

1945

The trail of 254 thru blood & fire

Harris Peel

United States Army

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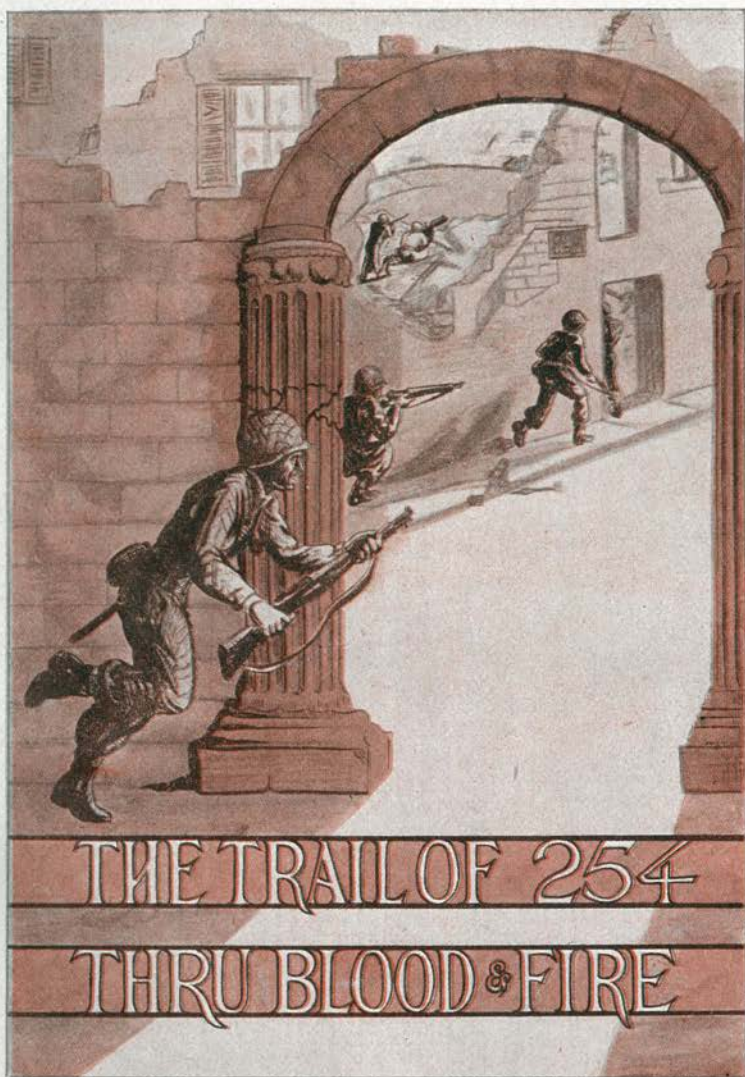
254

254th

INFANTRY

63rd

DIVISION



THE TRAIL OF 254
THRU BLOOD & FIRE

254th INFANTRY

JOSEPH H. WARREN, Colonel
COMMANDING OFFICER

MARION W. SCHEWE, Lt. Colonel
EXECUTIVE OFFICER

ROBERT E. TUCKER, Lt. Colonel
COMMANDING OFFICER 1ST BN.

WILLIAM J. BRYAN *Lt. Colonel*
COMMANDING OFFICER 2nd BN.

DONALD R. MATHESON *Lt. Colonel*
COMMANDING OFFICER 3RD BN.



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 C C B C C C C C S C I F
 C D B C C C C C C C C C C A C
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A Unit History

Dedicated to every man who was ever assigned to our unit. But above all it is dedicated to those who fell on the long road to victory. It is with the hope that these men will be remembered, not for the war in which they fought, but for a new, lasting peace for which they died that this book recounts the history of the 254th Infantry.





This is the story of one regiment; or rather, it is the story of the men of one regiment. Undoubtedly, the world took little note of the 254th Infantry. To them we were merely a number, a small unit which lost itself in a multitude of small units, a forgotten integer in headlines which screamed only of corps and armies and theaters of war.

But to those of us who fought in the regiment, it was the army, the theater, the war. When our casualties were high, the war was a tough one; when we moved rapidly and the land fell to us like wheat before a reaper, the war was going well.

Our regiment has one hundred and twenty five days of combat to its credit. Each of these days could be a saga in itself. Because of both time and space limitations, it has been necessary to deal only with the most important engagements — for the most part, those in which the entire regiment participated.

There are no names in this history. In our records there are countless cases of individual acts of heroism. We know that there are countless others of which we have no record. In the last analysis, no man is more gallant than he who despite a heart gripped with fear remained to do the task that was asked of him.

As this book goes to press, there are only a few of those left who helped make the 254th a regiment of which we could be so proud. We hope that as you read this book it will bring back, in some measure, the days we—the regiment and you—spent together.

Chapter 1

The Preparation

One chapter in the lives of each of us is now complete. That episode, whether it marks a prominent or a lowly place in our life's story, will be entitled by all "The 254th Infantry Regiment." For a few, it began on the northern bank of the Danube River just as we were being pulled off the front line for the last time; for another few, it began on the day of activation at Camp Blanding, Florida; for the majority of us there was a place, a time somewhere between.

In the early part of 1943, slightly a year after the United States had declared war on Germany, the three great leaders of the anti-fascist nations gave birth to plans at the Casablanca Conference for the defeat of the Nazi cancer which was gnawing at the democratic organs of the world. Unknowingly, as these men released their famous promise to make our enemies "Bleed and burn in expiation of their crimes against humanity," they inspired the conception of a new United States Division to be known as the "Blood and Fire" 63d Infantry Division.

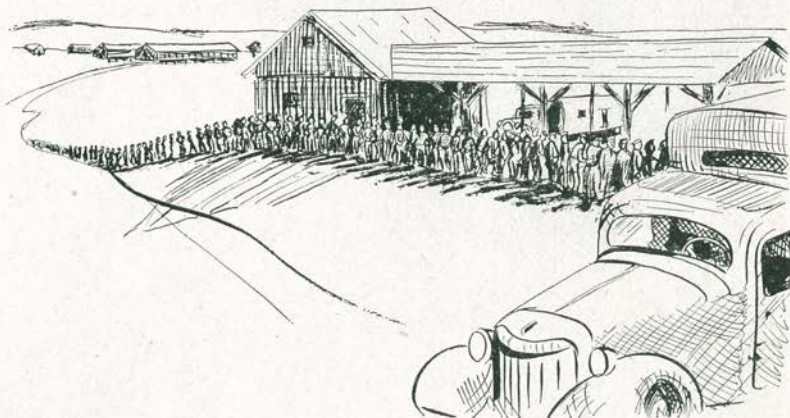
June 15, 1943, was a hot, sultry day at Camp Blanding, Florida, as the entire contingent of men assigned to the 254th Infantry Regiment from the 390th Infantry, 98th Infantry Division listened to their commander, Brigadier General Louis E. Hibbs, promise that the new division would someday see combat. At this time the unit consisted of 139 officers and 276 enlisted men commanded by Colonel Paul T. Baker, who had as his Executive Officer the man who was later designated to lead the 254th Infantry into combat, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph H. Warren.



The first two months following the activation of the regiment were days spent in training the cadre and the occasional "fillers" who merely trickled into the organization.

