! They'll kill you! They've got tanks, machine guns, air power, everything!"

"They were just babbling," Major Dick Winters of the 506th PIR recalled. "It was pathetic. We felt ashamed."

Reporter Jack Belden described the retreat as he saw it in the Ardennes on December 17, 1944. There were long convoys of trucks, carrying gasoline, portable bridges, and other equipment, headed west, with tanks and other armed vehicles mixed in. "I noticed in myself a feeling that I had not had for some years. It was the feeling of guilt that seems to come over you whenever you retreat. You don't like to look anyone in the eyes. It seems as if you have done something wrong. I perceived this feeling in others too. The road was jammed with every conceivable kind of vehicle. An enemy plane came down and bombed and strafed the column, knocking three trucks off the road, shattering

trees and causing everyone to flee to ditches." Jabos in reverse. Then came the buzz bombs, or V-ls. "It went on all night. There must have been a buzz bomb or a piloted plane raid somewhere every five minutes."

Every man for himself. It was reminiscent of the German retreat through the Falaise gap. But there were critical differences. All along the front scattered groups of men stuck to their guns. They cut the German infantry columns down as a scythe cuts through a wheat field. The GIs were appalled at how the enemy infantry came on, marching down the middle of a road, their weapons slung, without reconnaissance of any sort, without armour support. The German soldiers knew nothing of infantry tactics. What was happening was exactly what Eisenhower had predicted-the Volkssturm divisions were not capable of effective action outside their bunkers. In far too many cases, however, they were attacking eighteen- and nineteen-year-old barely trained Americans. Both sides had been forced to turn to their children to fight the war to a conclusion.

Another difference between the German retreat in August and the American retreat was that as the beaten, terrified GIs fled west down the middle of the road, there were combat reinforcements on each side headed east, marching to the sound of the guns.

AT DAWN on December 19, as German tanks prepared to surround Bastogne and the 101st marched into the town, Eisenhower met with his senior commanders in a cold, damp squad room in a barracks at Verdun, the site of the greatest battle ever fought. There was but one lone potbellied stove to ease the bitter cold. Eisenhower's lieutenants entered the room glum, depressed, embarrassed-as they should have been, given the magnitude of the intelligence failure.

Eisenhower walked in, looked disapprovingly at the downcast generals, and boldly declared, "The present situation is to be regarded as one of opportunity for us and not of disaster. There will be only cheerful faces at this conference table."

Patton quickly picked up the theme. "Hell, let's have the guts to let the bastards go all the way to Paris," he said. "Then we'll really cut 'em off and chew 'em up." He had already seen the obvious: the Germans

were putting their heads in a noose. By attacking the southern shoulder of the salient with his Third Army, Patton could cut enemy supply lines, isolate the tanks inside what was already being called "the Bulge," and destroy them. Before leaving Metz, he had told his staff to begin the preparations for switching his attack line. So when Ike asked him how long it would take for two Third Army corps that were facing east to turn and face north and attack the German flank, Patton boldly replied, "Two days."

Eisenhower's decisiveness and Patton's boldness were electrifying. Their mood quickly spread through the system. Dispirited men were energized. For those on the front line, help was coming.

From the Supreme Commander down to the lowliest private, men pulled up their socks and went forth to do their duty. It simplifies, but not by much, to say that here, there, everywhere, from top to bottom, the men of the US Army in northwest Europe shook themselves and made this a defining moment in their own lives and in the history of the army. They didn't like retreating, they didn't like getting kicked around, and as individuals, squads, and companies they decided they were going to make the enemy pay.

## Chapter Eight

The Ardennes: December 20-31, 1944

BY MIDDAY, December 20, Charlie Company, 395th Infantry Regiment, 99th Division, had been retreating for three and a half days, mostly without sleep and water and enough food, through mud that was so deep "that men carrying heavy weapons frequently mired in mud so others had to take their weapons and pull them out. In one area it took one and a half hours to cover a hundred metres." Sergeant Vernon Swanson said that when word came down at 1700 hours that the regiment was withdrawing to Elsenborn Ridge, where it would dig in beside the 2nd Division, "it was certainly good news. We felt it was the equivalent of saying we were returning to the United States."

The journey to Elsenborn, however, Swanson remembered "as the worst march of that week," because of the combination of mud, ice, frozen ground, and snow all along the route. "We left most of our supplies behind," Swanson said, "but our weapons were always ready.

Throughout this entire journey our men made their way, cold, tired, miserable, stumbling, cursing the Army, the weather and the Germans, yet none gave up."

They arrived on the ridge around midnight, and although beyond exhaustion, the men dug in. A good thing, because at dawn a German artillery shelling came down on them. Swanson's company took seven casualties, four of them sergeants, "which opened up the field for promotions." One of those hit was Swanson, who got wounded in the neck by shrapnel. Litter bearers brought him to an aid station, where a chaplain bent over him. "I could dimly make out his collar ornament which was a Star of David. He, in turn, misread my dogtag, thought I was a Catholic and gave me last rites. I remember thinking that I really had all bases covered."

Peiper could have taken Elsenborn without difficulty on the seventeenth or eighteenth, but he stuck with Hitler's orders and moved west rather than north once through the American line. The low ridge should have been a main objective of the Germans, but the Americans got there first and dug in. Now only a direct frontal assault could oust them from the position.

The Germans tried. "The first night at Elsenborn is unforgettable," Captain Charles Roland of the 99th wrote later. "The flash and roar of exploding shells was incessant. In all directions the landscape was a Dante's inferno of burning towns and villages." His regiment dug furiously throughout the night. "Everyone was aware that there would be no further withdrawal, whatever the cost."

Enemy mortar and artillery fire hit the 99th. American artillery fired continuously. At night the temperature fell well below zero. "The wind blew in a gale that drove the pellets of snow almost like shot into our faces," Robert Merriman wrote. "Providing hot food on the front line became impossible, and we were obliged to live exclusively on K rations. Remaining stationary in damp, cold foxholes, with physical activity extremely limited, we began to suffer casualties from trenchfoot. The extreme cold, fatigue, boredom, and hazard became maddening. A few men broke under the strain, wetting themselves repeatedly, weeping, vomiting, or showing other physical symptoms." But there was no more retreating.

The fighting was at its most furious in the twin villages of Rocherath and Krinkelt, on the eastern edge of the ridge. There a battalion from



the 2nd Infantry Division engaged a German armoured division in a wild melee that included hand-to-hand combat. American tank crews knew they could not take on the big German tanks toe to toe, so they allowed the Panthers and Tigers to close on their positions for an intricate game of cat and mouse among the village streets and alleys. Shermans remained hidden behind walls, buildings, and hedgerows, waiting for a German tank to cross their sights. Most engagements took place at ranges of less than 25 metres. The 57-mm antitank guns of the Americans were cumbersome, with too little firepower to have much effect. The bazooka, however, was highly effective within the villages, especially after dark, when bazooka teams could work their way close enough to the German tanks.

Sergeant Arnold Parish of the 2nd Infantry had made the D-Day landing, when he won the Bronze Star, had been wounded on June 9, and had rejoined his unit in August, so he had four months of combat by mid-December. He agreed: Elsenborn was the toughest. "We were helpless," Parish recalled, "and all alone and there was nothing we could do, so I prayed to God." During the nights "the time went by very slow as I tried to keep warm but that wasn't possible so I thought about my mother and hoped she didn't know where I was or what I was doing. I was glad I was not married."

SOUTHWEST OF Elsenborn the 82nd Airborne was arriving to stop Peiper's rush westwards. On December 20 Colonel Ben Vandervoort's 2nd Battalion, 505th PIR, arrived at Trois-Ponts, where the Salm and Ambleve rivers flowed together. Vandervoort put E Company on the east side of the Salm. By 0300 hours they were in position to ambush any German force coming from the east. There they waited, no fires, no lights, no smoking, all wide awake.

German armour-Peiper's-was coming on, accompanied by infantry. Peiper had a twenty-to-one manpower advantage over Vandervoort and a colossal firepower superiority. The American paratroopers had only one little 57-mm antitank gun, six bazookas, and the ultralight airborne 75-mm pack howitzer for artillery.

At 0315 hours, as an armoured German vehicle rounded a curve on the road and wound its way down to the river, a bazooka team bush-whacked it. After the German crew fled, the paratroopers placed a

minefield on the far side of the burning hulk. At 0400 a second armoured vehicle blew itself up on the mines.

At first light on December 21, Peiper attacked E Company with infantry and five tanks. Bazookas and the antitank gun knocked out the armour. Men in the foxholes drove back the infantry with great loss. From the west bank the Americans could see Peiper's tanks, artillery, and mobile flak batteries massing for another attack.

Vandervoort sent F Company across the river to support E Company with a flank attack, but it had little effect. Vandervoort later remarked that "disaster seemed imminent, but not one man of E company left his fighting position." He jumped into a jeep and had his driver take him over the bridge and to the bluff above the east bank. He arrived at the CP just as the first wave of German infantry attacked, supported by tanks firing their cannon and machine guns spraying the American positions.

Vandervoort jumped out of his jeep and ran to the CO, Lieutenant William Meddaugh. "Pull out," he ordered, "and do it now!"

As Meddaugh passed on the word, Vandervoort began driving down the bluff to the riverbank, "urged on by swarms of nine-millimetre rounds from Schmeisser machine pistols." On the bluff, Meddaugh's men withdrew, using lessons from close quarter fighting in Holland. In Vandervoort's words, they "intuitively improvised walking fire in reverse. Moving backward and using the trees for cover, they simply out-shot any pursuer who crowded them too closely."

When the GIs reached the edge of the bluff, they had to jump down a sheer cliff, pick themselves up (there were a number of broken bones and sprained ankles), run a 100-metre gauntlet across a road, cross over a railroad track, and wade the icy river. GIs in the town along the west bank fired at any German who showed on the opposite bluff. E Company made it to the town with 33 per cent casualties, all of whom were carried to the battalion aid station. When every man was accounted for, engineers blew the bridge.

Vandervoort described the E Company survivors as they came into Trois-Ponts: "They were a tired, ragged, rugged looking bunch. But what I saw was beautiful. About one hundred troopers, with weapons and ammunition, still ready to fight."

Then, as Vandervoort recalled, "A Tiger tank appeared on the edge of the bluff road. The menacing white skull-and-crossbones of the SS insignia, and the black and-white battle cross painted on its armour were clearly visible. It depressed its long-barrelled, bulbous muzzle and began firing point-blank down into our houses."

A couple of bazooka rounds hit the Tiger but only bounced off. Vandervoort called for the mortar platoon to go after the tank. The men selected white phosphorus to reduce German visibility. "The first round hit the Tiger right in front of the turret. Searing phosphorous globules arched in all directions. Enemy infantry soldiers near the tank scattered like quail. The driver slapped the now-not-so-menacing monster into reverse and accelerated back into the concealment of the woods," Vandervoort said.

Now the division artillery observer called in fire that forced the enemy to take to the wood, there to spend the remainder of the day. After dark German infantry tried to ford the Salm, but were beaten back. Peiper went north to find a bridge, but never found one he could take. Trois-Ponts turned out to be his high-water mark.

IF HITLER made his biggest investment in Peiper, he made his best in Otto Skorzeny's battalion, which had spread out in Peiper's wake. Throughout the Bulge those 500 or so volunteers in American uniforms were having an impact beyond their numbers. They turned signposts, causing great confusion. They spread panic. Once it was known that the Skorzeny battalion was behind the lines, the word went out with amazing speed:

trust no one. The GIs, especially MPs, questioned everyone, right up to Bradley: Who plays centre field for the Yankees? Who is Mickey Mouse's wife? What is the capital of Illinois? General Bradley was detained for answering Springfield to the last question; the MP insisted it was Chicago. One general was arrested and held for a few hours because he put the Chicago Cubs in the American League.

By December 21, however, a number of Skorzeny's men had been captured or shot, and the remainder were trying to get back inside German lines. One German in an American officer's uniform drove a jeep to a roadblock, where he was interrogated. The German's speech and identification papers were flawless-too flawless, it turned

out. The authentic Adjutant General's Office Identification Card, carried by all GIs, had printed at the top: "NOT A PASS-FOR IDENTIFICATION ONLY." With Teutonic exactness the German forger had corrected the spelling, so that the forged card read "IDENTIFICATION." That missing n cost the German officer his life.

The GIs spent an inordinate amount of time checking on each other. Meanwhile, a rumour started by captured members of Skorzeny's battalion was widely circulated-it was that the main mission was to assassinate Eisenhower. Thus everyone at SHAEF became super security conscious. Guards with machine guns took up places all around the Trianon Palace, and when Eisenhower went to a meeting, he was led and followed by armed guards in jeeps. That kind of security, commonplace around the world a half-century later, was so unusual in 1944 that it left an impression of panic.

But Eisenhower was far from panicked. On December 21 his confidence was great because his basic situation was so good. He was rushing reinforcements to the battle, men and equipment, in great numbers. Major John Harrison, at First Army headquarters, wrote to his wife on December 22: "There is something quite thrilling about seeing all of the troops and armour moving in on the Kraut. There has been a steady stream for days and though the Belgians are mighty worried I am sure they are amazed at the sights they see. The armour moves about 25 miles an hour in and out of towns and to see and hear a tank roar through a fair sized town, turn on one tread and never slow down is quite a sight."

IN THE MIDDLE of the Bulge, the Germans had made better progress than Peiper had managed, but the 101st Airborne and others got to Bastogne before they did. The Germans surrounded the Americans, and from December 19 on, launched fifteen divisions at Bastogne, four of them armoured, supported by heavy artillery.

Inside the perimeter casualties piled up in the aid stations. Most went untreated because a German party had captured the division's medical supplies and doctors. Nevertheless, spirits stayed strong. Corporal Gordon Carson took some shrapnel in his leg and was brought into town. At the aid station he "called a medic over and said, 'Hey, how come you got so many wounded people around here? Aren't we evacuating anybody?'"

"Haven't you heard?" the medic replied. "They've got us surrounded-the poor bastards."

As the battle for Bastogne raged, it caught the attention of the world. The inherent drama, the circled-wagons image, the heroic resistance, and the daily front-page maps combined to make the 101st the most famous American division of the war. But the 101st was not alone inside Bastogne. A combat command team of the 10th Armoured was there, along with supporting units from engineers, antiaircraft units, and more. What stands out about the defence of Bastogne was the combined-arms approach the GIs used. It was something to learn for the paratroopers, who had in Normandy and Holland fought pretty much on their own.

Now they had tanks but no advanced knowledge of the techniques of infantry fighting with tanks. Even as the battle raged, Colonel William Roberts, CO of the 10th Armoured, circulated among the paratroopers, giving them tips on the employment of tanks. Lieutenant Colonel Harry Kinnard, the 101st's operations officer, organized the four infantry regiments into a combined-arms team, each with its permanent attachment of tanks, TDs (tank destroyers), and antitank guns. Each team was responsible for a roadblock, a crossroads, or a position on prominent terrain.

Corporal Robert Bowen, 401st Glider Infantry, 101st, a wounded veteran of Normandy and Holland, was a squad leader on the western sector of the 30 kilometre perimeter. At dawn on December 21-following a below zero night with ankle-deep snow on the ground-Bowen's CO told him the enemy had slipped through and established a roadblock between the 101st and Bastogne. "That roadblock has to be taken out, Bowen," the CO said. He gave Bowen two squads and told him to get at it.

"Short, sweet and scary," Bowen characterized the order. He wished the regiment had an officer to put in charge, but it didn't. He discussed the situation with his men and agreed there had to be a better way than just charging the houses at the roadblock. At that moment a tank appeared.

"Suppose I take care of those houses with my cannon?" the tanker asked. "My fifty-cal can rake those foxholes dug in around them. OK?"

"OK?" Bowen replied. "Man, you've just come from heaven."

They went at it. The tank began to fire, cannon and machine gun. Bowen's squads moved down the road, shooting as they walked. Within a half-hour some of the Germans were fleeing, while others threw up their hands. "It was a textbook attack," Bowen said, "working better than anything we had ever done in practice."

The threat met and defeated, Bowen went back to his original position. That night the thermometer plunged again. "The night passed like a horrible dream," Bowen remembered. "Nothing I could do could keep me warm. I begged for dawn to come."

When it did, a heavy ground fog reduced visibility to near zero. Germans used the cover to move in on the American positions; their white camouflage clothing helped hide them. As Bowen put it, they were "opaque figures in snow suits emerging from nowhere." A fierce firefight ensued. Bowen looked for the tank that had been so helpful the previous day. He found it, badly damaged. The tanker had been firing the .50-calibre when an antitank shell hit the turret just under him. His face was horribly cut by shrapnel. Bowen got him to an aid station, then returned to position.

Things couldn't have been much worse. Germans were scattered in a semicircle around him, firing at his men in their holes. There were eleven German tanks supporting the infantry. Bowen could do nothing about them because the 57-mm antitank gun assigned to his team was useless- its wheels were frozen solid in the ground, and it could not be moved.

A half-track pulled up, bringing a squad of fighting men forward. Bowen checked his line. His casualties were mounting. He picked up a bazooka and three shells from the half-track, took careful aim at a Tiger 200 metres distant, fired-and grazed the turret. A mortar shell found Bowen's position. He was badly wounded and, shortly thereafter, captured. German doctors treated him, then sent him east to a POW camp. So it went for the armoured troopers and airborne infantry in Bastogne.

LIEUTENANT Helmuth Henke was an aide to General Fritz Bayerlein, CO of the Panzer Lehr Division, which had been reconstituted after its pounding in France. On December 22 Bayerlein handed him a letter from the "German Commander to the USA

Commander of the encircled town of Bastogne." It demanded an "honorable surrender to save the encircled USA troops from total annihilation." Bayerlein told Henke, who spoke good English, to join a colonel from the staff, get a couple of enlisted men and two white flags, approach the American lines, and deliver the letter.

All went well. The GIs stopped firing when the German party waved its white flags. The Germans came into American lines, where Henke told a lieutenant that he had a message for the CO. The lieutenant blindfolded the Germans and drove them to General Anthony McAuliffe's headquarters. Henke, still blindfolded, handed over Bayerlein's demand.

McAuliffe read it, and a short while later said, "Take them back," as a staff officer placed McAuliffe's reply into Henke's hand. The Germans were driven back to the front, where their blindfolds were removed. Henke finally had a chance to read McAuliffe's response. It said, "Nuts." He looked at his American escort, Colonel Joseph Harper. "Nuts?" he asked, in disbelief.

"It means, 'Go to hell,'" Harper replied.

Henke knew what that meant. Before departing for his own lines, "I told the American officer what I told every soldier whom I took prisoner, 'May you make it back to your homeland safe and sound.'"

"Go to hell," was Harper's reply.

ON DECEMBER 23 the skies cleared. The Allied air force, grounded for a week, went into action. Medium bombers hit German bridges and rail yards around and behind the Eifel. Jabos shot up German vehicles and columns. Captain Gerd von Fallois, commanding a German tank unit outside Bastogne, called it "psychologically fantastic. Aeroplanes everywhere. Thousands." He added, "I didn't see a single Luftwaffe plane."

American transport C-47s dropped tons of supplies into Bastogne—medicine, food, blankets, ammunition—with an over 90 per cent success rate. The Germans continued to attack—they launched one of their heaviest assaults on Christmas Day—but they made no gains against the resupplied men of the 10th Armoured and the 101st Airborne.

From the Battle of Trois-Ponts on, events had turned rapidly. As Major Guderian of the 116th Panzer Division put it, "We started with fuel enough for only fifty kilometres." Captured American fuel gave them enough for another twenty kilometres. Meanwhile, behind the German lines the traffic jams had been straightened out, so more fuel and ammunition could be brought forward. But as Guderian remarked, "We had no defence against air attacks."

Peiper's advance ended. That afternoon he got an order via radio-withdraw. For the Germans the offensive phase of the Battle of the Bulge was over. One of Peiper's privates, Ginter Bruckner, asked a question to which the answer was obvious: "We were so well equipped, beautiful weapons, but what is the use of having a brand-new tank, but no gas? What is the use of having a machine gun when I have no more ammunition?"

Or what is the use of having the world's best fighter aeroplane when there is no fuel to run it? By this stage the Germans had built hundreds of single-engine jets (Messerschmitt 163s) and twin-engine jets (ME-262s) and were going into production on a jet bomber. The Americans were not going to have jets until October. Some Allied airmen worried that if the war went on, the Germans might regain control of the sky. But the Luftwaffe was without fuel. The all-out bomber assault on German refineries and oil-related targets had a cumulative effect that was devastating.

For the Wehrmacht almost everything had gone wrong, all of it predictable. It had been madness to attack in the Ardennes-an area with the most difficult terrain and least adequate road system in all of Western Europe-with insufficient fuel. Of course Eisenhower had tried to continue the Allied offensive in September and October when his troops had insufficient fuel. But by December the Allies had fuel dumps throughout Belgium and Luxembourg. Now it was the Germans' turn to retreat, abandoning their vehicles and weapons in disarray. Their week of glory was over.

DURING CHRISTMAS season of 1944 there were some 4 million young soldiers on the Western Front, the great majority of them Protestants or Catholics. They said the same prayers when they were being shelled,



directed to the same God. They joined in denouncing godless communism, which was one side's ally and the other side's enemy.

In World War II no hatred matched that felt by Americans against Japanese, or Russians against Germans, and vice versa. But in Northwest Europe there was little racial hatred between the Americans and the Germans. How could there be when cousins were fighting cousins? About one third of the US Army in ETO was German American in origin.

The season highlighted their closeness. Americans and Germans alike put up Christmas trees and used the debris of war-like chaff, the tinfoil dropped by bombers to fool radar-to decorate them. Men who would never do such a thing at any other time prepared gifts for other men. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day men on both sides of the line sang the same carols. The universal favourite was "Silent Night." Nearly every one of those 4 million men on the Western Front was homesick. Loneliness was their most shared emotion. Christmas meant family, and family and home meant life.

They couldn't go home just yet, however, so the GIs did what they could to make where they were look like home. The 99th Division had taken its position in the Ardennes and gone to work building double-walled shelters. "We looked forward to spending Christmas secure in our log bunkers," one sergeant wrote, "with a decorated tree, singing carols and enjoying a hot meal."

Most rear-echelon people lived and slept in houses. Sometimes frontline men, too, when the line ran down the middle of a village. If a village had been or was the scene of a battle, its civilian population was usually gone. The first men into the village got first crack at looting what the combat troops wanted most-food, a change in diet. Shelves of canned fruits, vegetables, and meats made for some memorable holiday feasts.

Corporal Clair Galdonik of the 90th Division found himself on Christmas Eve in an undestroyed home just inside Germany. His company had occupied the town at dusk. The Germans thought civilians were still there. To keep them fooled, the CO told the men to build fires. The smoke rising from the homes worked: there was no shelling that night. But in Galdonik's house the chimney wasn't drawing. Smoke filled the room. Galdonik investigated. He found that the stovepipes were stuffed with smoked hams and sausages the German family had tried to

hide. There was enough to provide his squad with two days of banqueting.

There was no general cease-fire anywhere on Christmas Day. Apparently it never occurred to anyone to suggest it. But the urge to go to church was widely felt. Private George McAvoy of the 9th Armoured Division was in Fratin, Belgium, on Christmas Eve. He attended a midnight mass along with every man in his company not on duty and most of the town's inhabitants. As the church was jammed, the GIs took seats in the rear. They were in combat dress and armed, which caused considerable embarrassment. Rifles leaned against the hardwood pews would slip and crash to the floor. The men put their helmets under the pews in front of them; when people knelt they kicked the helmets and sent them spinning. "It was the noisiest service I ever attended," McAvoy wrote. "But the sense of comfort, well-being and safety was amazing."

Throughout the service McAvoy noted the boys up in the choir stall were giggling. It turned out that one of the squads had gone into the church shortly after dark, thrown their bedrolls down around the altar, and gone to sleep. When the priest arrived, he let them sleep. What set the boys to giggling was the sight of one of the GIs suddenly waking up, hearing the organ and seeing the priest, and crying out, "I've bought it!"

GENERAL McAULIFFE was all pumped up. His boys had held, the skies had cleared, and help was coming. McAuliffe's men in the foxholes were not so upbeat. Their Christmas Eve dinner consisted of cold beans. In his company Captain Winters was last to go for chow. All he got was "five white beans and a cup of cold broth." At least his company didn't get attacked on Christmas Day. On the other side of Bastogne the Germans launched their heaviest attacks ever to try one last time to break through. They failed.

That was but one of many attacks launched by both sides. They were there to kill, holy day or not. The dead and dying were all around. Sergeant Bruce Egger's company attacked a village late on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. German machine guns hit the advancing GIs. Two men were wounded, one killed. The platoon dug in. Egger recalled: "A wounded man kept crying, 'Mother, Mother! Help me!' as he struggled to rise. Another burst from the machine gun silenced him.

That beseeching plea on that clear, cold Christmas night will remain with me for the rest of my life."

Private Phillip Stark, a nineteen-year-old machine gunner in the 84th Division, arrived on Christmas Eve at a position outside the Belgian village of Verdenne on the northern shoulder of the Bulge. At twilight the German troops in Verdenne began to celebrate. Stark wrote later, "Sounds and songs carried well across the cold clear air." Too well for Stark's liking, however: officers at regimental level heard the songs and ordered Stark's platoon to attack and drive the Germans from the town. That meant going up a hill. In the dark the company got to the top, only to be shelled by American artillery. Stark and his buddy Wib tried to dig in, but below the frozen earth there was rock. Despite frantic efforts, when dawn came, "our hole was only about a foot deep and six feet long. Wib was 6'2" and I'm 6'6", but at least we were able to keep ourselves below the all important ground level. This is how we spent Christmas Eve in 1944."

Christmas morning Stark got to talking about stories he had heard from the First World War, when on Christmas the front-line soldiers would declare a truce. "We longed for a day of peace and safety." Instead, they got a German barrage intended to cover the retreat of German vehicles. Stark began cutting down fleeing enemy infantry. "Only on this Christmas Day did I ever find combat to be as pictured in the movies. We blazed away ruthlessly," he wrote.

At dawn the following day German infantry and tanks counterattacked. The remainder of the platoon retreated, but Stark stayed with his machine gun, even when Wib took a bullet in the middle of his forehead. "Now I was alone and for the first time I was sure that I too was going to die. But I kept on firing, hoping to keep them off. By now three enemy tanks were very close and firing their machine guns and cannon directly at my position." A German bullet ricocheted off his machine gun, broke into bits, and slammed into his cheek, blinding him in the left eye. He ran to the rear, over the hill, and back to where he had started three days ago on Christmas Eve. He had lost an eye and won a Silver Star.

ON CHRISTMAS Eve, Private Joe Tatman of the 9th Armoured found himself with his squad, hiding in a hayloft outside Bastogne, well within German lines. They had been trapped there five days and had run out

of food, "but we talked about Christmas and home, never giving up our hopes."

At 1600 the Germans found Tatman's group and forced it to surrender. A captain took charge. He had been a lawyer in New York. He explained that he had returned to his homeland to settle his father's estate and got caught up in the war. He took the prisoners into the kitchen of the farmhouse. His cooks were preparing for a Christmas party. He gave the GIs milk and doughnuts. He talked and joked about the war. He hoped it would end soon so that everyone could go home.

After they ate, the captain gave the Americans hot water, towels, and shaving materials. He told them to wash up as he was inviting them to join the Christmas party. The elderly Belgian farm couple had set a large, beautiful table in a decorated dining room, covered with all kinds of food and drinks, including meats. There were plates holding "all brands of American cigarettes." After eating, the captain offered a toast of good luck to the prisoners. He explained he and his men wanted to have the party because they realized that in the morning, Christmas Day, the GIs "would begin their journey to Hell."

Hell was a German POW camp. By late December they were growing rapidly, as the GIs captured in the first days of the Bulge began to come in. The trip from Belgium to the camps in eastern Germany was purgatory. Private Kurt Vonnegut of the 106th had a typical experience. After his group was forced to surrender, the Germans marched the POWs 60 miles to Limburg. There was no water, food, or sleep. In Limburg they were loaded into railway cars designed to hold forty men or eight horses. Private Vonnegut's car held sixty men. The cars were unventilated and unheated. There were no sanitary accommodations. Half the men had to stand so the other half could lie down to sleep. In every car there were any number of men with severe dysentery. There they stayed for four days.

Shortly after dark on Christmas Eve, in one of those cars, a man began singing. "He obviously had a trained voice; he was a superb tenor," Private George Zak recalled. He sang "Silent Night." Soon the others in the car took it up. It spread to the cars up and down the line. The German guards joined in the singing.

Suddenly the air-raid sirens went off. Soon bombs from the RAF were dropping all around the railroad yard. "Let us out!" the POWs screamed as they pounded at the locked sliding doors. "For Christ's sake, give us a

chance!" But the guards had run off. The thinnest man in the car managed to squeeze through one of the vent windows and remove the wire locking the sliding door. The POWs poured out and ran up and down the track, opening the wire on the other cars. They saw a cavelike gully and ran to it. Some made it, but about 150 got killed or wounded.

When the all-clear sounded, the guards returned, rounded up the prisoners, and put them back in the cars. Slowly the excited talk died down as the adrenaline drained. Soon it was a silent night. "Hey," someone called out. "Hey, tenor, give us some more."

A voice from the other end of the car responded, "He ain't here. He got killed."

So it went on the Western Front during the Christmas season, 1944.

OUT IN THE English Channel the transport *Leopoldville*, a converted luxury liner, was headed towards Le Havre, bringing 2,223 replacements for the Battle of the Bulge. The officers were from the Royal Navy, the crew was Belgian, the passengers were Americans—a fine show of Allied unity. Sergeant Franklin Anderson and 150 others went up to the deck just before midnight to sing Christmas carols. There was a boom. A torpedo from a U-boat had hit amidships.

The ship shivered, then began to sink. The officers and crew jumped into the lifeboats—there were only fourteen of them—and took off, leaving the US soldiers to fend for themselves. Anderson managed to jump from *Leopoldville* to the deck of a destroyer that came alongside. Others who tried the same missed and were crushed as big waves pushed the two ships into each other. Still others drowned or succumbed to hypothermia. Altogether 802 GIs died in the incident, but not one British officer or Belgian seaman died. Bad show for Allied unity. The incident therefore was covered up. There was no investigation, no court-martial.

Built to carry 360 passengers, the *Leopoldville* held well over 2,000 troops when it sank in early winter, a time when the Channel is always rough and often stormy. The Allies were sending every available man across the Channel to the front on every available boat. To speed the process, ordinary precautions were neglected. There were insufficient life jackets, and no instructions on their use. With men packed into the

very bowels of the ship, there were no lifeboat or abandon-ship drills. There were many other oversights, most caused by haste.

As a result, what should have been a minor loss was the equivalent of losing a full-strength rifle regiment, as the 1,400 or so survivors of the Leopoldville had to be sent to the hospital rather than the front line when they finally got to Cherbourg.

PATTON WOKE on Christmas morning, looked at the sky, and said to himself, "Lovely weather for killing Germans." But to his disappointment the spearhead for his thrust north to relieve Bastogne failed to break the siege that day.