The first order of movement was to Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi, and was completed four days after its start on August 21, 1943. Men began to pour into the unit from reception centers all over the country as an intensive training schedule commenced. These were the days of life in tar paper shacks, lectures on our favorite maneuver, "Build up a base of fire, flank to the right or left," of pine sloped hills resounding with the noise of shovels in sandy clay and men's laughter, of week-end trips to Baton Rouge with their inevitable mile long bus line, of double chocolate sundaes atop bottles of 3.2 beer, of K. P. for the lower brackets and C. Q. for the upper brackets, of hurried furloughs that never lasted long enough, of Saturday parades which always made us too hot or too cold, of cooling showers which we dreamed of through the 5, 10, or 25 miles of dust and sweat and tired feet, of welcome cries of "Take ten!" accompanied by the sound of a hundred matches striking, of two day bivouacs in the rain under a leaky shelter half, and of squad runs, squad runs, and more squad runs.

But all was not as carefree as the above paragraph may sound. It seemed as if the Regiment was plagued with bad luck. Every-time a group of men felt as if they had trained together long enough to make a good combat team a new Special Order called



for all Pfc's and Privates, and many times a good portion of the non-coms. Three times the regiment was built to full fighting strength; three times it was broken.

Around August 1, 1944, came the order that we had so long awaited, some of us anxiously, some of us apathetically, and some of us dreadfully: the alert for overseas movement. The great exodus for the train station at McComb began as mass furloughs were granted. After our hectic ten days at home, wives, mothers, and sweethearts were left in tears at the station as we departed with the "this is it" attitude.

Dame Rumor became the new Commanding Officer as each barracks had its quota of those who either "got it straight from a guy who practically runs division personnel" or "was just down at S-1 when this phone call comes in, see." Around November 1st, when it was a certainty that we were leaving very soon, the camp was divided into two almost equal groups: those who knew we were going to Fort Ord, California, and those who were positive it would be Camp Kilmer, "Joisy." After standing an average of three show-down inspections each day, at each of which someone managed to lose a shoe string, we boarded the train on November 6, 1944. Here most of us learned for the first time that we were headed for Camp Shanks, New York. Several thousand dollars worth of bets were cancelled between the "Ord" and "Kilmer" men.

Three days later we detrained at our destination. The race began immediately to make our unit qualified for POE. The world became one of seemingly endless inspections, life-boat drill, must movies, and last minute range firing. Throughout all of this we had only one primary thought, passes. Many of us lived within commuting distance of New York City and a portion of our eighteen hours was spent in traveling between our homes and Grand Central Station. Some of us had managed to have our wives stay in the City while we remained at this camp. For the rest of us there was an endless pilgrimage from one bar to another, from one night spot to the next, from show to show with occasional stops at the Pepsi Cola bar for refreshment prior to another attempt to call home from the Serviceman's Telephone Exchange.

Two weeks after our arrival at Camp Shanks, we left, carrying our duffel bags loaded with complete GI equipment and a per-

sonal horde of cigarettes and chocolate bars. A short ride brought us to the Brooklyn Army Base, New York Port of Embarkation. While on the dock we stuffed ourselves with doughnuts and coffee which were served us by the American Red Cross and managed to find somewhere among our baggage a place to put the gift bag we received.

As we climbed the gangplank and entered the boat each man was shown his stateroom, which consisted of one canvas bunk in a room with two hundred other canvas bunks. For most of us it was our first ocean voyage and the adventure of being at sea helped displace the feeling of homesickness. Our first curiosity, that which concerned our boat and its history, was soon satisfied. We found that we were on the "M. S. Saturnia," a former Italian luxury liner which had surrendered to the British with its entire crew. We walked down to the bowels of the ship to peer at the huge Diesel engine which we were told was the largest afloat.

The sea was fairly calm and the voyage was rather a pleasant one. A limited program of calisthenics and training combined with an extensive entertainment schedule supplemented the

many card games we played and the books we read. The regimental orchestra gave daily shows on the aft deck. It didn't take us long to catch the seaman's slang and in two days all directions were given by port, aft, for'd, bow, and stern. The theme song of each show was "I Lost My Chow On the Bow."

Late mornings, late afternoons, and late evenings saw the rails lined with men viewing the awe inspiring scene of tumultuous green waves dashing themselves against the other ships of the convoy silhouetted against the dark blue sky. Early mornings, afternoons, and evenings, just after mess, the rails were also



crowded with men viewing the awful scene of tumultuous green waves dashing themselves against the green ships of the convoy silhouetted against a green sky in a green world. The nights were ever heralded by the raucous voice of one of the Italian crew members announcing over the loud speaker system, "Atenshione, light showing starboards, ameed sheeps."

Undoubtedly, the most beautiful scene of the entire trip was the night of December 6th when we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar. To our left we could see a few lights blinking on "The Rock" itself and the shadow it made from the light of the full moon; to our right it seemed as if the entire coastline of Northern Africa was a blaze of lights as our ship scurried through the mined waters.

On December 8th, we entered the harbor of one of the most beautiful of all port cities - - Marseilles. In the harbor we could see the famous Chateau D'If while our ship nervously plied its way through the fifty ships which had been scuttled in the harbor by the Germans.

The following day we disembarked and marched through the streets of Marseilles to await transportation to whatever destination was in store for us. Although the town, particularly the water front, had been heavily bombed and shelled the city was in good enough shape to see its rare beauty. We marched to an assembly point which was just outside the prisoner of war enclosure. Here, for the first time, most of us saw caged copies of those we later fought.

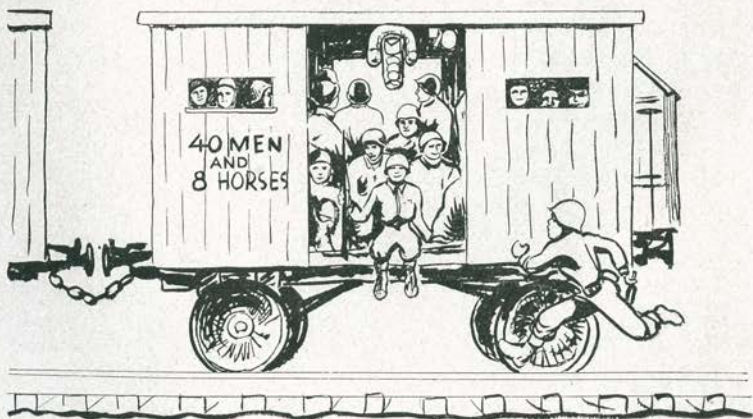
As darkness fell we began to feel the extreme cold which an icy wind blowing from the north brought with it. By the time the trucks finally arrived to take us to Staging Area Number 2, Delta Base Section, most of us were willing to label as malevolent propaganda the stories we had heard concerning the "sunny Mediterranean climate." As we began our 20 mile march for our first overseas location, we wondered if combat could possibly be as dangerous and miserable as the truck ride at unbelievable speeds along the icy mountain roads which curved toward our new destination. No matter how cynical had been our expectation of what to expect at Staging Area Number 2, all of us were disappointed. We found that the installation which bore the splendiferous name was nothing more than a bald clay hill with one kitchen shack

along the main road approximately every one hundred yards. Directly behind them at a distance of about five hundred yards was a similar row of latrines; the space between these two types of huts was designated as our living quarters. Here we sumptuously pitched our tents.

Although no passes were formally given to any of the members of the regiment, it took no time at all for everyone to learn that Marseilles and its surrounding towns were within easy hitch-hiking distance. Here on passes most of us met our first real French women, drank our first French champagne, and gave our first cigarettes and chocolate in answer to the pleading children with their "Cigarettes pour papa; chocolate pour babe?" We were amazed to find that a package of cigarettes would buy almost anything that the average one of us wanted.