The next morning the 4th Armoured moved out, with the 37th Tank Battalion (twenty Shermans strong), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Creighton Abrams, in the lead. Jabos preceded them, laying bombs into the German lines only a couple of hundred metres ahead of the advancing tanks. Keep moving, Abrams ordered. They did, and at 1650, December 26, Lieutenant Charles Boggess drove the first vehicle from 4th Armoured into the lines of the 101st Airborne. He was followed by Captain William Dwight. "How are you, General?" Dwight asked General McAuliffe, who had driven out to the perimeter to greet him.

"Gee, I am mighty glad to see you," McAuliffe replied. With the siege of Bastogne broken, with Peiper and the others in retreat, the week after Christmas was relatively quiet on the front. But to the rear American trucks were rushing reinforcements and supplies forward. The US Army in ETO had been pounded badly in the second half of December, but it had recovered, held, and now was preparing the final offensive.

## Chapter Nine

### Winter War: January 1945

ON NEW YEAR'S Eve, 1944, Lieutenant John Cobb (USMA, 1943) was in a convoy crossing the English Channel. A replacement officer for the 82nd Airborne, he was on his way to Elsenborn Ridge. "Notwithstanding blackout and security conditions," he wrote later,

"every ship in the Channel sounded whistles or sirens or shot off flares at midnight on New

Year's Eve."

That same night Corporal Paul-Arthur Zeihe of the 11th Panzer Division was on the front line near Trier. "Just before midnight the shooting stopped almost entirely," he remembered. "As the clock struck twelve, the Americans began with their fireworks, sending illuminated rockets into the air. Suddenly, by the light of their rockets, we saw the Americans getting out of their holes, clutching their rifles and pistols, jumping, skipping around, shooting their weapons and lighting up the whole valley. I can still see them before me today, caught against the light of their rockets, prancing around on a background of fresh snow. It did not take long before we were doing the same thing, firing off illuminated rockets, shooting our weapons. It lasted about five, maybe six minutes. It slowed, then stopped. We disappeared back into our holes, and so did they. It was one of the most beautiful experiences I had during my service. We had allowed our humanity to rise that once."

The feeling was universal. The new year had begun. Surely this had to be the last year of the war. The Allies had driven the Germans back. The troops had liberated France and Belgium. Supply lines from the United States and Great Britain were secure and stuffed with men and materiel being sent to the front.

A panoramic snapshot of ETO taken on January 1, 1945, would have shown tankers and freighters and transports unloading at Le Havre, Antwerp, Cherbourg; long lines of trucks carrying men and supplies forward; tent-city hospitals and army headquarters; supply dumps that held many square miles of food, ammunition, clothing, fuel, vehicles; some villages and cities destroyed, some intact; airfields scattered across France and Belgium, swarming with activity; a constant movement of tanks, cannon, jeeps, trucks; close to the German border the big cannon lined up;

and at the front itself American troops dug in-cold, hungry, exhausted but victorious.

A panoramic snapshot of Germany would have shown city after city in ruin, on fire; in rural areas little evidence of war; abandoned vehicles, some disabled by Jabos, some by mechanical problems; no artillery in sight because of camouflage; and at the front itself German troops

dug in-cold, hungry, exhausted and just defeated in their great offensive gamble.

As to the cold, all suffered equally. How cold was it? So cold that if a man didn't do his business in a hurry, he risked a frostbitten penis. Private Don Schoo, an AA (antiaircraft) gunner attached to the 4th Armoured Division, recalled, "I went out to my half-track to relieve the man on guard. He couldn't get out of the gun turret. His overcoat was wet when he got in and it froze so he couldn't get out." It was so cold the oil in the engines froze. Weapons froze.

Nights ranged from zero Fahrenheit to minus ten and lower. Men without shelter other than a foxhole-or heat stayed awake, stomping their feet through the fourteen-hour night. Major Harrison had as one of his most vivid memories the sight of GIs pressed against the hot stones of the walls of burning houses, as flames came out of the roof and windows. They were not hiding from Germans: they were trying to get warm for a minute or two.

The conditions in Northwest Europe in January 1945 were as brutal as any in history, including Napoleon's and the German retreats from Moscow in midwinter 1812 and 1941. But in this battle the Germans were not retreating. They fought back against the American advance, which could barely move forward anyway in the ice and snow, forcing the Americans to pay the highest price for taking back the territory lost in the Bulge. Eisenhower had under his command seventy-three divisions. Of the total, forty-nine were American, twelve British, three Canadian, one Polish and eight French. He had forty-nine infantry, twenty armoured and four airborne divisions. As against this, the Germans had seventy six divisions.

Given the near equality in firepower and the brutality of conditions, a winter offensive had little appeal. Nevertheless, Eisenhower decided to launch attacks north and south of the Bulge to trap the Germans at its western tip and regain the lost ground. He felt he had no option. The Allies could not shut down offensive operations while V-1s and V-2s continued to bombard Antwerp, London, and other cities.

The initial January offensive by the Allies was directed against the German salient. It was agreed that First and Third armies would meet at Houffalize, a village five miles north of Bastogne. When the linkup took place, the Bulge would be cut in half. Eisenhower insisted that there would be a broad-front advance into Germany once the Bulge



was eliminated. He emphasized, "We must regain the initiative, and speed and energy are essential."

For the frontline infantry, armour, and artillery of First and Third armies, the battle that raged through January was among the worst of the war-if possible, even more miserable than Hiirtgen. It was fought in conditions so terrible that they can only be marvelled at, not really imagined. Only those who were there can know.

The combat soldiers of ETO at this time numbered about 300,000. In the junior officer ranks the turnover had been almost three quarters. Still there was a core of veterans in most divisions, including junior officers who had won battlefield promotions-the highest honour a soldier can receive-and sergeants, most of whom had been the privates of Normandy, St. Lo, Falaise, Holland, and the Bulge; survivors who had moved up when NCOs were killed or wounded. These newly made lieutenants and sergeants, some of them teenage boys, provided the leadership that got the US Army through that terrible January.

There were some unusual junior officers on the front. One was Lieutenant Ed Gesner of the 4th Infantry Division. He was a 40-year-old who had been transferred out of OSS (Office of Strategic Services) because he was too old to jump behind enemy lines. He knew survival tricks that he taught his platoon, such as how to create a foxhole in a hurry in frozen ground: he shot eight rounds into the same spot, quickly dug out the loose dirt with his trench knife, placed a half stick of TNT in the hole, lit the fuse, ran back 30 metres, hit the dirt, got up and ran back before the dust settled, and dug with his trench shovel. Within minutes a habitable foxhole.

The junior officers coming over from the States were another matter. Pink cheeked youth, they were bewildered by everything around them. Major Winters, himself a private back in 1942, commented that during the Bulge, "I looked at the junior officers and my company commanders and I ground my teeth. Basically we had weak lieutenants. I didn't have faith in them." Winters did what he could to get his most experienced NCOs with the weakest officers and scattered the veterans among the new lieutenants.

In the hundreds of companies stretched along the front, when the order to attack got down to the line, the men were outraged. Major Winters said, "It pissed me off. I could not believe that after what we had gone through

and done, after all the casualties we had suffered, they were putting us into an attack."

It wasn't just that they figured it was some other guy's turn; it was that they were exhausted, completely drained, men. Practically every one had a bad cold to add to the misery (pneumonia sent many back to hospitals), and they were jumping off into conditions that would have taxed them at their peak physical condition.

In the woods in the Ardennes the snow was a foot and more deep, frozen on top, slippery, noisy. To advance, a man had to flounder through the snow, bending and squirming to avoid knocking the snow off the branches and revealing his position. Visibility was limited to a few metres. An attacker could not see a machine-gun position or a foxhole until he was almost on top of it. There were no landmarks. Squads had to move on compass bearings until they bumped into somebody-friend or enemy. But attacking through the cleared grazing fields was equally daunting. There was no concealment, and many GIs had no camouflage.

On January 9 an officer from the Criminal Investigation Corps asked Colonel Ken Reimers of the 90th Division if he had a Lieutenant Barry in his outfit. Reimers did. The CIC officer wanted to arrest Barry; it seemed he had stolen some sheets from a civilian house in the 90th's area. The CIC claimed a lot of looting had been going on, and he was going to put a stop to it. But Reimers discovered that Barry had hit on the idea of sheets for camouflage in the snow, and had cut holes in the centre of them and distributed one to every man in his platoon. When Reimers explained this to the division commander. General Earnest Bixby, Bixby said, "Promote him." Reimers explained that Barry was already a first lieutenant. "Well, give him a Bronze Star then, for his initiative."

Under the sheet, if he was lucky enough to have one, the average infantryman had the pockets of his combat jacket crammed with rations, shaving articles, pictures, cigarettes, candy, dry socks, writing paper and pens, and mess kit. He had his raincoat folded over the back of his belt or wore it to help keep warm. He carried two to four army-issue thin wool blankets. Whenever the GIs had to make a forced march of more than a few miles, the roadside would be strewn with blankets, overcoats, overshoes, and gas masks. A truck would follow along behind, collect the equipment, bring it forward, and reissue it-hopefully, before dark.

PRIVATE KURT Gabel of the 17th Airborne Division was in the attack on January 3 near Mande St.-Etienne, some ten kilometres north of Bastogne. His platoon moved through a wood, then spread out to cross an open snow-covered field. "Suddenly the air directly above us was alive with sounds I had not heard before," Gabel wrote. It was the screeching sound of the "screaming meemies," the German nebelwerfer, or multiple rocket. "The first salvo crashed into our formation as the next rounds already howled above us. The platoon leader yelled, 'Hit it!' I hit the snow, face first, and felt multiple concussions as the rockets pounded down. They howled and burst, and I clawed the ground and whimpered."

Between explosions Gabel heard a yell, "Move!" It struck him as incongruous. He turned his head as best he could while pressing his body into the ground and saw "a captain running towards the rifle squad. 'Get up!' he yelled, his face contorted with rage. 'Get up, you stupid bastards. You'll die here. There's no cover. Move! Move!' He grabbed one soldier by the shoulder and kicked another. I had never seen that kind of rage. 'Get 'em up, goddamn it!'"

Gabel was more than impressed: "The rockets seemed to lose their terror next to that captain. I did not know who he was and did not care. I jumped up and stumbled forward." Others did the same. The platoon got to the far side of the open field. The men threw themselves down in a drainage ditch, exhausted.

"Fix bayonets!" Gabel felt the shock of the order jerk his body. "Fix bayonets? That is World War I stuff. Bayonets were for opening C-ration cans." Not this day. All around Gabel, "there was the blood-freezing sound of fourteen bayonets drawn from scabbards and clicking home on their studs under the rifle barrels."

"Let's go," the platoon leader called out. All fourteen men jumped out of the ditch, formed into a line of skirmishers, and moved towards the German position. They began shouting, "Geronimo!" Gabel screamed with the others. They got into the German lines. Enemy soldiers tried to lift their hands. Still yelling, the troopers thrust their bayonets into the Germans. They took the village. Their reward was that they got to spend the night in town,

One thing that kept many of those thrown into these early January attacks going was the thought of where they would spend the night, usually the next small village to the east. "It was something to live for," Private Jack Ammons of the 90th Division remembered. If the GIs could drive the Germans from the houses before dark, it would be the GIs occupying the cellars, out of the wind. If Germans held the town, the GIs would spend the first hours of darkness digging foxholes in the wood nearest the village and the remainder of the night stomping in the foxhole to keep from freezing-and then move out on another attack in the morning.

It sometimes happened that the Germans occupied one set of cellars, the GIs the other. Occasionally they shared the same cellar. Private Schoo found three German soldiers sleeping on a cellar floor. Schoo got a couple of buddies, and they woke the Germans up. One could speak English. "We had them get wood for a fire, we heated food and coffee-we sat up all night talking, in the morning we took them back to HQ (they were nice guys)."

Another characteristic of the January fighting was the horror created by a high incidence of bodies crushed by tanks. Men slipped, tanks skidded. Wounded couldn't get out of the way. Twenty-year-old Sergeant Dwayne Burns of the 82nd Airborne saw a fellow paratrooper who had been run over by a tank. "If it hadn't been for the pair of legs and boots sticking out of all the gore, it would have been hard to tell what it was. I looked away and thought for sure that I was going to vomit. I just wanted to throw my weapon away and tell them I quit. No more, I just can't take no more."

But he had to, because the pressure from above was irresistible. The generals wanted results, so the colonels wanted results, so the men kept moving, no matter what.

Not all company commanders were willing to follow orders unquestioningly. On one occasion two simply refused to carry out a direct order to attack. They were Captain Jay Prophet and Captain Harold Leinbaugh, commanding companies A and K of the 333rd Infantry Regiment, 84th Division. The morning after a night spent in a wood, under regular shelling, the battalion commander, a colonel, came to the front and ordered A and K companies to advance another half mile. Prophet refused. So did Leinbaugh. Prophet protested that all the weapons were frozen; the companies were at half strength; the men exhausted. The

colonel threatened a court-martial. "Colonel," Prophet replied, "there's nothing I'd like more right now than a nice warm court-martial."

The colonel refused to believe the weapons were frozen. Prophet ordered a test. None of the weapons could be fired. The colonel began to chew out the captains for their own and their men's appearance. He said it looked like no one had shaved for a week. Leinbaugh said there was no hot water. The colonel, who prided himself on being a product of the old National Guard, gave a tip: "Now if you men would save some of your morning coffee it could be used for shaving." Leinbaugh stepped over to a snowbank, picked up the five-gallon GI coffee can brought up that morning, and shook it in the colonel's face. The frozen coffee produced a thunk. Leinbaugh shook it again.

"That's enough," said the colonel. "Goddammit, I can hear."

WHEN THE offensive began on January 3, First Army and Third Army were separated by 25 miles of rugged hills and gorges, frozen rivers, icy roads, snow-laden forests, and tens of thousands of battle-hardened German troops. From the south the lead units of Third Army—the 26th and 90th divisions—moved out towards Houffalize. To the north First Army lurched forward.

The 82nd Airborne was one of First Army's divisions, attacking southward from Trois-Ponts. Colonel Vandervoort's battalion of the 505th PIR was in the van. H hour was 0830, and initially all went well. Then an open field stretched between them and the village of Fosse, the first objective. Small-arms fire came on in such volume that it was impossible to advance. Nevertheless, company and platoon commanders tried to get the men to follow—only to be shot down themselves before taking a half-dozen floundering steps in the two-foot-deep snow. Colonel Vandervoort got artillery on the German position, and the barrage forced the Germans to pull out. The paratroopers moved into Fosse, then out to a wood, where they dug in for the night.

As the temperature dropped and the snow continued to fall, the 505th learned that trucks couldn't get through to bring on their gear, so there would be no overcoats, packs, or sleeping bags. Canteens froze solid. The cold and exposure caused old wounds to flare up and, remarkably, triggered many relapses of malaria that had been contracted in the Mediterranean. The regimental history comments, "Despite the heroic

efforts of the Medics (many of whom became casualties themselves) who laboured unceasingly all night long, some of the more seriously wounded died."

In the morning, January 4, the sleepless men resumed their attack—really, slogging through the snow, one man breaking trail for two followers, with two tanks in support. They came to a strongly defended hill. The tanks rolled forward and began raking the hillside with bullets and shells. "Everyone opened fire, shooting as fast as they could pull triggers and load clips. In a very short time (probably less than a minute), German soldiers started popping out of holes with their hands in the air," the regimental history notes. "Then an incredible spectacle occurred. From every position on that hill, Germans began climbing out of holes while troopers stood there with their mouths wide open at the sight of approximately 200 Germans milling around." In this encounter the 505th, which had suffered grievously the previous day, had nary a scratch.

January 5 and 6 were more of the same—a kilometre or so advance each day. The good news on January 6 was that the engineers had bulldozed a road through to the front, so trucks could bring the GIs their gear.

On January 7, at 0800 hours, Colonel Vandervoort was hit by mortar fire. "This stunned the battalion," the regimental history continues, "which had come to believe that its long-time commander was invincible." The wounds eventually ended his army career prematurely. As army historian S.L.A. Marshall put it, "The US Army lost a file that was destined for higher command."

THE GERMAN retreat out of the Bulge was slow, stubborn, and costly to the Americans—but to the Germans also. Hitler, always insistent on holding captured ground, refused to consider pulling out and returning to the Siegfried Line. To hold in the Bulge and retain the threat of an offensive thrust westward, Hitler attacked in Alsace with the idea of preventing further American reinforcements moving north to the Ardennes.

Hitler's Operation Northwind, the attack in Alsace starting January 1, hit Lieutenant General Alexander Patch's US Seventh Army. Eventually fifteen US divisions with 250,000 men were involved in the fighting, along a front that ran from Saarbrücken in the north to the

west bank of the Rhine, south of Strasbourg. This was a natural salient along the bend of the Rhine.

Behind the salient, the Alsatian plain stretched westward to the foothills of the Vosges Mountains. The textbook response to Northwind would have been to fall back on the rough country and leave the plain to the Germans. That was what Eisenhower wanted to do, but politics intervened. De Gaulle told the Supreme Commander that as the French leader he absolutely could not accept abandoning Strasbourg, not only for reasons of national pride but because of the fearful reprisals the Gestapo was sure to take on its citizens. Eisenhower reluctantly agreed, and the order went out to Seventh Army: hold your ground.

Colonel Hans von Luck's 125th Regiment, 21st Panzer Division, had the mission of breaking through the American lines on the northwestern base of the salient, cutting across the eastern foothills of the Vosges, and thus severing the American supply line to Strasbourg. That required breaking through the Maginot Line. It ran east-west in this area, following the Rhine River bend. The Line had seen no fighting to speak of in 1940-the Germans went around it-but in January 1945 it showed what a superb fortification it was.

On January 7 von Luck approached the Line south of Wissembourg, at Rittershoffen. "Suddenly we could make out the first bunker, which received us with heavy fire," he said. The Americans utilized the firing points, trenches, retractable cannon, and other features of the Line to stop the Germans cold.

Over the next two days the Germans reinforced the attack with the 25th Panzer Division. At one point they managed to get close enough to throw grenades into the embrasures, but they were immediately driven back by heavy artillery fire.

Still the Germans came on. At times the battle raged inside the bunkers, a nerve-shattering experience made worse by the ear-shattering noise of explosives. Eventually von Luck got through. On January 10 he moved his regiment forward for an attack on Rittershoffen, preparatory to assaulting another part of the Maginot Line from the rear, to widen the breach. That night he got into the village but was not able to drive the Americans out. They held one end: von Luck's men held the other. There then developed a two-week-long battle that von Luck, a veteran of Poland, France, Russia, North Africa, and

Normandy, characterized as "one of the hardest and most costly battles that ever raged."

Both sides used their artillery nonstop, firing 10,000 rounds per day. The lines were never more than one street apart, and sometimes on the same side of the street, occasionally in the same house. Private Pat Reilly of the 79th recalled, "It was a weird battle. One time you were surrounded, the next you weren't. Often we took refuge in houses where the Germans were upstairs. We heard them and could see them and vice versa. If they didn't make a move we left and if we didn't make a move they left." Flamethrowers were used to set houses afire. Adding to the horror, the population of women, children, and old folks huddled in the cellars. The soldiers on both sides did what they could to feed and care for the civilians.

Individual movement by day was dangerous. At night trucks rolled up, bringing ammunition and food, carrying out wounded. The dead, including some 100 civilians, lay in the streets. There was hand-to-hand fighting with knives, room-to-room fighting with pistols, rifles, and bazookas. Attacks and counterattacks.

On January 21 the much depleted 79th and 14th Armoured divisions abandoned the Maginot Line and fell back along the Moder River. Von Luck only realized they had gone in the morning. He walked around the village, unbelieving. At the church he crawled through the wreckage to the altar, which lay in ruins. But behind the altar the organ was undamaged. Von Luck directed one of his men to tread the bellows, then sat down at the keyboard and played Bach's chorale Danket Alle Gott. The sound resounded through the village. Soldiers and civilians gathered, knelt, prayed, sang.

Overall, the Northwind offensive was a failure. The Germans never got near Strasbourg, nor could they cut US supply lines. Seventh Army's losses in January were 11,609 battle casualties plus 2,836 cases of trench foot. German losses were around 23,000 killed, wounded, or missing.

IN THE Ardennes, K Company, 333rd Regiment, 84th Division, was the spearhead for First Army's drive on Houffalize. One member of the company. Private Fred "Junior" Olson, had come in as a replacement on, New Year's Eve. He remembered that no one gave him any advice or



information: "It was as if there was no way to explain it, that I would find out for myself in due time."

Over the next week Olson had enough experience to make him a hardened veteran. In his first firefight, on January 7, a German got behind his foxhole. Olson was eating "one of those damn chocolate bars out of the K ration" and never noticed. His buddy, Sergeant Paul Zerbel, saw the German when he was ten feet away. Zerbel beat the German to the draw. After killing the German, Zerbel said it was time to haul ass. "We were going single-file down through the trees," Olson recalled, "and I tripped." As he did, a machine-gun burst cut the branches off right above his head. His life flashed past him. "It didn't last long, just a matter of seconds. I still know in my own mind that if I hadn't tripped I'd have been killed."

When Zerbel and Olson reached the company lines, Olson was greatly relieved. "It was past midnight and January 7th had been my birthday. For some strange reason I had persuaded myself that if I could live through my nineteenth birthday, I could make it all the rest of the way;

that somehow everything was going to be all right. Here it was, January 8th, and I'd made it."

The company continued to attack. On January 13 Lieutenant Franklin Brewer protested to the company commander, "There is not one man in the company fit to walk another mile, much less fight." But division headquarters said that as the company had just spent a day in a village, where it had "rested and reorganized," it was fit for duty. That meant the men had found the ruins of a house to break the wind, huddled down in frozen overcoats, and fallen into an exhausted sleep. At 0330 it was up for tepid coffee and Spam and cheese sandwiches, then a march towards Houffalize.

That morning the lead squad came under fire from log-covered emplacements. The GIs did what came naturally to them by this stage—they called in the artillery. Within minutes more than a hundred rounds of 105 shells exploded against the German position. "As the barrage lifted," the company history records, "we moved forward quickly and built up a firing line within forty yards of the Germans. The small-arms exchange lasted only a few minutes before a white rag on the end of a rifle was waved frantically from a hole. The Germans—eight or ten of them crawled out of their holes, stretching their arms as high as possible as they trudged apprehensively towards us through the snow."

Moving forward. Captain Leinbaugh came across a German major propped against a tree. His right leg had been cut off at mid thigh. The German said to Leinbaugh, quietly and in good English, "Please shoot me." Leinbaugh kept on walking. Further on, one of the sergeants caught up to Leinbaugh and asked if he had seen the guy with his leg cut off.

"Yeah. He asked me to shoot him."

"Yeah. He asked me, too."

"Did you?" "Hell, you know I couldn't walk off and leave the poor son of a bitch to die like that."

That same day Major Roy Creek of the 507th PIR, one of the heroes of D-Day, met two men carrying a severely wounded paratrooper back to the aid station. Creek took his hand to give him encouragement. The trooper asked, "Major, did I do OK?"

"You did fine, son." But as they carried him away, Creek noticed that one of his legs was missing. "I dropped the first tear for him as they disappeared in the trees. Through the fifty years since, I still continue to fight the tears when I've thought of him and so many others like him. Those are the true heroes of the war."

ON JANUARY 14, K Company advanced to within a half mile of First Army's final phase line at Houffalize. When the linkup took place the following day, the companies faced east and attacked again, this time to breach the Siegfried Line. January 15 is generally considered the last day of the Battle of the Bulge, but no one could have convinced the GIs of that. They still had a hard push ahead to get back to positions they had held one month earlier.

It was a disheartening experience to have to fight for ground once held. The 4th Infantry Division had been in continuous combat since D-Day, June 6, 1944. Lieutenant George Wilson joined the 4th just before the St. Lo breakthrough. Now, in January 1945, he found himself fighting for terrain that was becoming more and more familiar. "We were retracing the route we had taken when chasing the Germans over four months before. Our overall mission was to penetrate the Siegfried Line

at the exact same spot." Wilson was struck by the thought that of the thirty-odd officers in his regiment in September, only three remained active. In addition, the regiment had lost many replacement officers. Wilson "could not help reflecting how many lives had been lost for what appeared to be no gain after almost five months of hell."

The total of American casualties in the Bulge was 80,987. More than half came in January. Thus January 1945 was the costliest month of the campaign in northwest Europe for the US Army. Total German casualties in the Bulge are estimated from 80,000 to 104,000. The battle had political consequences of the greatest magnitude. Hitler's decision to strip the Eastern Front to seek a decision in the West led to the crushing of the depleted German forces in the east, beginning January 12 with the Red Army offensive. The Red Army overran eastern Germany and Central Europe, which led to a half century of communist enslavement. The man responsible for this catastrophe was the world's leading anti-Communist, but he chose to sacrifice his nation and his people to the Communists instead of defending against them in the East.

At the end of January, American armies in northwest Europe were again at the German border. Surely, this time they would get across the Rhine.

## Chapter Ten

Closing to the Rhine: February 1-March 6, 1945

AT THE BEGINNING of February the front lines ran roughly as they had in mid December, but behind the lines the differences were great. On December 15 the Germans had crowded division on top of division in the Eifel, while the Americans in the Ardennes were badly spread out. On February 1 the Americans had division piled on division in the Ardennes, while the Germans in the Eifel were badly spread out. The Germans felt the Americans were not likely to attack into the Eifel, which was heavier forest than the Ardennes. That, however, was exactly what Patton and Bradley wanted to do. With most of First and Third armies already in the Ardennes, it made sense to conduct an all-out offensive from there. For the soldiers of ETO that meant another month of struggling through snow or mud to attack a dug-in enemy.

Conditions in February were different from January, yet just as miserable. A battalion surgeon in the 90th Division described them: "It was cold, but not quite cold enough to freeze. Rain fell continually and things were in a muddy mess. Most of us were mud from head to foot, unshaven, tired and plagued by severe diarrhoea. It was miserable. As usual, it was the infantrymen who really suffered in the nasty fighting. Cold, wetness, mud, and hunger day after day; vicious attack and counterattack; sleepless nights in muddy foxholes; and the unending rain made their life a special hell." They were hungry because, much of the time, supply trucks could not get to them. Between heavy army traffic and the rain, the roads were impassable. The engineers worked feverishly day and night throwing rocks and logs into the morasses, but it was a losing battle.

What was unendurable, the GIs endured. What had been true on June 6, 1944, and every day thereafter was still true: the quickest route to the most desirable place in the world-home!-led to the east. So they sucked it up and stayed with it and were rightly proud of themselves for so doing. Private Jim Underkofler was in the 104th Division. Its CO was the legendary general Terry Alien; its nickname was the Timberwolf Division; its motto was, "Nothing in hell will stop the Timberwolves."

"That might sound corny," Underkofler said in a 1996 interview, "but it was sort of a symbolic expression of attitude. Morale was extremely important. I mean, man alive, the conditions were often so deplorable that we had nothing else to go on but your own morale. You know, you're sitting there in a foxhole rubbing your buddy's feet, and he's rubbing yours so you don't get trench foot. That's only an example of the kind of relationship and camaraderie we had."

THE STRAIGHT line between Aachen and Cologne lay through Diiren, on the east bank of the Rur River. But rather than going directly, Bradley ordered the main effort made through a corridor some seventeen kilometres wide, south of the dreaded Hurtgen Forest. By so doing, the Americans would arrive at the Rur upstream from the dams and, once across the river, be free to advance over the Cologne plain to the Rhine without danger of controlled flooding. The first task was to get through the Siegfried Line. And every man in an ETO combat unit was well aware that this is where the Germans stopped them in September 1944.

The generals were all enthusiastic for this one. General Walter Lauer, commanding the 99th Division, paid a pre-attack call on Sergeant Oakley Honey's C Company, 395th Regiment. Honey recalled that Lauer stood on the hood of a jeep and gave a speech, saying we had fought the enemy "in the woods and the mountains and had beaten them. Now we were going to get a chance to fight them in the open." Honey commented, "Whoopee! Everyone was overjoyed. You could tell by the long faces."

On February 4, C Company pushed off into the Siegfried Line. Honey recalls "charging into a snow storm with fixed bayonets and the wind blowing right into our faces. After moving through the initial line of dragon's teeth we began encountering deserted pillboxes. At one command post out came ten Germans with hands in the air offering no resistance."

Private Irv Mark of C Company said the enemy troops "were waiting to surrender and the one in charge seemingly berated us for taking so long to come and get them. He said, 'Nicht etwas zu essen' (nothing to eat). Strange we didn't feel one bit sorry for them."

Few companies were that lucky. Sergeant Clinton Riddle of the 82nd Airborne was in Company B, 325th Glider Infantry. On February 2 he accompanied the company commander on a patrol to within sight of the Siegfried Line. "The dragon teeth were laid out in five double rows, staggered. The Krauts had emplacements dotting the hillsides, so arranged as to cover each other with cross fire."

Returning from the patrol, the captain ordered an attack. "It was cold and the snow was deep," Riddle recalled. "There was more fire from the emplacements than I ever dreamed there could be. Men were falling in the snow all around me. That was an attack made on the belly. We crawled through most of the morning." Using standard fire-and-move-tactics, the Americans managed to drive the Germans beyond the ridge. "When we reached the road leading through the teeth," Riddle said, "the captain looked back and said, 'Come on, let's go!' Those were the last words he ever said, because the Germans had that road covered and when he was half-way across he got hit right between the eyes. There were only three of us in our company still on our feet when it was over."

Another twenty-five men turned up, and the new CO, a lieutenant, began to attack the pillboxes along the road. But the Germans had been

through enough. After their CO fired the shot that killed the American captain, his men shot him and prepared to surrender. So, Riddle relates, "when we reached the pillboxes, the Germans came out, calling out 'Kamerad.' We should have shot them on the spot. They had their dress uniforms on, with their shining boots. We had been crawling in the snow, wet, cold, hungry, sleepy, tired, mad because they had killed so many of our boys." The Americans were through the initial defences of the Siegfried Line, and that was enough for the moment.

THE 90th DIVISION reached the Siegfried Line at exactly the spot where the 106th Division had been decimated on December 16. At 0400, February 6, the 359th Regiment of the 90th picked its way undetected through the dragon's teeth and outer ring of fortifications. Shortly after dawn pillboxes that had gone unnoticed came to life, stopping the advance. A weeklong fight ensued.

The Germans employed a new tactic to confound the Americans. Captain Colby explained it: "Whole platoons of infantrymen disappeared as a result of the German tactic of giving up a pillbox easily, then subjecting it to pre-sighted artillery and mortar fire, forcing the attackers inside for shelter. Then they covered the doorway with fire, blowing it in. The men soon learned it was safer outside the fortifications than inside."

Patton inspected a command pillbox: "It consisted of a three-storey submerged barracks with toilets, shower baths, a hospital, laundry, kitchen, storerooms, and every conceivable convenience plus an enormous telephone installation. Electricity and heat were produced by a pair of diesel engines with generators. Yet the whole offensive capacity of this installation consisted of two machine guns operating from steel cupolas which worked up and down by means of hydraulic lifts. As in all cases, this particular pillbox was taken by a dynamite charge against the back door." To Patton, this was yet another proof of "the utter futility of fixed defences. In war, the only sure defence is offence, and the efficiency of offence depends on the warlike souls of those conducting it."

That point was equally true when applied to the Atlantic Wall. At the Siegfried Line in February, as at the Atlantic Wall in June 1944, the Germans got precious little return on their big investment in poured concrete.