The first defensive action in which the regiment engaged was caused by a lone German observation plane which flew over our camp about three days after our arrival. In a matter of seconds all of the hundreds of fires which dotted our hill were extinguished and men who had always somehow gotten out of digging foxholes while in the States began to frantically make a personal entrenchment.

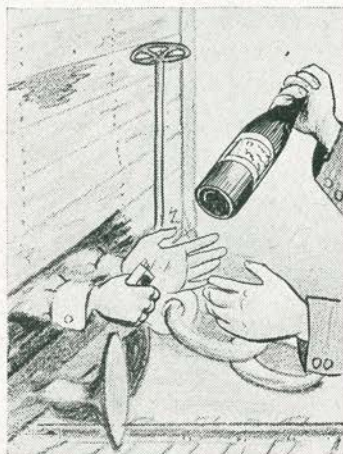
Our stay at Delta Base section was not a long one and we left there on December 16 with Camp Oberhoffen, near Bischweiler, France, as our destination. We were taken by trucks toward a



small railway station close to the staging area. As we began to leave the trucks some of the more observant men noticed the famous "40 and 8" railroad box cars. They pointed them out as the quaint conveyances upon which our fathers had ridden in the last world war. Originally designed around 1900, they were supposed to hold 40 men and 8 horses. All of us laughed and wondered how either 8 horses or 40 men could be put in these tiny, ridiculous looking vehicles. We were not laughing nearly so hard a few minutes later when we learned that we were going to take a four day trip in these cars. Twenty-five men in each made for slightly crowded conditions, but it increased the much needed warmth considerably, there being no method of heating the boxcar.

Amazingly, we found that the trip was much more enjoyable than we would ever have anticipated. The large sliding doors made it possible for almost everyone to see the country through which we were traveling. Numerous stops made it simple to attain bottles of champagne in exchange for a pack or two of cigarettes. The most notable towns we passed through were Lyon, Dijon, Epinal, and Saarburg. Throughout France we found, however, that many buildings, factories, roads, and bridges were destroyed beyond any chance of repair or salvage. This gave us our first sight of the true effects of war and many of us vowed that the Germans would pay for the destruction they had so wantonly wrought throughout the country of this almost prostrate ally of ours. We reached Camp Oberhoffen on December 20th after a truck ride from Saarburg, where the railroad ended. Oberhoffen, which translated in English means "Always Hope," was an old Napoleonic cavalry camp which had been used by both the French and Germans, in various stages of history, for over 200 years.

When we first heard that Camp Oberhoffen had been taken



only six days before our arrival we felt almost like veterans. At this time we were part of Task Force Harris, which consisted of three Infantry Regiments of the 63d Division and a Division Headquarters detachment. The first field order which was issued ordered us to duty with the 7th Army, and prepared us for early patrolling of the Rhine River near Strasbourg, France. Our first alert was given in the form of a message from G-2 at 2215 on December 23, 1944. It read, "Be on the alert for enemy paratroopers. Number dropped during recent alert between 2100 and 2130. Paratroopers probably in American uniform. Be careful of future drops during night." Although several of us while standing guard imagined the silky white umbrella shaped objects falling toward us in the moonless night, there was never any great reason to suspect that parachutists were dropped in our area.

December 24th came and went as most every other day, with a full training schedule; only the quietness of all those around us reminded us that it was Christmas Eve. The following day, after a delicious turkey dinner, we received our second mail call since being overseas. This, combined with a post exchange ration, boosted our morale from its probable lowest ebb.

The orders for our attachment to another unit came on December 28th, announcing that effective the 27th, the 254th Infantry was attached to the 3d Infantry Division, First French Army, VI Army Group for active duty.

The next day the movement began toward the area which surrounds Ville, France. Just a trifle over a year and a half after the regiment had been activated, it was moving toward the mission it had always known that it would someday fulfill — combat with the enemy on his own ground.

Chapter II

The Attainment: Colmar Pocket

On the first day of the first month of 1945, the free people of the world together prayed that this year might end the great slaughter of the war in Europe. For them it was a new dawn of hope, of faith, and of rededication to the task that lay before them.

For the 254th Infantry, too, January the first was a day different from all others: for most of us it was our first day of combat. We did not go into battle as a regiment, but rather as battalions and companies attached to units of our foster parent, the Third Infantry Division. Whether we were in the group attached to the 30th Infantry in the vicinity of Kayzersberg (our First Battalion, Antitank Company, and I & R Platoon), or in the group attached to the 7th Infantry in the vicinity of Lapoutrois (our Second Battalion with Service and Cannon Companies), or in the group attached to the 15th Infantry in the vicinity of Bergheim (our Third Battalion and Regimental Headquarters), all of us had much the same reaction as we moved toward the front line to relieve those on the defensive.

Many of us were assimilating what we had been told about our mission. We were about to be engaged in one of the most bitter campaigns of the entire War in Europe: the Colmar Pocket. The First French Army, under the command of General d'Armee Laitre d'Tassigney, had compressed the enemy in that part of the Vosges Mountains surrounding the French city of Colmar until the German lines had become a virtual ring of steel engulfing it, the adjacent towns, the juncture of the Rhine-Rhone Canal, and all that territory east to the Rhine River. At this time, the Nazis were emplaced in all the most strategic positions this mountain studded region afforded; in addition to this, they had ample supplies of men and materiel, including much armor, to indefinitely hold this ground.



At twilight we began our march toward the front in order to effect our assigned relief under the cover of darkness; involuntarily the pace quickened as if our feet were attempting to keep step with our fast beating hearts. We were three thousand; our thoughts were a million. Homes, families, wives, conversations, books, feet, and guns ran through our minds singly or simultaneously. While one of us thought of his wife, another recalled a passage from *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Yet each of us had two things in common: a question and a certitude. We wondered how we would react in combat; we knew we were scared.

An old soldier would have recognized us instantly as what we were: a fresh, green outfit "going up" for the first time. But a veteran would not have laughed at us just as later we never laughed at the uninitiated. We were about to learn something that each man must experience for himself. Combat defies description. No man can impart to another what it is really like.

Slowly the light ebbed until there was only the dark and the cold and a fragment of a moon. We talked in whispers as our stomachs began to feel like bottomless pits mounted on legs of rubber. Occasionally someone would attempt a joke such as "Man, my foxhole's gonna be so damn deep they'll have to gimme a campaign ribbon for the CBI!" These were met either by silence punctuated only with the sound of heavy boots automatically rising and falling on packed snow or by low, mirthless laughter which lasted too long.

We watched, our eyes hypnotized, as for the first time we saw in the distance the reddish burst of flame as big guns sent hundreds of pounds of explosive into the night, the blinding flash of phosphorus with its flaming fingers probing skyward, the dazzling light of flares which hung in the sky for a few moments lighting a

havoc-wrought, seemingly deserted world, the arched fall of machine gun tracers looking like red rain blown by a driving wind.

Sounds — new sounds — assailed our ears, adding to this, our first vision of men engaged in mutual destruction. There was the constant, patterned monotony of heavy shells rocking the air at exact intervals, wearing themselves out as the echo bounced from hill to hill; the hissing of high velocity shells ending in a sharp report; the fantastic screech of "Screaming Meemies" that made us instinctively want to lay on the ground and dig a hole. This we saw and heard and felt, and as it filtered through three thousand minds there came to each of us a different impression.

That night a thousand questions were answered and a thousand more raised. We discovered how men lived at the front. Command Posts were placed in cellars of destructed buildings and those of us on line spent our first night in a foxhole. A shell would scream overhead and we would fall to the ground hugging the earth as if she were our lover. A lifetime would pass until the shell crashed harmlessly hundreds of yards away.