LIEUTENANT John Cobb, 82nd Airborne, had arrived in France on January 1. By the end of January, he was a veteran. On February 8 his platoon was to accompany a squad of engineers using mine detectors to clear a trail across the Kail River valley.

The site had been the scene of a battle in November in which a battalion of the 28th Division took a terrible pounding. Cobb's was the first American unit to move back into the valley, dubbed by the 28th "Death Valley." Cobb described what he saw: "Immobile tanks and trucks and the bodies of dead American soldiers were everywhere. The snow and cold had preserved the dead and they looked so life-like it was hard to believe they had been dead for three months. It was as if a snap-shot of a deployed combat unit had been taken, with everything as it was at a given moment in the past. The command posts, the medical aid station with men still lying on their stretchers, and the destroyed supply trucks were all in their proper places just as if someone had set up a demonstration from the field manual-but the actors were all dead."

By February 8, Ninth Army, north of Aachen, had gotten through the Siegfried Line and closed to the Rur, but it could not risk an assault across the river so long as the Germans held the upstream dams. First Army, meanwhile, was working its way through the Line south of Aachen. On the tenth, V Corps won control of the dams, only to discover that the Germans had wrecked the discharge valves, thus creating a steady flooding that would halt Ninth Army until the waters receded.

While they waited, the GIs sent out reconnaissance patrols and practised river crossings. For Company K, in the centre of Ninth Army's front, that meant sending squads at night in rubber boats over the flooding Rur. Engineers worked with the infantry on assault-boat training and demonstrated the use of pontoons, rafts, smoke generators, and how to shoot communication wire across the river with rockets and grenade launchers.

D-day was February 23. After dark on the 22nd, tanks drove to the river's edge. Engineers lugged the 400-pound assault boats through deep mud to assembly areas. Huge trailer trucks with girders and pontoons for the heavy-duty bridges ground forward to final staging areas. In the 29th

Division the shivering men gathered beside the boats to huddle together in the mud and water.

The river was two- to four-metres deep, 300 to 400 metres wide, with currents running more than ten kilometres per hour. On the German side the banks were heavily mined from the river to the trench system that commanded the river. Conditions were similar along the whole stretch of the Rur.

At 0245, February 23, the Rur River line, 35 kilometres long, burst into fire. It was one of the heaviest barrages of the war—every weapon the Americans had, hurled against the enemy; a 45-minute deluge of bullets and high explosives designed to stun, kill, or drive him from his position. Ninth Army alone had more than 2,000 artillery pieces firing 46,000 tons of ammunition.

"In the middle of it all," a lieutenant in the 84th wrote, "a lone German machine gunner decided he'd had enough. He fired a long burst of tracers at his tormentors. It was his last mistake. Every tank, every antiaircraft gun, every machine gunner within range returned the fire. Waves of tracers and flat trajectory rounds swept towards the hole, engulfing it in a single continuous explosion. We cheered lustily, and Captain George Gieszl commented, 'Now that's an awfully dead German.'"

At 0330 the first assault waves shoved their boats into the river. In the 84th, assault companies had several boats overturn, but most of the men swam to the enemy banks, many without weapons (there were only thirty rifles in one 130-man company). The troops moved inland. Behind them engineers worked feverishly to build footbridges and to get a cable ferry anchored on the far bank. By 0830 the job was done, and ammunition, supporting weapons, and communication wire were ferried across. By 1030 elements of the assault companies had entered the town of Dtiren.

By the end of February 24 the engineers had treadway bridges over the Rur, allowing tanks and artillery to join the infantry on the east bank. K Company crossed on a narrow swaying footbridge that night. It beat swimming, but it wasn't easy. The men had 30 or 40 pounds of gear. Half the duckboards were under water, and there was a single strand of cable for a handhold. The Germans were pumping in artillery, close enough to



be disconcerting. Sergeant George Lucht recalled his dash across the bridge:

"The Germans had regrouped and their artillery was falling on both sides of the river, and I was thinking. Boy, this is just like Hollywood."

Once over the Rur there was open, relatively flat ground between the Americans and the Rhine. It was the most elementary military logic for the Germans to fall back. Why defend a plain that had no fortifications when Germany's biggest river was at your back? Yet that is what everyone knew Hitler would do-and Hitler did. He ordered his army to stand and fight. As it had neither fixed positions nor a river line for defensive purposes, the men should utilize the villages as strongpoints. These were villages inhabited by loyal Germans. When the 5th Division got into one of them, there were signs painted on the walls which said: SEE GERMANY AND DIE, ONWARD SLAVES OF MOSCOW, and DEATH WILL GIVE YOU PEACE.

Those signs didn't stay up long, because the walls came tumbling down. The GIs used the techniques of street fighting that they had learned in the fall of 1944. The most important things were to stay off the streets and "keep dispersed, move fast, and keep on moving whatever happens," one veteran explained. "Keep your head up and your eyes open and your legs moving."

THROUGH February, Patton attacked, whatever the conditions. He was at his zenith. His energy, his drive, his sense of history, his concentration on details while never losing sight of the larger picture combined to make him the preeminent American army commander of the war. He was constantly looking for ways to improve. For example, he ordered all Sherman tanks in his army to have two and a half inches of armour plate, salvaged from wrecked tanks, put on the forward hull of the tanks-and was delighted with the results; for the first time, a Sherman could take a direct hit from an 88 and survive. He also had flamethrowers mounted on the tanks, using the machine-gun aperture-and again was delighted with the results. They were highly effective against pillboxes.

Patton's worst enemy was the weather and what it did to the roads. The nightly freezes, the daily thaws, and the heavy traffic combined to

make them impassable. Patton at one point in early February was forced to turn to packhorses to supply the front line. Still he said attack.

On February 26 elements of Third Army captured Bitburg. Patton entered the town from the south while the fighting was still going on at the northern edge of town. About this time Patton was spending six hours a day in an open jeep inspecting, urging, prodding, demanding. He crossed the Sauer River on a partly submerged footbridge, under a smoke screen (from which emerged another Patton legend, that he had swum the river).

History was very much on his mind. In the evenings he was reading Caesar's Gallic Wars. He was especially interested in Trier, at the apex of the Saar Moselle triangle, on his northern flank. The historic city of the Treveri, according to Caesar, had contained the best cavalry in Gaul. Patton wanted Trier. He inveigled the 10th Armoured out of Bradley and sent it to take the city.

Lieutenant Colonel Jack Richardson (LJSMA, 1935) of 10th Armoured led a task force in the successful attack into Trier. Driving into the city along Caesar's road, Patton "could smell the sweat of the Legions," imagining them marching before him into the still surviving amphitheatre where the emperor Constantine the Great had thrown his captives to the beasts. He could not rest. Third Army had started the February campaign further from the Rhine than any other army on the Western Front. He still had so far to go that he feared his would be the last army to cross. "We are in a horse race with Courtney [Hodges]," Patton wrote his wife. "If he beats me [across the Rhine], I shall be ashamed."

BY THE MIDDLE of the first week in March, Ninth and First armies were closing to the Rhine, threatening to encircle entire divisions. Hitler ordered counterattacks. As a consequence, thousands of German troops were trapped on the west bank, where they either surrendered or were killed. First Army intelligence declared: "Perhaps it is too early to be optimistic but everyone feels that resistance is on the point of crumbling."

Cologne was a magnet for First Army. The famous cathedral city was the biggest on the Rhine. The Germans had never imagined invaders from the west would get that far, so Cologne was defended only by a

weak outer ring of defences, manned by bits and pieces of a hodgepodge of divisions, and a weaker inner ring, manned by police, firemen, and Volkssturm troops. Such forces could not long hold up an American army at the peak of its power.

Americans were pouring through the Siegfried Line. The columns were advancing fifteen kilometres a day and more. Meanwhile, the artillery was pounding the cities and bridges. Major Max Lale wrote his wife on March 2: "Tonight, just at dusk, I stood from a long distance away and watched the plumes of smoke, the flashes of flames, and listened to the long, low rumble that marked the death of one of the oldest cities in Europe."

On March 5 General Maurice Rose's 3rd Armoured Division entered Cologne, followed by General Terry Allen's 104th Division. The next day Rose's tanks reached the Hohenzollern Bridge, but most of the structure was resting in the water, as were the other Cologne bridges over the Rhine. In Cologne only the great cathedral stood, damaged but majestic. Like St Paul's in London, it had been used as an aiming point but was never knocked down.

It was carnival time. Mardi Gras came on March 7. In Cologne, one of the most Catholic of German cities, the inhabitants did their best to celebrate. Lieutenant Gunter Materne, a German artillery officer, recalled that his men investigated a ship tied to a wharf, and found it filled with Champagne and still wines. They proceeded to have a party. People emerged from cellars to join in. "And so we had a great time," Materne said. "We got drunk. People came up to me and said. Take off your uniform. I'll give you some civilian clothes. The war is already lost." But Materne spurned the temptation and the next day managed to get across the Rhine in a rowboat.

He was one of the last Germans to escape. The Americans had taken 250,000 prisoners and killed or wounded almost as many. More than twenty divisions had been effectively destroyed. The Allied air forces were taking full advantage of lengthening days and better weather, blasting every German who moved during daylight hours, flying as many as 11,000 sorties in one day.

On the first day of World War II, then Colonel Eisenhower had written to his brother Milton: "Hitler should beware the fury of an aroused democracy." Now that fury was making itself manifest on the west bank of the Rhine. The Allies had brought the war home to Germany.

## Chapter Eleven

### Crossing the Rhine: March 7-31, 1945

THE RHINE was by far the most formidable of the rivers the GIs had to cross. It rises in the Alps and flows generally north to Arnhem, where it makes a sharp turn to the west. It is between 200 and 500 metres wide, swift and turbulent, with great whirlpools and eddies. The Germans on the far bank were disorganized and demoralized but still determined and capable of utilizing the natural advantages the Rhine gave them to defend their country. There were only two or three places from Cologne south that were possible crossing sites. Worse, along that stretch there were no major objectives on the east bank inland for some 50 kilometres, and the hinterland was heavily wooded, undulating, and broken by narrow valleys.

North of Cologne, Montgomery's Twenty-first Army Group had many suitable crossing sites, good terrain for a mobile offensive, and major objectives just across the Rhine in the Ruhr Valley. Beyond the Ruhr, the plain led straight to Berlin. So while Eisenhower's heart was with Bradley, Hodges, and Patton, his mind was with Monty. SHAEF G-3 had decided that north was the place for the main crossing. Eisenhower agreed, but warned that "the possibility of failure cannot be overlooked. I am, therefore, making logistic preparations which will enable me to switch my main effort from the north to the south should this be forced upon me."

As MONTGOMERY'S armies were closing to the river, he began to build his supply base for the assault crossing. Altogether he required 250,000 tons of supplies for the British and Canadian forces and the US Ninth Army and 17th Airborne Division. Ninth Army had been part of Twenty-first Army Group since the preceding fall; the 17th Airborne Division had arrived in Europe in December.

Montgomery's planning for the Rhine crossing was almost as elaborate as for Overlord. Eighty thousand men, slightly less than half the number of men who went into France on June 6, 1944, would cross the Rhine by boat or transport aeroplane on the first day for Operations Plunder

(the crossing by boat) and Varsity (the airborne phase), with an immediate follow-up force of 250,000 and an ultimate force of 1 million.

Montgomery set D-day for March 24. For the two weeks preceding the assault he laid down a massive smoke screen that concealed the buildup- and gave the Germans ample warning about where he was going to cross. The air forces pounded the Germans on the east bank with 50,000 tons of bombs. Monty invited Churchill and other dignitaries to join him to watch the big show.

Beginning February 28, Ninth Army had been pushing east. Company K, 333rd Regiment, received orders to take the village of Hardt, between the Rur and the Rhine. After an all-day march through mud and cold, followed by a few hours' rest, the company formed up an hour before dawn. Everyone was groggy, exhausted and wary, since they knew their flank was open, yet they were pressing on deeper into the German lines.

The company moved out to Hardt, attacked, and got stopped by machine-gun fire and a shower of 88s. Two men were killed. The others hit the ground. Sergeant George Pope's squad got caught in the open. "We were all pinned down," he remembered. "It was flat as a floor. There wasn't a blade of grass you could hide under. I'm yelling 'Shoot, you sons of bitches!' That was a tough time."

Lieutenant Bill Masters was in the edge of a wood with half of his platoon. The remainder of his men and other platoons were getting pounded out in the open flat field. Masters recalled: "I decided I had to get these guys moving or a lot more were going to get killed." He ran forward, swearing at the men to get them going as he passed them. "I got up as far as a sugar-beet mound that gave some cover, close enough to toss a grenade at the German machine gunner right in front of me. But I couldn't get the grenade out of my pocket-it was stuck." A German tossed a potato masher. "It landed right next to me but didn't explode."

The enemies commenced firing at each other. Both missed. Both ran out of ammunition at precisely the same time. Masters knelt on one knee, reloaded, as did the German. The enemies looked up at the same time and fired simultaneously. Masters put a bullet between the machine gunner's eyes. When Masters took off his helmet to wipe his brow, he found a bullet hole through the top.

Masters ran to the first building on the outskirts of town. "I had this dead-end kid from Chicago I'd made my bodyguard. He came in close behind

me, and then a number of men pulled up and we went from building to building cleaning out the place and captured a sizable batch of German paratroopers." Lieutenant Paul Leimkuehler gave a more vivid description of Masters's action: "He was leading, running down the main street like a madman, shooting up everything in his way."

The company advanced and by March 7 was in Krefeld, on the banks of the Rhine. By some miracle the men found an undamaged high-rise apartment building in which everything worked-electricity, hot water, flush toilets, telephones. They had their first hot baths in four months. They found cigars and bottles of cognac. Private Bocarski, fluent in German, lit up, sat down in an easy chair, got a befuddled German operator on the phone, and talked his way through to a military headquarters in Berlin. He told the German officer he could expect K Company within the week.

That was not to be. Having reached the river, K Company, along with the rest of Ninth Army, would stay in place until Montgomery had everything ready for Operation Plunder.

ON MARCH 7 Patton's forces were still fighting west of the Rhine, trying to close to the river from Koblenz south to Mainz. The best stretch of river for crossing south of Cologne was in his sector. He was thinking of crossing on the run and hoping he could do it before Montgomery's operation even got started-and before Hodges's First Army, too, if possible.

But his men were exhausted. "Signs of the prolonged strain had begun to appear," one regimental history explained. "Slower reactions in the individual, a marked increase in cases of battle fatigue, and a lower standard of battle efficiency all showed quite clearly that the limit was fast approaching." Company G, 328th Infantry Regiment, was typical. It consisted of veterans whose bone weariness was so deep they were indifferent, plus raw recruits. Still, it had the necessary handful of leaders, as demonstrated by Lieutenant Lee Otts in the second week in March, during Third Army's drive towards the Rhine. Private George Idelson described it in a 1988 letter to Otts: "My last memory of you-and it is a vivid one-is of you standing in a fierce mortar and artillery barrage, totally without protection, calling in enemy coordinates. I know what guts it took to do that. I can still hear those damn things exploding in the trees."

Otts established a platoon CP and started to dig a foxhole. "Mortar shells started falling almost as thick as rain drops," he remembered. "Instead of covering my head, I, like a fool, propped up on my right elbow with my chin resting on my hand, looking around to see what was going on. All of a sudden something hit me on the left side of my jaw that felt like a blow from Jack Dempsey's right. I stuck my hand up to feel the wound and it felt as though half my face was missing." The company commander came limping over. He had been hit in the foot and intended to turn the company over to Otts, but he took one look at Otts's face and cried, "My God, no, not you too," and limped back to his foxhole.

Otts got up to start walking back to the aid station, when a sniper got him in the shoulder, the bullet exiting from his back without hitting any bone. He was on his way home. For the others the pounding continued. Lieutenant Jack Hargrove recalled: "All day men were cracking mentally and I kept dashing around to them but it didn't help. I had to send approximately fifteen back to the rear, crying. Then two squad leaders cracked, one of them badly."

FIRST Army was moving east all along its front, making ten miles per day, sometimes more. They were taking big bags of prisoners. They were looking forward to getting to the river, where they anticipated good billets in warm, dry cellars and a few days to rest and refit. There was even a chance they could stay longer, as there were no plans for crossing in their sector. First Army was, in essence, SHAEF's reserve. Eisenhower counted on it to give him the flexibility to send a number of divisions either north to reinforce Monty or south to reinforce Patton, depending on developments.

Early on March 7, on First Army's right flank, 9th Armoured Division was sent to close to the west bank of the Rhine. The mission of Combat Command B (CCB) of the 9th, commanded by General William Hoge, was to occupy the west bank town of Remagen, where a great railroad bridge spanned the Rhine. It had been built in World War I and named after General Eric Ludendorff. On the east bank there was an escarpment, the Erpeler Ley. Virtually sheer, rising some 170 metres, it dominated the river valley. The train tracks followed a tunnel through the Erpeler Ley.

As CCB moved towards the Rhine, Lieutenant Harold Larsen flew ahead in a Piper Cub, looking for targets of opportunity. At around 1030 he was approaching Remagen, when he saw the Ludendorff Bridge, its massive superstructure intact, looming out in the fog and mists. Larsen radioed General Hoge, who immediately sent orders to the units nearest Remagen to take the bridge. They were the 27th Armoured Infantry Battalion and the 14th Tank Battalion. Hoge formed them into a task force under Lieutenant Colonel Leonard Engeman, who put Lieutenant Emmet "Jim" Burrows's infantry platoon in the lead. Brushing aside light opposition, Task Force Engeman reached a wood just west of Remagen a little before noon. Burrows emerged from the wood onto a cliff overlooking the Rhine. German soldiers were retreating across the Ludendorff Bridge.

Burrows called back to Lieutenant Karl Timmermann, 22 years old, who had just assumed command of Company A the previous day. A touch of irony: Timmermann had been born in Frankfurt am Main, less than 160 kilometres from Remagen. His father had been in the American occupation forces in 1919, had married a German girl, stayed in the country until 1923, when he returned to his native Nebraska with his wife and son. Timmermann had joined the army in 1940 and earned his bars at officer candidate school at Fort Benning.

Timmermann was told to get into the town with his infantry and tanks. As Timmermann set out, Hoge set off cross-country in a jeep to get to the scene, weighing the prospects of capturing the bridge. He had just received an order to proceed south on the west bank until he linked up with the left flank of Third Army. To go for the bridge he would have to disobey direct orders, risking a court-martial and disgrace.

At 1500 Hoge arrived. Timmermann, meanwhile, had fought through scattered resistance and by 1600 was approaching the bridge. Germans on the east bank were firing machine guns and anti-aircraft guns at his company. His battalion commander, Major Murray Deevers, joined Timmermann. "Do you think you can get your company across that bridge?" he asked.

"Well, we can try it, sir," Timmermann replied.

"Go ahead."



"What if the bridge blows up in my face?" Timmermann asked. Deevers turned and walked away without a word. Timmermann called to his squad leaders, "All right, we're going across."

He could see German engineers working with plungers. A huge explosion sent a volcano of stone and earth erupting from the west end of the bridge. The Germans had detonated a charge that gouged a deep hole in the earthen causeway joining the road and the bridge platform. The crater made it impossible for vehicles to get onto the bridge-but not infantry.

Timmermann turned to a squad leader: "Now, we're going to cross this bridge before-" At that instant there was another deafening roar. The Germans had set off a demolition two thirds of the way across the bridge. Awestruck, the men of A Company watched as the huge structure lifted up, and steel, timbers, dust, and thick black smoke mixed in the air. Many of the men threw themselves on the ground.

Ken Hechler, in *The Bridge at Remagen*, described what happened next: "Everybody waited for Timmermann's reaction. 'Thank God, now we won't have to cross that damned thing,' Sergeant Mike Chinchar said fervently, trying to reassure himself.

"But Timmermann, who had been trying to make out what was left of the bridge through the thick haze, yelled, 'Look-she's still standing.' Most of the smoke and dust had cleared away, and the men followed their commander's gaze. The sight of the bridge still spanning the Rhine brought no cheers. The suicide mission was on again." Timmermann could see German engineers working frantically to try again to blow the bridge. He waved his arm overhead in the "follow me" gesture. Machine-gun fire from one of the bridge towers made him duck. One of A Company's tanks pulled up to the edge of the crater and blasted the tower. The German fire let up.

Timmermann was shouting, "Get going, you guys, get going." He set the example, moving onto the bridge himself. That did it. The lead platoon followed, crouching, running in the direction of the Germans on the far shore. Sergeant Joe DeLisio led the first squad. Sergeants Joe Petrencsik and Alex Drabik led the second. In the face of more machine-gun fire, they dashed forward. "Get going," Timmermann yelled. The men took up the cry. "Get going," they shouted at one another. Engineers were right behind them, searching for demolitions and tearing out electrical wires. The names were Chinchar, Samele,

Massie, Wegener, Jensen. They were Italian, Czech, Norwegian, German, Russian-children of European immigrants come back to the old country to liberate it.

On the far side, at the entrance to the tunnel, they could see a German engineer pushing on a plunger. There was nothing for it but to keep going. And nothing happened. Apparently a stray bullet or shell had cut the wire leading to the demolition charges. DeLisio got to the bridge towers, ran up the circular staircase of the one to his right, and on the fourth level found three German machine gunners firing at the bridge.

"Hande hoch!" DeLisio commanded. They gave up; he picked up the gun they had been using and hurled it out the firing window. Men on the bridge saw it and were greatly encouraged. Drabik came running at top speed. He passed the towers and got to the east bank. He was the first GI to cross the Rhine. Others were on his heels. They quickly made the German engineers in the tunnel prisoners. Timmermann sent Lieutenant Burrows and his platoon up the Erpeler Ley. Burrows took casualties, but he got to the top, where he saw far too many German men and vehicles spread out before him to even contemplate attacking them. But he had the high ground, and the Americans were over the Rhine.

Sixteen-year-old Private Heinz Schwarz, who came from a village a short distance upstream, was in the tunnel. He heard the order ring out:

"Everybody down! We're blowing the bridge!" He heard the explosion and saw the bridge rise up: "We thought it had been destroyed, and we were saved." But as the smoke cleared, he saw Timmermann and his men coming on. He ran to the entrance to the tunnel. "I knew I had to somehow get myself out through the rear entrance of the tunnel and run home to my mother as fast as I could." He did. Fifteen years later he was a member of the Bundestag, part of the federal legislature of West Germany. At a ceremony on March 7, 1960, he met DeLisio, and they swapped stories.

AS THE WORD of Timmermann's toehold spread up the chain of command, each general responded by ordering men on the scene to get over the bridge, for engineers to repair it, for units in the area to change direction and head for Remagen. Bradley was the most enthusiastic of all. He had been fearful of a secondary role in the final

campaign, but with Hodges over the river he decided immediately to get First Army fully involved.

Bradley got on the phone to Eisenhower. When he heard the news, Ike was ecstatic. Bradley said he wanted to push everything across he could. "Sure," Ike responded. "Get right on across with everything you've got. It's the best break we've had."

The Germans agreed with Eisenhower and Bradley that the Luden-dorff Bridge was suddenly the most critical strategic spot in Europe. So, like the Americans, they began rushing troops and vehicles to the site. For the Germans it was a hellish march through mud, traffic jams, abandoned vehicles, dead horses, dead men. Piper Cubs would spot them and bring down shelling from American artillery on the west bank.

For the Americans it was a hellish march over the bridge. Captain Roland of the 99th Division crossed on the night of March 7-8, to the "whistle and crash of hostile shells. How exposed and vulnerable I felt on that strip of metal high above the black, swirling waters. Walking forward became extremely difficult. I had the feeling that each projectile was' headed directly at my chest." Colonel William Westmoreland (USMA, 1936), chief of staff of the 9th Armoured, crossed that night lying on his belly on the hood of a jeep, spotting for holes in the planking that covered the railroad tracks. In the morning he set up an antiaircraft battery on top of the Erpeler Ley. He saw his first jet aircraft that day.

Hitler ordered courts-martial for those responsible for failing to blow the bridge. The American crossing at Remagen cost Field Marshal Rundstedt his job as commander in the West; Hitler dismissed four other generals and ordered an all out assault to destroy the bridge, including jets-plus V-2s, plus frogmen to place explosives in the pilings, plus constant artillery bombardment. The Americans hurried antiaircraft into the area. One observer of a German air strike recalled that when the planes appeared, "there was so much firing from our guys that the ground shuddered; it was awesome. The entire valley around Remagen became cloaked in smoke and dust before the Germans left-only three minutes after they first appeared."

The Americans poured in artillery, depending on Piper Cub FO's (forward observers) to direct the shells to a ripe target. Sergeant Oswald Filla, a panzer commander, recalled, "Whenever we went anywhere around the bridgehead to see what could be done, we had, at most, a half-hour before the first shells arrived."

As the infantry and armour gradually forced the Germans back, hundreds of engineers worked to repair the bridge even as it was getting pounded, while thousands of others laboured to get pontoon bridges across the river. The 291st Engineer Combat Battalion (ECB) worked with grim resolve despite air and artillery assaults. The engineers also built log and net booms upstream to intercept German explosives carried to the bridge by the current.

Major Jack Barnes (USMA, 1938) of the 51st ECB was in charge of building a 25 ton heavy pontoon bridge. His description of how it was done illustrates how good the American engineers had become at this business. Construction began at 1600 hours, March 10, with the building of approach ramps on both shores two kilometres upstream of the bridge. Smoke pots hid the engineers from German snipers, but "enemy artillery fire harassed the bridge site. Several engineers were wounded and six were killed. The Germans even fired several V-2 rockets from launchers in Holland, the only time they ever fired on German soil.

"The bridge was built in parts, with four groups working simultaneously, mostly by feel in the dark. By 0400 the next morning, fourteen 4-boat rafts had been completed and were ready to be assembled together as a bridge. When the rafts were in place they were reinforced with pneumatic floats between the steel pontoons so the bridge could take the weight of 36-ton Sherman tanks."

But as the bridge extended to midstream, the anchors couldn't hold the rafts in place. Barnes continued: "We discovered that the Navy had some LCVPs in the area and we requested their assistance. Ten came to the rescue. They were able to hold the bridge against the current until we could install a one-inch steel cable across the Rhine immediately upstream of the bridge, to which the anchors for each pontoon were attached. The remaining four-boat rafts were connected to the anchor cable, eased into position and connected to the ever-extending bridge until the far shore was reached.

"Finally, at 1900 March 11, twenty-seven hours after starting, the 969-foot heavy pontoon bridge was completed. It was the longest floating bridge ever constructed by the Corps of Engineers under fire. Traffic started at 2300, with one vehicle crossing every two minutes."

On March 15 the great structure of the Ludendorff Bridge, pounded unmercifully by first the Americans and then the Germans, sagged abruptly and fell apart with a roar, killing twenty-eight and injuring ninety-three engineers. By then the Americans had six pontoon bridges over the river and nine divisions on the far side. They were in a position to head east, then north, to meet Ninth Army, which would be crossing the Rhine north of Dusseldorf. When First and Ninth armies met, they would have the German Fifteenth Army encircled.

Remagen was one of the great victories in the US Army's history. All that General Marshall had worked for and hoped for in creating this citizen army, happened. The credit goes to the men-Timmermann, DeLisio, Drabik, through to Hoge, Bradley, and Ike-and to the system the army had developed, which bound these men together into a team that featured initiative at the bottom and a cold-blooded determination and competency at the top.

UP NORTH Montgomery's preparations continued. Down south Patton's Third Army cleared the Saarland and the Palatinate. On the night of March 22-23, his 5th Division began to cross the river at Oppenheim, south of Mainz. The Germans were unprepared. Well before dawn the whole of the 5th and a part of the 90th Division were across.

At dawn German artillery began to fire, and the Luftwaffe sent twelve planes to bomb and strafe. The Americans pushed east anyway. By the afternoon the whole of the 90th Division was on the far side, along with the 4th Armoured. Patton called Bradley: "Brad, don't tell anyone, but I'm across."

"Well, I'll be damned-you mean across the Rhine?"

"Sure am. I sneaked a division over last night."

The following day Patton walked across a pontoon bridge built by his engineers. He stopped in the middle. While every GI in the immediate area who had a camera took his picture, he urinated into the Rhine. As he buttoned up, Patton said, "I've waited a long time to do that."

THAT NIGHT Montgomery put his operation in motion. More than 2,000 American guns opened fire at 0100, March 24. For an hour more than a thousand shells a minute ranged across the Rhine. Meanwhile, 1406 B-17s unloaded on Luftwaffe bases just east of the river. At 0200 assault boats pushed off. Things went so well that before daylight the 79th and 30th divisions were fully across the river, at a cost of only thirty-one casualties.

At airfields in Britain, France, and Belgium, the paratroopers and glider-borne troops from the British 6th and the American 17th Airborne divisions began to load up. This was an airborne operation on a scale comparable with D-Day; on June 6, 1944, 21,000 British and American airborne troops had gone in, while on March 24, 1945, it was 21,680. There were 1,696 transport planes and 1348 gliders involved (British Horsa and Hamilcar gliders, and American Wacos; all of them made of canvas and wood). They would be guarded on the way to the drop zone and landing zone (DZ and LZ) by more than 900 fighter escorts, with another 900 providing cover over the DZ. To the east 1,250 P-47s would guard against German movement to the DZ. while 240 B-24s would drop supplies. Counting the B-17s that saturated the DZ with bombs, there were 9,503 Allied planes involved.

A couple of B-17s were loaded with cameramen and assigned to fly around the DZ to take pictures. What concerned them was the flak: the Ruhr Valley and environs, Germany's industrial heartland, was the most heavily defended in the country. The transports and gliders would be coming in low and slow, beginning just after 1000 hours. The tow planes had two gliders each, instead of one as on D-Day, a hazardous undertaking even on an exercise.

The DZ was just north and east of Wesel. It took the air armada two and a half hours to cross the Rhine. Lieutenant Ellis Scripture was the navigator on the lead plane. It was a new experience for him to fly in a B-17 at 500 feet and 120 knots-perilously close to stall-out speed. Still, he recalled, "It was a beautiful spring morning and it was a tremendous thrill for us as we led the C 47s to the middle of the Rhine. The thrill was the climax of the entire war as we poured tens of thousands of troops across the final barrier."

Across the river the German anti-aircraft guns sprang to life. The flak and ground fire were the most intense of any airborne operation of the war. One American veteran from the Normandy drop said there "was no

comparison," while an experienced British officer said that "this drop made Arnhem look like a Sunday picnic."

Sergeant Valentin Klopsch, in command of a platoon of German engineers in a cow stable about ten kilometres north of Wesel, described the action from his point of view. First there was the air bombardment, then the artillery. "And now, listen," Klopsch said. "Coming from across the Rhine there was a roaring in the air. In waves aircraft were approaching at different heights. And then the paratroopers were jumping, the chutes were opening like mushrooms. It looked like lines of pearls loosening from the planes."

The Luftwaffe gunners went back to work, "but what a superiority of the enemy in weapons, in men, in equipment. The sky was full of paratroopers, and then new waves came in. And always the terrible roaring of the low-flying planes. All around us was turning like a whirl." The Americans attacked Klopsch's cowshed. His platoon fired until out of ammunition, when Klopsch put up a white flag. "And then the Americans approached, chewing gum, hair dressed like Cherokees, but Colts at the belt." He and the surviving members of his platoon were marched to a POW cage on a farm and ordered to sit. Decades later he recalled, "What a wonderful rest after all the bombardments and the terrible barrage."