Then slowly we would rise, dust the snow from our clothes, and grin sheepishly at our comrades who were also grinning sheepishly. This continued until, as a last resort to maintain self-respect, we paid no attention to the shells. Soon one would hit fairly close and the whole process would repeat itself again.

We found that nights on the front are filled with strange noises and that no man can trust his eyes. We watched as the first patrol left our lines to seek contact with the enemy; for hours we strained our senses trying to make them out as they returned. Every sound seemed man-made; a twig crackling was an enemy infiltrating. We punished our eyes until the distant trees began to pass ammunition to each other, the ruins of buildings moved forward on tank treads, and the concertina wires crawled up with machine guns.



"As different as day and night" became a gross actuality. We found that life during the daylight hours was simple, almost pleasant. Most of us lived in cellars which, although crowded, were warm and could be made livable by the addition of articles salvaged from ruined houses. Canned fruits, vegetables, and even meat left by the inhabitants greatly augmented our "10-in-1" or "C" rations. We were in the heart of the wine country and each cellar had its huge casks and bottle racks filled with old and new Rhine Wine. Only the outposts were manned. For those not on duty there was little to do except eat and sleep.

At night we fought the war. From twilight until after dawn we lived in a world of death, destruction, and danger. The night was filled with explosives and flares and magnified sounds. We sent patrols to infiltrate the enemy lines; the Germans sent patrols to enter ours. It became a gambling game with life and death as the stake. We saw men die and we realized how thin was the thread on which our lives dangled.

And continually we learned. We could differentiate between an 88 and a 76. We knew when to hit the ground and when it was unnecessary. We discovered when to lie still and when to move. We could ascertain between the enemy's machine gun and ours, his rifle and ours, his tank engine and ours. We could tell our own patrols from his. (Ours made more noise.) We found that our enemy was smart and that he had good equipment. In short, we were becoming veterans.



Not all of our time, however, was spent on the line. After a week or ten days at the front we were given two or three days rest in one of the shell-scarred towns several miles to the rear. It was here that we first discovered the "Goums," or French Moroccan soldiers. These characters, looking like the background in a story from the pages of "Arabian Nights," were the most ferocious fighters and

childish men most of us had ever met. One of the most valuable possessions of these long-robed soldiers was a flashlight. Only batteries exceeded these instruments in desirability as the fortunate owners of both walked in front of their pack mules testing the light every few moments by shining it in their eyes. After making sure it worked they would grin broadly, showing rows of milk white teeth, and shout the only English expression they knew, "O. K., Joe!"

During these rest periods, too, we learned much from the veterans of the Third Division. They never seemed to mind taking time to tell us about something we wished to know. If we became seasoned fighters in less time than the average regiment, it was probably due to the interest taken in us by this organization.

We were sent from one sector to another to give us as much variety of experience as possible. It was also during this period that we received a pamphlet sent to "Blood and Fire" by the Germans. (see next page) The receipt of this filled us with wrath. If the Germans had known the effect of their propaganda, they would probably have saved the effort.

HILL 216

At last, after three weeks of mastering the defensive arts, we were assigned an offensive mission — we were to take Hill 216. Field Order Number 1, issued on January 20, 1945, indicated the plans of the Regimental Commander for the seizure of this well defended knoll. The First Battalion was designated assault element and assigned a thousand yard front extending from a point south of Mittelwihr, eastward from the easterly power line. The battalion, two companies in a line, was to push forward to the north bank of the Weiss River and establish defensive positions from the junction of this stream and the power line eastward to the Fecht River and thence northward to the highway bridge. An outpost line was to be pushed forward from the Weiss River to a distance of some thousand yards south of the main disposition while the bridge was to be secured by not less than one platoon.

During this action, the Second Battalion was to continue to hold its defensive position facing eastward along the Fecht River. The Third Battalion was to stand by in regimental reserve, although

This pamphlet received
by leaflet shell on
January 21. All men
are now repatriated.



Soldiers of the Blood and Fire Division!!

We, the Krauts salute. We're glad you've arrived! The idyllic days along the Mediterranean are over. You have come from the coast and or other soft into where life was comparatively easy. But already and that's another breeze is blowing the French Mor for Div. which is bloody and fighting spirit. You still remember President Roosevelt's promise to the American people on the 23rd of October, 1940?

"I assure you"
Only a few days ago your French allies suffered grave losses between the Ill and the Rhine. More than a thousand frogs were sensible enough to lay down their arms when they saw that their situation was hopeless.

Have you ever asked yourselves why you are risking lives? Think it over and talk to your comrades about it! What hit your French comrades about it? When the tornado finally breaks loose, thousands and thousands of America's comrades will have been broken for the Nth time. We promise you only one thing:

Plenty of Fire and even more Blood!

Hello, pals of the Blood and Fire Division!
Thirteen comrades of G. Komp. - 11 Bill 934th Reg. have already fallen into our hands send you good eggs

Louis A. LEPORE
Paul GERHARDT
Vernon DANISTER
William BUCHROIZ
Burr P. ALBRICHT
Charles C. COLBY

John P. VITKO
Victor KOLKOWSKY
Felix S. MOSE
Clyde R. SERRANO
Mauro ALONZA
Louis KOLKOWSKY

Lucky boys! The bloody business is over for them. It must be a pleasant feeling to know nothing can happen to you. Comrades are all O.K. in spite of the propaganda line that tell you that the wicked Germans kill all their prisoners. Do you believe such nonsense? Your comrades are better off than you lying in the mud and cold. After the war they will see their loved ones at home again. They send you their regards with a very special care for you. With the wish that he take better care of his soldiers. Otherwise he will soon be alone!

THE KRAUTS ARE ROUGH ON AMYALTES!

Company **L** was assigned the mission of patrolling and out-posting to the front upon the attainment of the Weiss River line.

Two days before the attack was to be made the First and Third Battalions were released from their defensive positions and brought to rear areas west of Mittelwihr for training. Here those of us in these two units were briefed on the task which awaited us. We found on the map that Hill 216 is located southwest of the Alsatian town of Bennwihr about four miles north of Colmar. We knew (some from having been on the line in that vicinity) that there were strongly prepared positions on the flanks of the hill and a reinforced defensive arc running generally parallel to the Bennwihr-Ingersheim Road.

Although there was some tension as the time for the attack drew nearer, a great deal of this was dissipated as we became "armchair strategists." Around each map a group of us would gather and a mild discussion would begin; soon, however, fists would pound the table as each of us realized that the rest of those present had no understanding of what really should be done. The endangering of the flank in our planned zone of advance by the powerfully held German stronghold of Chateau de Schoppenwihr became the major argument. Those who believed the attack of the 7th Infantry in their zone would command the attention of the defenders disputed with the more pessimistic of us. All preferred to forget that twice the hill had been unsuccessfully attacked by other units.

During the early morning hours of January 23rd the First Battalion (less **C** Company in reserve) marched from the assembly area near Beblenheim to the line of departure. It was still snowing and a bitter north wind seemed to tear unhampered through combat pants and layers of sweaters ending in field jackets. Our new shoe-pacs were warm but uncomfortable to walk in, even on the soft snow; nevertheless we were thankful for them. As we wound along the narrow road to the line of departure we looked like a column of hooded ghosts in our snow capes.

Company **B** led the column and proceeded to the eastern half of the battalion front; **A** followed to the western half. At fifteen minutes before "H" hour, 0700, the Third Division as well as the organizational and attached artillery began firing a preparation. We lay in the snow and watched as the big shells flashed against

the snow clad hill. As we saw the destruction rained on whatever was out there waiting, we remembered what the Third Division doughs had told us, "An Infantryman may be the hero to a lot of people, but when you're ready to shove off in the attack, the artilleryman is the hero's hero."

Minds and bodies became tense as we awaited the signal to move forward. We had seen some of war but always it had been we who awaited the enemy in our defensive positions; now it



was his turn to wait in a hole, ours to attack. For the Nth time we checked the bolt on our rifle, or adjusted the weight of our mortar ammunition, or made sure our K-rations were properly tied.

"OK, let's go!" Before we knew it we were moving forward, a lot of the tenseness had left us, and we had begun our first attack.

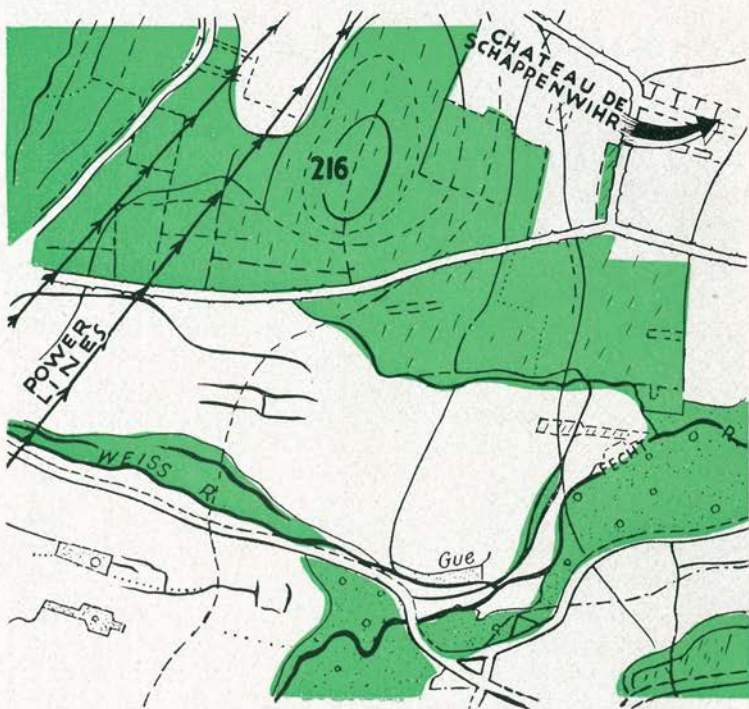
Silently and unseen we moved through the deep snow, our capes blending in perfectly with the world of white which surrounded us. For a few moments after we heard the dull explosions and saw our comrades lying on the ground, we did not realize what was happening. No shell scream, no mortar whistle accompanied the burst. Then our minds began to work once more and we recognized this barrier the crafty Germans had erected — a field of the tiny, foot-shearing Schu-mines. The heavy snow fall of the preceding days coupled with brisk winds had perfectly hidden the mines and the footprints of the soldiers who laid them. Together the two companies began to cross the minefield, in the only way that a minefield can be crossed - - slowly, grimly, probing each step before moving, with a foot or a leg or a life the penalty for a misstep.

The explosions of the mines alerted the waiting Germans and mortar fire began to pour into the minefield. This was clearly directed from the top of the hill and came from weapons in the woods south of the Weiss River. The concentration was extremely heavy and B Company began to receive large numbers of casualties from this shelling as well as from the Schu-mines. As the light became better, machine guns opened up from their positions along the road at the base of Hill 216 while snipers on the northern slope of the hill aimed their deadly fire on the men picking their way through the mine-field.

Finally, in order to avoid a direct frontal assault on the positions at the base of the hill, the company "gave way" to the east and started working southward with its left flank about five hundred yards west of the river. Fire came in increasing intensity from the Chateau de Schoppenwihr and from the woods along the Fecht River — small arms, machine guns, and 88's. Pinned down by this curtain of fire the advance of the company after 0800 was tor-

tuously slow. So heavy was the resistance and so high the casualties that at 1000 it was decided to employ Company **C** on the left flank.

A Company, on the battalion right flank, was making better progress. Although many men fell from the Schu-mines, the mortar shells consistently dropped behind the advancing units. As the



companies neared the top of the hill, machine gun, machine pistol, and rifle fire became devastating in its accuracy. Courage in the face of superior fire power coupled with heavy small arms, machine gun, and mortar fire poured into the German positions on the north slope of the hill forced the enemy to vacate this position. By 0900 **A** had reached the crest, the first platoon in the lead, the second in echelon to the left rear, and the third following shortly behind. When the units crossed the peak they found

enemy dug in on the south slope. Even more intense fire than they had received from the north slope met them here as they began again to work their way through another thickly sown minefield. Direct fire from small arms and machine guns in the wooded area south of the Weiss River added to the torrent of fire which the determined Germans threw in an effort to halt the attack. Casualties mounted as men fell from the exploding shells, the accurate small arms, and the fiendish Schu-mines. Nevertheless, the company continued to advance and by 1230 had reached the east-west road on the southern face of Hill 216. Between this position and the river there was an open field, undoubtedly mined and swept by direct fire from the woods along the Weiss River. Considerably depleted by casualties, the company found further advance to be impossible; the unit commenced digging in.

Company **C**, in reserve at Mittelwihr, was alerted at 1000 and by noon the line of departure used by the other companies earlier in the morning was crossed. Sniper and machine gun fire from the Chateau and the woods below it were received almost immediately. By the time Company **C** had worked down to **B**'s former position, the latter unit had pushed forward. A group of riflemen had inched toward the machine gun nests and silenced the guns; **B** was moving forward again. As they came to the east-west road, the second platoon spread to the right to gain contact with **A** while a small group from the first platoon, following the edge of a vineyard, pushed toward the Weiss River. Contact was made with **A** by **B**'s Second Platoon at 1430. The other platoon pulled to the west of the north-south road and using an abandoned enemy CP formed a defensive line facing east. The leading element of **C** had not proceeded far along this road before it met **B**'s group returning from the river, still under small arms fire. **C**, therefore, built up a defensive line east of the road facing the Fecht River.

At about 1400 it became apparent that the now depleted First Battalion without assistance would be unable to reach the Weiss River before dark. The Third Battalion, therefore, was alerted and moved out at 1650. Only two rifle companies were available to that unit for the operation, Company **L** remaining in regimental reserve. In addition, **K** was short one platoon which had been

employed since early morning on the First Battalion's left flank and was still pinned down by fire from the Chateau. Leaving the assembly area near Beblenheim, **I** and **K** proceeded along the east side of the Bennwihr-Ingersheim road between the two power lines. The advance of both units was slowed down considerably by a mine field encountered on the approach march. Probing their way through this under continued small arms and machine gun fire, **I** Company proceeded, under intense fire from the south bank of the Weiss River, to the junction of the eastern power line and this stream. Here, after extending eastward, the men dug in at about 1900.

After **I** had cleared from in front of **A**, **K** moved out eastward along the road. On turning south the company came under heavy machine gun and mortar fire from below the Chateau. Cautiously the unit crossed the minefield as the scream of shrapnel coupled with the sharp crack of well aimed bullets made the men want to leave the single path being probed through the mine studded area. With the aid of well placed mortar fire, **K** reached the Weiss river at its junction with the Fecht. Upon arriving at this point, about 2100, the company deployed west along the bank toward **I**. As **K** began to dig in, the lack of the detached platoon was strongly felt; at midnight a group from Company **B** was inserted between the two Third Battalion companies.