The C-46s took a pounding from the flak. This was the first time they had been used to carry paratroopers. The plane had a door on each side of the fuselage, which permitted a fast exit for the troopers, but the fuel system was highly vulnerable to enemy fire. Fourteen of the seventy-two C-46s burst into flames as soon as they were hit. Eight others went down; the paratroopers got out, but the crews did not.

For the gliders it was terrifying. The sky was full of air bursts; machine-gun bullets ripped through the canvas. The pilots—all lieutenants, most of them not yet eligible to vote—could not take evasive action. They fixed their eyes on the spot they had chosen to land and tried to block out everything else. Nearly all made crash landings amid heavy small-arms fire.

Private Wallace Thompson, a medic in the paratroopers, was assigned a jeep placed inside a glider, and rode in the jeep's driver's seat behind the pilots of a Waco. Through the flight he kept telling the pilots, Lieutenants John Heffner and Bruce Merryman, that he would much

prefer to jump into combat. They ignored his complaints. As they crossed the river, the pilots told Thompson to start his engine so that as they landed, they could release the nose latches and he could drive out.

Over the target, a few metres above the ground, an 88 shell burst just behind Thompson's jeep. The concussion broke the latches of the nose section, which flipped up, throwing the pilots out. The blast cut the ropes that held the jeep, which leaped out of the glider, engine running, flying through the air, Thompson gripping the steering wheel with all his might. He made a perfect four-wheel landing and beat the glider to the ground, thus becoming the first man in history to solo in a jeep.

The glider crashed and tipped, ending rear end up. Lieutenants Merryman and Heffner survived their flying exit but were immediately hit by machine-gun bullets, Heffner in the hand and Merryman in the leg. They crawled into a ditch. Thompson drove over to them.

"What the hell happened?" he demanded, but just then a bullet creased his helmet. He scrambled out of the jeep and into the ditch, saying he'd just taken his last glider ride. Then he treated their wounds and drove Merryman and Heffner to an aid station.

Operation Varsity featured not only a flying jeep, it also provided a unique event in US Army Air Force history. At the aid station, Merryman and Heffner met the crew of a B-24 that had been shot down and successfully crash-landed. When the air force guys started to dash out of their burning plane, the first man was shot, so the rest came out with hands up. The Germans took them to the cellar of a farmhouse, gave them some Cognac, and held them "while the Germans decided who was winning. A little later the Germans realized they were losing and surrendered their weapons and selves to the bomber crew. The Germans were turned over to the airborne." This was perhaps the only time a bomber crew took German infantry prisoners.

Before the end of the day the airborne troops had all their objectives, and over the next couple of days the linkup with the infantry was complete. Twenty-first Army Group was over the Rhine.

BY THE FIRST week of spring 1945, Eisenhower's armies had done what he had been planning for since the beginning of the year—close to the Rhine along its length, with a major crossing north of Dusseldorf-



and what he had dared to hope for, additional crossings by First Army in the centre and Third Army to the south. The time for exploitation had arrived. The Allied generals were as one in taking up the phrase Lieutenant Timmermann had used at the Remagen bridge-Get going!

The 90th Division, on Patton's left flank, headed east towards Hanau on the Main River. It crossed in assault boats on the night of March 28. Major John Cochran's battalion ran into a battalion of Hitler Youth officer candidates, teenage Germans who were at a roadblock in a village. As Cochran's men advanced, the German boys let go with their machine gun, killing one American. Cochran put some artillery fire on the roadblock and destroyed it. "One youth, perhaps aged 16, held up his hands," Cochran recalled. "I was very emotional over the loss of a good soldier and I grabbed the kid and took off my cartridge belt.

"I asked him if there were more like him in the town. He gave me a stare and said, 'I'd rather die than tell you anything.' I told him to pray, because he was going to die. I hit him across the face with my thick, heavy belt. I was about to strike him again when I was grabbed from behind by Chaplain Kerns. He said, 'Don't!' Then he took that crying child away. The Chaplain had intervened not only to save a life but to prevent me from committing a murder." From the crossing of the Rhine to the end of the war, every man who died, died needlessly. It was that feeling that almost turned Major Cochran into a murderer.

Hitler and the Nazis had poisoned the minds of the boys Germany was throwing into the battle. Captain F.W. Norris of the 90th Division ran into another roadblock. His company took some casualties, then blasted away, wounding many. "The most seriously wounded was a young SS sergeant who looked just like one of Hitler's supermen. He had led the attack. He was bleeding copiously and badly needed some plasma." One of Norris's medics started giving him a transfusion. The wounded German, who spoke excellent English, demanded to know if there was any Jewish blood in the plasma. The medic said damned if he knew, in the US people didn't make such a distinction. The German said if he couldn't have a guarantee that there was no Jewish blood he would refuse treatment.

Norris remembered: "In very positive terms I told him I really didn't care whether he lived or not, but if he did not take the plasma he would certainly die. He looked at me calmly and said, 'I would rather die than have any Jewish blood in me.'

"So he died."

BY MARCH 28 First Army had broken out of the Remagen bridgehead. General Rose's 3rd Armoured Division led the way, headed for the linkup with Ninth Army. That day Rose raced ahead, covering 90 miles, the longest gain on any single day of the war for any American unit. By March 31 he was attacking a German tank training centre outside Paderborn. Rose was at the head of a column in his jeep. Turning a corner, his driver ran smack into the rear of a Tiger tank. The German tank commander, about eighteen years old, opened his hatch and levelled his burp gun at Rose, yelling at him to surrender.

Rose, his driver, and his aide got out of the jeep and put their hands up. For some reason the tank commander became extremely agitated and kept hollering while gesturing towards Rose's pistol. Rose lowered his arm to release his web belt and drop his holster to the ground. Apparently the German boy thought he was going to draw his pistol. In a screaming rage he fired his machine pistol straight into Rose's head, killing him instantly. Maurice Rose was the first and only division commander killed in ETO.

In most cases the retreating Germans did not stop to fight. Generally they passed right through the villages, rather than use them as strong-points. First and Third armies were advancing in mostly rural areas, spending their nights in houses. The GIs would give the inhabitants five minutes or so to clear out. The German families were indignant. The GIs were insistent. As Major Max Lale put it in a March 30 letter home, "None of us have any sympathy for them."

The rural German homes had creature comforts-electricity, hot water, soft, white toilet paper-such as most people thought existed in 1945 only in America. On his first night in a house Private Joe Burns spent five minutes in a hot shower. Fifty-one years later he declared it to be "the most exquisite five minutes in my life. Never before or since have I had such pure pleasure." Private David Webster recalled washing his hands at the sink and deciding, "This was where we belonged. A small, sociable group, a clean, well-lighted house [behind blackout curtains], a cup of coffee-paradise." Things were looking up, even though there was still a lot of Germany to overrun.

## Chapter Twelve

Victory: April 1-May 7, 1945

EASTER CAME on April 1 in 1945. In many cases the celebration of the Resurrection brought the GIs and German civilians together. Sergeant Lindy Sawyers of the 99th Division and his squad had moved into a house that was big enough to allow the frau and her two small girls to remain. He remembered that on the day before Easter, "I entered the house and heard a wail from the mom and kids." He asked what was wrong and was told that some of his men had stolen the family Easter cake. Sawyers investigated and caught two recruits who had done the deed. He returned the cake to its owners. "There was great rejoicing and I felt virtuous, for a second at least."

Sergeant Oakley Honey recalled that as his squad left the house they had slept in, "the old lady was handing something to each guy as we left. As I got to the woman, I could see tears in her eyes as she placed a decorated Easter Egg in my hand. We had treated them well and not disturbed the main part of the house. For this they were thankful. There was an unwritten code. If you had to fight for a town, anything in it was yours. If we were allowed to walk in unopposed, we treated the population much better."

On Easter Sunday, 1944, the US Army had had no troops or vehicles on the European continent north of Rome. One year later there were over 1 million GIs in Germany, most of whom had been civilians in 1943, many of them in 1944. Tens of thousands of American trucks, jeeps, DUKWs (amphibious vehicles), armoured personnel carriers, self-propelled artillery, and more rolled down the roads, covered by thousands of aeroplanes ranging in size from Piper Cubs to B-17s and B-24s. In the villages and towns civilians stood on the sidewalks, awestruck by this display of mobility and firepower. Few had any illusions about how the war was going to end. The older German civilians were delighted that Americans, rather than Russians or French troops, had come to their towns and could hardly do enough for them.

The youngsters were different, and not just those teenagers in the Volkssturm units. In one town Sergeant Honey stood next to an elderly German man and a ten year-old boy. As the Shermans and brand new Pershings (America's first heavy tank, armed with a 90-mm cannon) rumbled by, the boy said, "Deutsches Panzer ist besser." Honey looked

down at him and asked, "If German tanks are better, why aren't they here?"

But the GIs were surprised to find how much they liked the Germans. Clean, hardworking, disciplined, cute kids, educated, middle class in their tastes and lifestyles-the Germans seemed to many American soldiers to be "just like us." Private Webster of the 101st hated the Nazis and wished more German villages would be destroyed, so that the Germans would suffer as the French and Belgians had suffered and thus learn not to start wars. Despite himself, Webster was drawn to the people. "The Germans I have seen so far have impressed me as clean, efficient, law-abiding people," he wrote his parents. "In Germany everybody goes out and works."

In some cases the GIs mistreated the civilian population, and they engaged in widespread looting, especially of wine, jewellery, and Nazi memorabilia. Combat veterans insist that the worst of this was carried out by replacements who had arrived too late to see any action. Overall, it is a simple fact to state that the American and British occupying armies, in comparison to other conquering armies in World War II, acted correctly and honourably.

So the Germans in areas occupied by the Americans were lucky, and they knew it. Thus the theme of German-American relations in the first week of April, 1945, was harmony.

CORPORAL ROGER Foehringer was in the 106th Division and had been captured along with four buddies. On Easter Sunday their guards began marching them east, to flee the oncoming American army. Foehringer and his men dropped out of the line, hid in a wood, and thus escaped. They started moving west. Near the village of Versbach someone shot at them. They ran. Up on a hill they saw two elderly gentlemen waving their arms, motioning for the GIs to come their way. They did. The Germans showed them a cave and indicated they should stay put. They spent the night. They could hear and see the German army heading east.

In the morning, Foehringer related, "two young boys came into the cave and brought with them black bread, lard and ersatz coffee. Hot!!! We couldn't communicate with them, but they let us know we should stay put. Late in the afternoon of the 6th, the boys came running up to the cave yelling, 'Die Amerikaner kommen! Die Amerikaner kommen!'

So we and the boys raced down the hill towards Versbach. The whole little village was surrounding a jeep in the centre of the square and on top of the hood of the jeep was an American sergeant waving a .45 around in the air."

The sergeant was a mechanic with a tank destroyer outfit from the rear who had got to drinking and decided he was going to the front to see what it was like. So he stole a jeep and took off. He had no idea where he was and hoped Foehringer did. For his part, Foehringer wanted to thank those who had helped him. "Every jeep in the world had a foot locker with all kinds of stuff," he remembered. "Candy bars, rations, bandages and medical supplies. So we opened the foot locker and threw everything to the people." Then all five GIs scrambled onto the jeep. "There wasn't much to us," Foehringer explained. "I was down to 100 pounds, so were the others. So we were only about 500 pounds."

The sergeant drove west, towards Wtirzburg. Foehringer saw "burning German half tracks, tanks, trucks, dead soldiers lying alongside the road, but no sign of troops." Near Wurzburg they came into the lines of the 42nd Division, safe and sound.

Thirty years later Foehringer, with his family, returned to Versbach. He had never gotten the names of the boys who helped him, but through inquiry he got the names of two brothers of about the right age. He went to one brother's home and was greeted by the frau, who took one look and yelled back at her husband, "Mem Gott, it's the American!" He came running. The two men recognized each other immediately and embraced. The other brother was summoned. The families celebrated. Foehringer hosted a grand dinner at the local restaurant.

ON EASTER Sunday, Twenty-first Army Group and Twelfth Army Group linked up near Paderborn, completing the encirclement of the Ruhr. Some 400,000 German soldiers were trapped, while Eisenhower was free to send his armies wherever he chose.

Montgomery wanted to drive on to Berlin. Hodges wanted Berlin, as did Simpson, Patton, and Churchill. But Bradley didn't and neither did Eisenhower. Partly their reason was political. At the Yalta conference the Big Three had agreed to divide Germany into zones of occupation, and Berlin into sectors. If Simpson's Ninth or Hodges's First Army fought its way on to Berlin, they would be taking territory that would have to be

turned over to the Soviet occupation forces. Eisenhower asked Bradley for an estimate on the cost of taking the city. About 100,000 casualties, Bradley replied, "a pretty stiff price to pay for a prestige objective, especially when we've got to fall back and let the other fellow take over."

Further, Eisenhower believed that if the Americans tried to race the Russians to Berlin, they would lose. Ninth and First armies were 400 kilometres from Berlin; the Red Army was on the banks of the Oder River, less than 100 kilometres from the city, and in great strength-more than 1,250,000 troops.

Another consideration: Eisenhower's goal was to win the war and thus end the carnage as quickly as possible. Every day that the war went on meant more deaths for concentration camp inmates, for millions of slave labourers, for the Allied POWs. If he concentrated on Berlin, the Germans in Bavaria and Austria-where many of the POW and slave labour camps were located-would be able to hold out for who knew how long.

Eisenhower had issued a proclamation to the German troops and people, in leaflet form and via radio, urging surrender. He described the hopelessness of their situation, and most Germans heartily agreed. Thousands of soldiers threw down their arms and headed home. But a core of fighting men remained, including SS, Hitler Youth, and officer candidates. Many of them were fanatics; nearly all were mere boys. They didn't know much about making war, but they were such daredevils and so well armed they could cause considerable harm. Even after the surrender of the Ruhr, these boys could get all the panzerfausts, potato mashers, machine guns, burp guns, and rifles they could carry.

After the mid-April surrender of 325,000 troops (plus thirty generals) in the Ruhr pocket, the Wehrmacht packed it in. Lieutenant Gunter Materne was a German artilleryman caught in the pocket. "At the command post, the CO of our artillery regiment, holding back his tears, told us that we had lost the war, all the victims died in vain. The code word 'werewolf' had been sent out by Hitler's command post. This meant that we were all supposed to divide up into small groups and head east." Not many did, Materne observed. The veterans sat down and awaited their American captors.

The Volkssturm, the Waffen SS, and the Hitler Youth were another matter. They fought fiercely and inflicted great damage. It was chaos

and catastrophe, brought on for no reason-except that Hitler had raised these boys for just this moment.

The Allied fear was that Hitler would be able to encourage these armed bands to continue the struggle. His voice was his weapon. If he got to the Austrian Alps, he might be able to surround himself with SS troops and use the radio to put that voice into action.

Exactly that was happening, according to OSS agents in Switzerland. SHAEF G-2 agreed. As early as March 11, G-2 had declared, "The main trend of German defence policy does seem directed primarily to the safeguarding of the Alpine Zone. This area is practically impenetrable. Evidence indicates that considerable numbers of SS and specially chosen units are being systematically withdrawn to Austria. Here, defended by nature the powers that have hitherto guided Germany will survive to reorganize her resurrection. Here a specially selected corps of young men will be trained in guerrilla warfare, so that a whole underground army can be fitted and directed to liberate Germany."

Eisenhower's mission was to get a sharp, clean, quick end to the war. The Russians were going to take Berlin anyway. The best way to carry out the mission was to overrun Bavaria and Austria before the Germans could set up their Alpine redoubt. Eisenhower ordered Ninth Army to halt at the Elbe River, First Army to push on to Dresden on the Elbe and then halt, and Third Army and Seventh Army, plus the French army, to overrun Bavaria and Austria.