The night following our first attack came and suddenly all the death we had seen, the noise we had heard, the fear we had felt descended on us like an avalanche, leaving us only cold and wet and exhausted. Our first day of attack was over. Even through our tiredness we realized that each of us was a wiser man than he had been the day before. We knew that battle was not glorious; we knew that our minds had been left with an imprint that even time could not fully erase; we knew that we had been through something that none of us would ever be able to adequately describe.

That night both **I** and **K** companies were harrassed: **I** by small arms fire from positions across the river east of the bridge, **K** by mortar and machine guns in the woods to the left front. **I** sent a two-squad patrol around its right flank and across the river. These men found and assaulted six foxholes. **K** discovered that the

mortar fire coming from its front was being directed from an OP; after placing artillery on this position, the harassment was eliminated.



Only one further action remained for the regiment to complete its mission around Hill 216 — that of "mopping up" the west bank of the Fecht River down to its junction with the Weiss. At 0940 C jumped off from its defensive position of the night before to complete this task and to contact the right flank of the 7th Infantry just south of the Chateau. As C began moving through the open fields which separated them from the thin strip of woods on the west bank of the river, heavy fire from machine guns and 88's pinned

the company down about 800 yards from the river. So intense was this fire that it became necessary for friendly artillery to lay smoke. With this cover the company was able to gain the edge of the narrow strip of woods along the river by 1400.

Upon completion of this, we had accomplished our first offensive mission. The green of our reputation lost another coat of its vanishing brilliance. A new feeling of pride surged through us — a pride born of combat — replacing the cold and the fatigue. Tested in fire, the regiment proved that it could fight beside the veteran units of the famous Third Division. There was never a day after Hill 216 that our heads did not rise just a little higher when we said, "I'm from the 254th Infantry."

JEBSCHEIM

Slightly before midnight on January 24th, the first elements of the 28th Division began arriving to relieve us on position. By noon of the following day, the entire regiment was assembled in an area in the Colmar Forest northeast of Ostheim. The First Battalion

was greatly understrength, **A** having only 120 line troops, **B** depleted to 80, **C** to about 120, and the machine gun platoons of **D** with less than half of their full strength. The Third Battalion had also sustained a large number of casualties, although to a lesser degree. Only the Second Battalion remained in good operational strength.

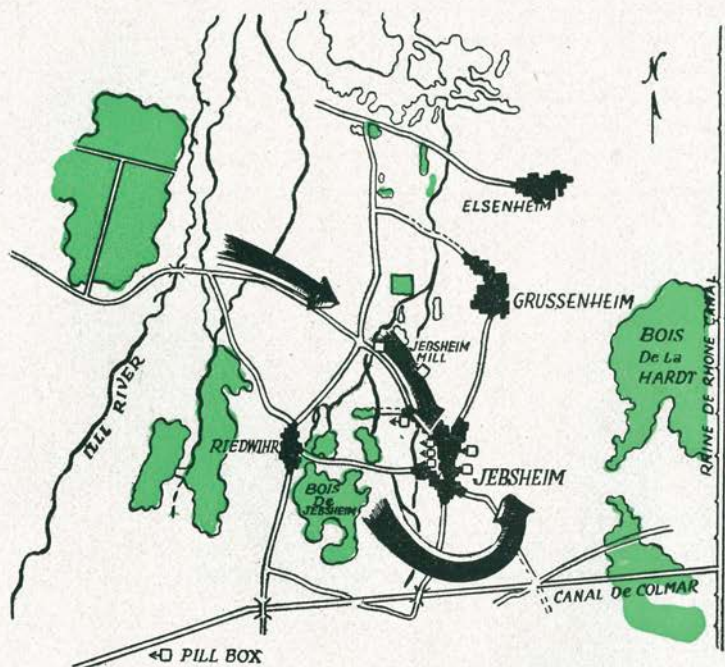
Our stay in the Colmar Forest was destined to be a short one, however, for another mission lay ahead of the regiment. The 15th Infantry had, the previous day, cleared the area east of the Ill River, pushing toward Reidwihr in its southward drive, leaving isolated groups of enemy in its wake. The route from the west toward the town of Jepsheim was now clear.

It had become apparent as the month of January drew to a close that the hub of resistance, the key, to the entire Colmar Pocket was the well fortified town of Jepsheim, France. The village itself is laid out in a way highly advantageous to the defender. The principal artery of the town is a north-south street with stone buildings on either side. Branching off at both ends of the main street are two parallel ones leading west. Weapons located in the houses along these streets can effectively cover with cross-fire almost all the area to the west of the town.

The Germans had skillfully supplemented Jepsheim's natural defensive virtues. Along the street and road leading northwest, heavy concrete bunkers had been built. In an arc extending above the northwest street, a row of pillboxes defended to the north while other steel reinforced emplacements at the southern end completed the strong defensive system.

On the night of January 23, while the attack on Hill 216 was still in progress, the tanks and tank destroyers attached to the regiment had been released. Now they were attached once more. Operation Instruction Number 8 specified that elements of the Reconnaissance Company and a platoon of Company **C**, 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion were to maintain contact with the 1st DMI, follow the Second Battalion, and stand ready to reduce such strong points as might be encountered. A light tank platoon of Company **C**, 756th Tank Battalion, was to follow the tank destroyers, protecting the rear and assisting the battalions by fire. The chemical mortar platoon and the AAA/AW platoon remained attached as before.

So swiftly had come the decision for the regiment to attack Jepsheim that when the regimental staff and battalion commanders returned from Third Division Headquarters it was already the hour set to launch the attack, 1600. There was time for only the barest briefing possible to the company commanders. As we moved out of the Colmar Forest, most of us knew only that the



First and Second Battalions were to be employed initially with the First Battalion on the right maintaining contact with the 15th Infantry driving south below Riedwihr while the Second Battalion on the left linked itself with the 1st DMI by reconnaissance elements. The Third Battalion had been designated as regimental reserve, to be used on Third Division order only.

At 1600 the two battalions moved out, each maintaining a two company front — the First on the right side of the northwest road, the Second on the left side. We had supposed that the operations

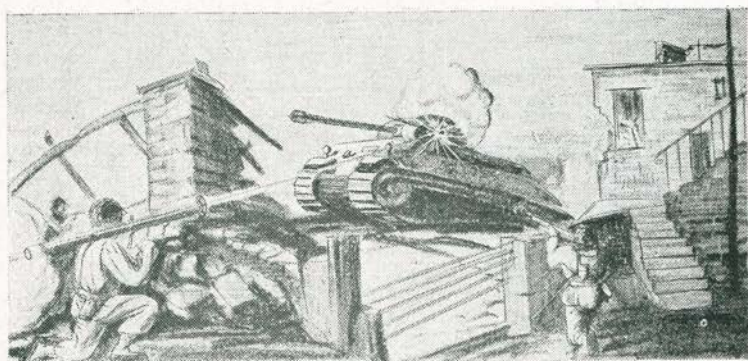
of the 15th Infantry insured us an easy approach to the line of departure. This proved untrue. Shortly after crossing the Ill River, more than fifteen hundred yards short of the line of departure, we received fire from machine guns and small arms in the northern end of the Bois de Jebnheim as well as heavy artillery from the vicinity of Jebnheim.

Sub-zero temperature combined with a fierce north wind which whipped the deep snow into a frenzy of blinding ice particles slowed our advance to a painful crawl as we fought our way through artillery and rocket barrages to the line of departure. This was reached at about 2100, and already the effect of the cold and exertion began to show on us; the First Battalion especially suffered, their complete lack of sleep and rest for so many hours making resistance very low.

Because of the difficulty which the Blind River presented, our formation was changed at the line of departure to a column of companies in each battalion. Upon traversing the road west of the Blind River, the advance became even more difficult under the machine gun, rifle, and pistol fire. We found that a detachment of French troops had taken the burning buildings of Jebnheim Mills. Even though we realized the danger of falling debris, shells directed on the Mills, and the perfect outline our bodies made against the bright flames, many of us were more than willing to take the chance as we huddled for a few minutes as close to the fire as possible. This was reportedly one of the coldest nights of the entire winter; warmth seemed more important than safety.

At about 2230, **G** Company, leading the Second Battalion, crossed the Blind River. With two platoons abreast, one either side of the road, the unit moved toward the town. After advancing a few hundred yards, the company lost contact with the First Battalion on the right and stopped.

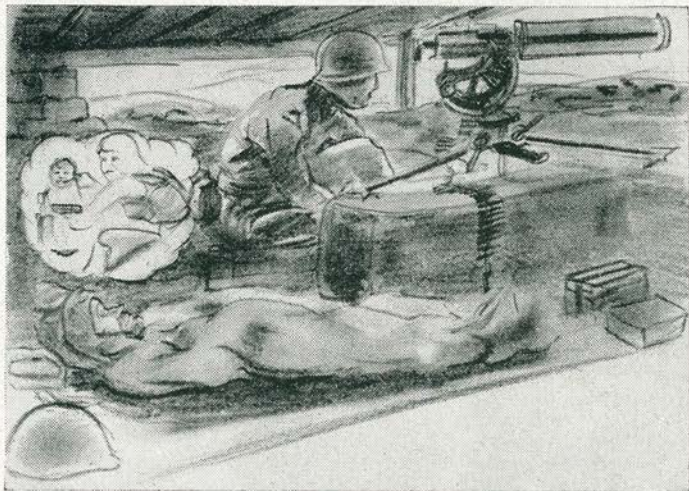
The First Battalion meanwhile was running into difficult obstacles. **A** Company, leading, waded across the icy, swift-flowing river. Emerging on the west bank, the company was pinned down by accurate heavy machine gun fire. Contact was lost as the men of **A**, soaked from the waist down, crawled through the deep snow. Company **B** inched its way from behind and finally contacted **G**.



Both companies then moved along the northwestern approach to the town. After another hour of slow advance, at 2030, the two companies came within 400 yards of the outlying bunkers. Here they were completely pinned down as fire rained on them from three directions: the Bois de Jebnheim to the south, the vicinity of Grussenheim to the north, and the bunkers of Jebnheim to the east. Mortar fire was placed on the bunkers, but was ineffective; a patrol sent southwestward to silence the machine guns in the Bois de Jebnheim met with failure as frozen weapons failed to work for their frozen owners. So intense was the small arms and artillery fire brought to bear on us that even after a fifteen minute barrage by four battalions of field artillery, the resistance was still so heavy that we could advance no further. At 0430 the two leading companies began a withdrawal toward the Blind River. The Second Battalion formed a defensive arc around the eastern side of Jebnheim Mills while the First Battalion took positions in a ditch several yards west of the north-south road.

Undoubtedly, this night was the most miserable the regiment ever experienced. Each man had carried only one blanket into the attack, and most of these had been soaked when we crossed the Blind. All of our clothing was wet either from the stream or from the snow melted by our body heat as we lay in it. This had now frozen to our skin. No fires could be lit. Those of us not on guard slept. Somehow, the night finally ended.

The following morning we counted our casualties, and met a new enemy, one who accounted for five times as many men as the Germans — the dreaded trenchfoot. Men who could hardly walk hobbled back to aid stations to be evacuated to hospitals. The First Battalion suddenly fell to less than company strength. The Second Battalion, which had not been committed on Hill 216, fared much better, although it, too, had a share of frozen hands and trenchfoot.



Meanwhile, plans were being made to attack Jepsheim again that evening. The volume of fire which had come from the Bois de Jepsheim indicated that the clearing of this forest would require considerable attention. Therefore, while the First and Second Battalions continued their attack on Jepsheim, the Third Battalion would pass through Riedwihr and reduce the enemy holding in the Bois de Jepsheim. This done, the Third was to advance eastward and assist in the taking of Jepsheim by an attack from the south.

It was just getting dark on the evening of January 26 when the Third Battalion moved out of Riedwihr. Company I was in the lead as the troops crossed the little stream just east of Riedwihr. This unit's mission was to clear the patch of woods just north of the

Riedwihr-Jebsheim road. Company **L** was to turn off the road to the south and clear the upper half of the forest which lay on that side; **K** was to keep to the right of **L** and sweep the southern half of the woods.

I sent its three rifle platoons forward at 1700, two platoons abreast, one to the rear. The two leading platoons came under mortar and small arms fire, but were able to reach the eastern edge of the woods. The reserve element was fired on and pinned down by a well emplaced machine gun at the stream junction to the north. Two squads sent to silence the gun were unable to close in on the weapon, but it was finally eliminated by mortar fire. Defensive positions were then placed along the east edge of the woods and the company remained here that night.

The attack of **L** began at 2100. Meeting little resistance, the company turned south off the road, then pushed eastward, intending to advance to the east edge of the forest. However, a large clearing in the center of the woods was mistaken, in the darkness, for the fields beyond. When the company arrived at this clearing, it went into defensive positions.

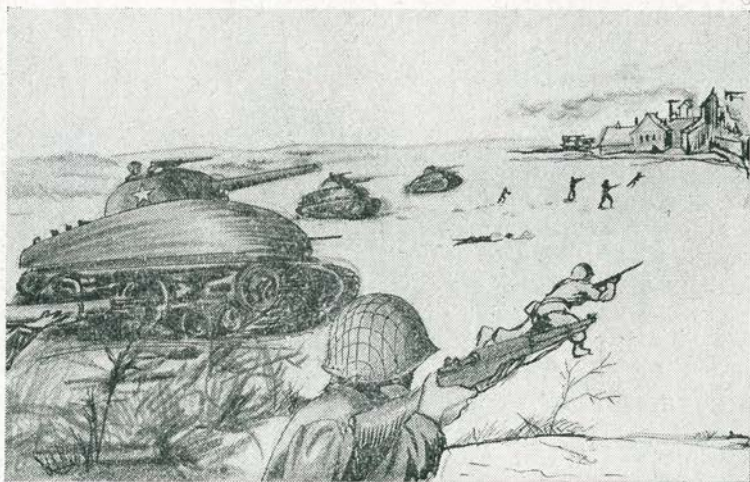
K jumped off and pushed due south through the western portion of the forest. The advance was successful until the company was within a short distance of the clearing. At this point **K** encountered heavy fire from the southern edge of the woods, mostly consisting of high velocity, flat trajectory fire. Unable to proceed, the company fell back to Riedwihr, leaving one platoon in defensive positions at the point of farthest advance.

Meanwhile, the attack on Jebsheim had started at about the same time the Third Battalion moved out. The objective remained the same - the northern half of the town to the Second Battalion, and the southern half of the town to the First. **F** passed through and led **G**, which was to protect the left flank. **E** remained as battalion reserve in the defensive positions occupied the night before by one of its platoons. Company **C**, with **A** following, launched the First Battalion's attack. **B**, initially to the rear of the other companies, was to stand by until they had cleared, then strike the southern part of the town.