American POWs were a major concern. The Germans held 90,000 US airmen and soldiers in stalags scattered across central and southern Germany. Rescue missions became a primary goal.

WHEN THE POW camps were liberated, the GIs usually found the guards gone, the POWs awaiting them. The sight of an American or British soldier was a signal for an outburst of joy. Captain Pat Reid of the British army was in Colditz prison, a castle in a rural area of central Germany. The prisoners were Allied officers, "bad boys" to the Germans because they had escaped from other stalags. Colditz was supposed to be escape-proof, but these incorrigibles kept escaping (one via what may have been the world's first hang glider), although few made it to Switzerland. Reid described the moment on April 15, a day after the guards took off, when a single American soldier stood at the gate, "his

belt and straps festooned with ammunition clips and grenades, sub-machine gun in hand." An Allied officer cautiously advanced towards him with outstretched hand. The GI took it, grinned, and said cheerfully, "Any doughboys here?"

"Suddenly, a mob was rushing towards him, shouting and cheering and struggling madly to reach him, to make sure that he was alive, to touch him, and from the touch to know again the miracle of living, to be men in their own right, freed from bondage. Men with tears streaming down their faces kissed the GI on both cheeks-the salute of brothers."

At Moosburg, Allied POWs who had been marched away from the oncoming Russians, under horrible conditions and at great risk, were gathered-some 110,000 of them, including 10,000 Americans. Major Elliott Viney of the British army was among the POWs. He kept a diary. April 29, 1945: "AMERICANS HERE! Three jeeps in the camp and all national flags hoisted. The boys brought in cigars, matches, lettuce and flour. The scenes have been almost indescribable. Wireless blaring everywhere, wire coming down, wearing Goon bayonets and caps. The SS put a panzerfaust through the guard company's barracks when they refused to fight."

To most German soldiers the sight of a GI or Tommy standing in front of them was almost as welcome an event as it was for the POWs. Those who surrendered safely thought themselves among the luckiest men alive. In mid-April, Sergeant Egger recalled, "I fired at a deer in the evening while hunting but missed, and five German soldiers came out of the woods with their hands up. I bet they thought we had excellent vision."

On the autobahns German troops marched west on the median, while Americans on tanks, trucks, and jeeps rolled east. Sergeant Gordon Carson, heading towards Salzburg, recalled that "as far as you could see in the median were German prisoners, fully armed. No one would stop to take their surrender. We just waved." Private Webster couldn't get over the sight of the Germans, "coming in from the hills like sheep to surrender." He recalled "the unbelievable spectacle of two GIs keeping watch on some 2,500 enemy."

The 101st was riding in DUKWs. Most GIs were riding on vehicles of every description, always heading east. A few infantry, however, were still slogging forward the same way they had crossed France and Belgium and the Rhineland-by foot. "We walked another twenty-five



miles today," Sergeant Egger recorded on April 20. "Naturally the men were complaining, but I always preferred walking to fighting."

Sometimes they had to fight. On April 27, G Company came to Deggendorf, northeast of Munich. There were some Hitler Youth in the town of 15,000. They had machine guns and panzerfausts, and they let go. "The bullets sounded like angry bees overhead," Egger wrote. American artillery destroyed the hive. Later, in the by then destroyed town, one of his buddies said to him, "The thought of being killed by some fanatical thirteen-year-old scares the hell out of me. After coming this far I don't want to die now."

AS THE TOMMIES and GIs moved deeper into Germany, they made discoveries that brought on a great change in attitude towards Germany and its people. On April 11 the 3rd Armoured Division got into Nordhausen, on the southern side of the Harz Mountains. Captain Belton Cooper was near the van as the GIs worked their way into town. Suddenly "a strange apparition emerged from the side of one of the buildings. A tall frail-looking creature with striped pants and naked from the waist up. It appeared to be a human skeleton with little signs of flesh, if any. The skin appeared to be like a translucent plastic stretched over the rib cage and sucked with a powerful vacuum until it impinged to the backbone in the rear. I could not tell whether it was male or female. There was no face, merely a gaunt human skull staring out. The teeth were exposed in a broad grin and in place of eyes were merely dark sockets. I did not see how it was humanly possible for this pathetic creature to have enough strength to walk. As we proceeded down the road, we encountered more and more of these gaunt figures standing or sitting but most of them were sprawled on the road where they had collapsed."

Cooper came to a warehouse where German civilians were plundering. "The crowd was ravenous; they were pushing and shoving. They paid absolutely no attention to the poor pitiful wretches lying in the streets." Further on "we passed three large stacks of what appeared to be wastepaper and garbage piled in rows six feet high and four hundred feet long. The stench was overwhelming and as I looked I noticed that parts of the stack were moving. To my absolute horror, it dawned on me that these stacks contained the bodies of naked human beings. A few were still alive."

General Collins ordered that every civilian in Nordhausen must work around the clock until the bodies were buried. Bulldozers came forward to dig a mass grave. Later Cooper discovered the V-2 rocket factory where the slave labourers worked until they starved. East of Nordhausen he came across a schoolhouse with some trees around it. On closer examination it turned out to be a rocket assembly plant. The trees were aluminium fuel tanks piled on each other and covered with camouflage nets.

Lieutenant Hugh Carey, who became governor of New York in the 1980s, was at Nordhausen on April 11. Thirty years later he wrote, "I stood with other American soldiers before Nordhausen. I inhaled the stench of death, and the barbaric, calculated cruelty. I made a vow as I stood there that as long as I live, I will fight for peace, for the rights of mankind and against any form of hate, bias and prejudice."

Eisenhower saw his first slave labour camp on April 13. It was Ohrdruf Nord, near the town of Gotha. He called it the shock of his life. He had never seen such degradation, had never imagined the bestiality man was capable of committing.

"Up to that time I had known about [Nazi crimes] only generally or through secondary sources," he wrote. Like so many men of his age, he was deeply suspicious of wartime propaganda. The reality was far worse than the stories and all but overwhelmed him. "I visited every nook and cranny of the camp because I felt it my duty to be in a position from then on to testify at first hand about these things in case there ever grew up at home the belief or assumption that the stories of Nazi brutality were just propaganda." That night he sent communications to Washington and London, urging the two governments to send newspaper editors, photographers, Congressmen, and members of Parliament to visit the camp and make a record. That was done.

Day after day over the next couple of weeks more camps were discovered. On April 15 Edward R. Murrow went to Buchenwald, just north of Weimar. Like every GI who saw one of the camps, Murrow feared that no one could believe what he saw. He gave a description on his CBS radio program. In his conclusion he said, "I have reported what I saw, but only part of it. For most of it I have no words. If I've offended you by this rather mild account of Buchenwald, I'm not in the least sorry."

Martha Gellhorn of The New York Times visited the main camp at Dachau. Then she flew out on a C-47 carrying liberated POWs to France. She talked to them about Dachau, which they had just seen. "No one will believe us," one soldier said. "We got to talk about it, see? We got to talk about it if anyone believes us or not."

ON APRIL 25, at Torgau on the Elbe River, a lieutenant from First Army, William D. Robinson, met a Red Army soldier. Germany was divided. A celebration ensued. Hundreds of Red Army soldiers found rowboats and rafts and came over to the American side. A factory in Torgau produced harmonicas and accordions, so there was music and dancing. Private Andy Rooney was there for Stars and Stripes. So was combat historian Sergeant Forrest Pogue, interviewing the GIs. They danced with female soldiers-reportedly the best snipers in the Red Army.

ON APRIL 27 the 12th Armoured Division approached Landsberg-am-Lech. Major Winters was one of the first to arrive. "The memory of starved, dazed men," he related, "who dropped their eyes and heads when we looked at them through the chain-link fence, in the same manner that a beaten, mistreated dog would cringe, leaves feelings that cannot be described and will never be forgotten. The impact of seeing those people behind that fence left me saying, only to myself, 'Now I know why I am here!'"

To the south. Third Army was penetrating Czechoslovakia (already assigned to the Russians for occupation) while Seventh Army raced eastwards past Munich and down into Austria (where no boundary lines had yet been set). Eisenhower urged the GIs to get as far into Austria as possible.

There wasn't much resistance.

As individuals, squads, companies, regiments, divisions, corps-as entire armies the Germans were surrendering. The crazies were still fighting, like chickens with their heads cut off, even though Hitler had shot himself on April 30. But most of the shooting was over. The dominant thought in every GI's head was home. On May 6 Don Williams of Stars and Stripes wrote an article that gave them the bad news: "No man or woman, no matter how long he or she has been in service, overseas or in

combat, will be released from the Army if his or her services are required in the war against Japan." There would be a point system for demobilization: so many points for length of service, time already spent overseas, combat decorations, and the number of dependent children in the States. Soldiers deemed essential for war duties would either stay on as occupation troops or ship out for the invasion of Japan. "In the meantime," Williams wrote, "don't write home and tell your mother or sweetheart that you'll be home next week or next month. For most of you, it just ain't so."

On May 7 the campaign of the US Army in Northwest Europe came to an end. That morning, at SHAEF headquarters in Reims, German delegates signed the unconditional surrender. The Russians insisted that there be a second signing, in Berlin, which took place on May 8.

Men reacted differently. Sergeant Ewald Becker of Panzer Grenadier Regiment 111 was near his home in Kassel. "We went out onto the streets to surrender. The first vehicle to come was an American jeep and as I raised my hands he waved and grinned at me and continued to drive. Then another jeep with four men. They stopped and gave me chocolate and drove on. Then a German vehicle came with a white flag. I asked him what was going on and he said the war has been over for two hours. I went back to the village and we tapped the first available keg. Within two hours, I can say with confidence, the entire village was drunk."

Sergeant James Pemberton, 103rd Division, by the end of the war had been in combat for 347 days. "The night of May 8, I was looking down from our cabin on the mountain at the Inn River Valley in Austria. It was black. And then the lights in Innsbruck went on. If you have not lived in darkness for months, shielding even a match light deep in a foxhole, you can't imagine the feeling."

Many units had a ceremony of some sort. In the 357th Combat Team, 90th Division, the CO had all the officers assemble on the grassy slopes of a hill, under a flagpole flying the Stars and Stripes. The regimental CO spoke, and the division commander spoke. Lieutenant Colonel Ken Reimers remembered counting the costs. "We had taken some terrible losses-our infantry suffered over 250 per cent casualties. There was not a single company commander present who left England with us."

The 90th Division had been in combat for 308 days-the record in ETO-but other divisions had taken almost as many casualties. The junior

officers and NCOs suffered most. Some of America's best young men went down leading their troops in battle. Dutch Schultz paid his officers and NCOs a fine tribute: "Not only were these men superb leaders both in and out of combat, but, more importantly, they took seriously the responsibility of first placing the welfare of their men above their own needs."

THERE is NO typical GI among the millions who served in Northwest Europe, but Bruce Egger surely was representative. He was a mountain man from central Idaho. In October 1944 he arrived in France, and on November 6 he went on the line with G Company, 328th regiment, 26th Division. He served out the war in almost continuous frontline action. He had his close calls, most notably a piece of shrapnel stopped by the New Testament in the breast pocket of his field jacket, but was never wounded. In this he was unusually lucky. Egger rose from private to staff sergeant.

In his memoir of the war Egger spoke for all GIs: "More than four decades have passed since those terrible months when we endured the mud of Lorraine, the bitter cold of the Ardennes, the dank cellars of Saarlutem. We were miserable and cold and exhausted most of the time; we were all scared to death. But we were young and strong then, possessed of the marvellous resilience of youth, and for all the misery and fear and the hating every moment of it the war was a great, if always terrifying, adventure. Not a man among us would want to go through it again, but we are all proud of having been so severely tested and found adequate. The only regret is for those of our friends who never returned."

## Epilogue

### The GIs and Modern America

AT THE beginning of World War II my father, a small-town doctor in central Illinois, joined the navy. When he shipped out to the Pacific in 1943, my mother, brothers, and I moved to Whitewater, Wisconsin, to live with my grandmother. Consequently, I didn't see many GIs during the war. But in 1946, when Dad left the navy and set up a practice in Whitewater, we had what amounted to a squad of ex-GIs

for neighbours. They lived in a boarding house while attending the local college on the GI Bill.

Dad put up a basketball backboard and goal over our garage. The GIs taught me and my brothers to play the game. We were "shirts" and "skins." I don't know that I ever knew their last names-they were Bill and Harry, Joe and Stan, Fred and Ducky-but I've never forgotten their scars. Stan had three-on his arm, his shoulder, his hand. Fred and Ducky had two; the others had one.

We didn't play all that often because these guys were taking eighteen or twenty one credits per semester. "Making up for lost time," they told us. Their chief recreation came in the fall, when they would drive up to northern Wisconsin for the opening weekend of deer season. Beginning in 1947, when I was twelve, I was allowed to go with them.

We slept in a small farmhouse, side by side in sleeping bags on the floor. There was some drinking-not much, as we would get up at 4:00am (0400 to the ex-GIs, which mystified me), but enough to loosen their tongues. In addition, their rifles came from around the world-Czech, British, Russian, American, Japanese, French-and each man had a story about how he acquired his rifle. It was there that I heard my first war stories. I've been listening ever since. I thought then that these guys were giants. I still do.

By the time I went to Madison for my own college education, the ex-GIs had graduated and were off making their livings. Over the next four years I developed my fair share of academic snobbery. My professors put me to reading such books as Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and William Whyte's *Organisation Man*. These books, like the professors, deplored the conformity of the 1950s. They charged that the young corporate men of the '50s marched in step, dressed alike, seldom questioned authority, did as they were told, were frighteningly materialistic, devoid of individualism. By the time I became a graduate student, I was full of scorn for them and, I must confess, for their leader, President Eisenhower-the bland leading the bland.

But in fact these were the men who built modern America. They had learned to work together in the armed services in World War II. They had seen enough destruction; they wanted to construct. They built the interstate highway system, the St Lawrence Seaway, the suburbs (so scorned by the sociologists, so successful with the people), and more.

They had seen enough killing; they wanted to save lives. They licked polio and made other revolutionary advances in medicine. They had learned in the armed forces the virtues of solid organization and teamwork, and the value of individual initiative, inventiveness, and responsibility. They developed the modern corporation while inaugurating revolutionary advances in science and technology, education and public policy.

The ex-GIs had seen enough war; they wanted peace. But they had also seen the evil of dictatorship; they wanted freedom. They had learned in their youth that the way to prevent war was to deter through military strength and to reject isolationism for full involvement in the world. So they supported NATO and the United Nations and the Department of Defence. They had stopped Hitler and Tojo; in the 1950s they stopped Stalin and Khrushchev.

In his inaugural address President John F. Kennedy described his generation: "The torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans- born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage-and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed."

The "we" generation of World War II (as in "We are all in this together") was a special breed of men and women who did great things for America and the world. In the process they liberated the Germans (or at least the Germans living west of the Elbe River). In June 1945 Eisenhower told his staff, "The success of this occupation can only be judged fifty years from now. If the Germans at that time have a stable, prosperous democracy, then we shall have succeeded." That mission, too, was accomplished.

In general, in assessing the motivation of the GIs, there is agreement that patriotism or idealism had little if anything to do with it. The GIs fought because they had to. What held them together was not country and flag, but unit cohesion.

And yet there is something more. Although the GIs were and are embarrassed to talk about the cause they fought for, they were the children of democracy, and they did more to help spread democracy around the world than any other generation in history. At the core, the American citizen soldiers knew the difference between right and wrong, and they didn't want to live in a world in which wrong prevailed.

So they fought and won, and we all of us, living and yet to be born, must be forever profoundly grateful.

Stephen E. Ambrose

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