Companies **C** and **F** waded through the deep snow toward the bunkers which had turned them back the previous night. Moving along the northwest road toward the junction at the western

approach to the town, the battalions again met a furious hail of fire about five hundred yards from the defending emplacements. This was of the same pattern as that received the night before — 88mm fire from three directions, automatic weapons from the bunkers, and small arms from dug in positions around the pillboxes. Slowly they moved forward, inching their way through the snow, and attempted to reduce the fortifications with well-aimed bazooka fire. This proved successful with all but one of the bunkers, whose two foot thick walls merely ricocheted the rockets into the air. As a last resort, the tank destroyers were brought up; braving the dangerous 88's east of the town, these fired point blank through the thick walls of the bunker and rendered possible its capture by **F** Company men.

At this point Companies **A** and **C**, greatly understrength from the battles of the last four days, joined with **F** for the final push into town. At 2400 we saw one of the most awe-inspiring scenes most of us can recall as eight battalions of artillery laid a concentration into Jepsheim which lasted for fifteen minutes. As we watched it seemed as if the village, laying peacefully asleep one moment, became nothing but a massive sheet of flame the next.



By 0100, January 27, Company **F** and the remnants of the First Battalion were on the northwest street of the town. Three hours later Jebbsheim was clear to the upper square. In this engagement, which was extremely bitter while it lasted, **G** worked parallel to **F** along northwest street. The now exhausted men of **F** organized defensive positions in houses while **G** set up an arc facing north toward Grussenheim. Since little activity was observed in the southern part of the town, we believed that Jebbsheim was clear except for snipers.

G Company that afternoon, therefore, began the task of clearing the north-south street. The unit soon discovered that our surmise had been far from right. After an intense battle which lasted all that day, **G** finally fought its way down to the lower square. The fighting was of the most severe type possible — house to house, floor to floor, room to room. Before the company had time to prepare proper defense at the lower square, a strong counterattack developed from the enemy position, and the depleted unit was driven back through sheer weight of numbers and fire power. The counterattack was finally repulsed at the upper square.

The following morning, the 28th, the French desired to pass through the town, but failed in their attempt to break the German lines. **E** Company then resumed the attack at 1400 to reduce resistance in the southern end of Jebbsheim. Gaining impetus as the drive progressed smoothly and swiftly, the company was across the intersection and about five houses down on the left side of the street an hour later. 115 prisoners had been taken at the cost of only 26 killed or wounded. At about 1700 the enemy launched another desperate counterattack, and as the company was slowly forced to give ground, **G** was committed to aid them. Together the two units repulsed the attack and made plans to continue the advance at 0400 the following morning, January 29.

Just before the companies began their attack, three Germans entered our lines and asked Company **E** to surrender, saying, "We know you have only a company here and we have a battalion." The men of **E** opened fire in answer and began the last, most bitter fight for the possession of Jebbsheim.



The enemy was being supplied and reinforced by the road leading north into Jebbsheim from Muntzenheim. To cut this road and to provide a base of fire for I striking Jebbsheim from the south, the Third Battalion left its position in the Bois de Jebbsheim at 1130 that day. Leaving K in reserve, I and L moved out along the road. Arriving at the bridge over the small creek, Company L turned south along the west bank to provide a base of fire for I Company, which was to move southeast, by-pass the tip of Jebbsheim, and, turning sharply north, strike the enemy in the vineyards just east of the German-occupied houses.

Heavy fire from these houses caused a change in I's operation; a flank attack was decided upon. Accordingly, the unit moved in by the road leading west from the southern end of the town. A French tank encountered on the outskirts was persuaded to assist them and the newly formed tank-infantry team attacked enemy strongpoints on the west side of the north-south street.

At the time of their arrival, the fight between the Second Battalion and the enemy in his remaining houses was particularly violent. Compressing the Germans into these few houses below the southern square had necessitated the commitment of the remaining elements of the First Battalion as well as the reserve company of the Second. From the houses, from the bunkers, and from the foxholes in the vineyards southeast of the street crossing,

the enemy resisted fiercely with automatic weapons while 88mm guns poured fire on the attackers.

The impact of **I**, coupled with the blows being delivered by the Second Battalion, broke the German's desire to resist further. At about 1630 they began to march out of their foxholes, first in small groups of five and ten, then in larger groups, to surrender. The total was about 450, most of whom were members of the 136th Mountain Regiment.



Jebbsheim, itself, was now taken. The cost had been high, but well worth the price we had paid for it. According to statements of prisoners of war, the town had been used as a corps headquarters. It was not until later that we learned that the Third Division had not expected us to be able to capture this stronghold. The question as to why our determination was so strong, our fighting so fierce, in taking this town was probably best answered by one Pfc who said, "If you think I was going to stay out in some damn foxhole

full of snow while the Krauts were living in nice, warm cellars, you're crazy!"

"WATCH ON THE RHINE"

While the battle for Jebbsheim was in its final stages, Company **L**, still on the banks of the little stream, was under heavy fire from the road leading south of town. In terrain which offered little concealment, **L** called for smoke; with the aid of this and strafing operations of the Army Air Corps along the road, the unit was released, and entered Jebbsheim, now cleared.

Company **K** was immediately assigned the mission of pushing southeast from Jebbsheim, which they had entered by the Reidwihr-Jebbsheim road, attacking down the Muntzheim road, and securing the canal crossing just north of the latter town. The enemy still

resisted below Jebnheim and south of the canal, but after mopping up the Germans left to fight delaying action, the company secured the bridge. **F** was sent southeast of town immediately after its fall, and held a line extending northwest from the canal crossing.

The regiment spent the night of January 29th in defensive positions to the east and northeast of town, with the exception of **K** along the canal and **F** extending north of the canal crossing. The following morning the First Battalion moved to the line which Company **F** had held during the night. From this point the First, in conjunction with the French armor on the left flank, attacked east toward the Bois de la Hardt. Using **A** and **B** as a two company front, (these two units, with elements of **D** attached, had less than fifty men) the battalion advanced to the edge of the woods under small arms fire. Here the French were met by a heavy barrage of 88mm guns emplaced in the woods; not wishing to risk their armor, the French withdrew and requested that the First Battalion draw back with them. They therefore returned to the line of departure and went into defensive positions extending north from the canal.

The attack on the Bois de la Hardt and eastward toward the canal junction was resumed on February 1. Having replaced the First Battalion on the line of departure, the Third Battalion moved off at 0100 and advanced slowly against strong resistance. This was eliminated only after **I** Company made a determined charge on the German positions and overran them. By 0730 the leading elements were through the forest and on the west bank of the Rhone Canal.

A series of swift moves began the following day as the Colmar Pocket began to crumble. Early in the morning we received orders to establish blocks along the Rhine River from Artzenheim to Biesheim as the 7th Infantry uncovered the Rhine on its advance south. The Second Battalion was immediately alerted and at 0400 moved out to follow the 7th Infantry with the mission of protecting the rear and flank of that regiment while proceeding to outpost the Rhine from Artzenheim to the vicinity of Baltzenheim. Later this same day, the First Battalion moved to Kunheim and outposted the Rhine River from Baltzenheim to the vicinity east of Kunheim. The Third Battalion was assigned its holding sector from Biesheim north to the junction of the Rhine-Rhone Canal.



These positions were held by the regiment until February 8th. During this time we occupied positions on the very banks of the Rhine River; across this liquid barrier we could see mighty, formidable looking concrete pillboxes. Our stay here became known as the "Watch on the Rhine." Daily we wondered when the signal would be given for us to cross the boundary between France and the Nazi homeland. As we manned our positions under the glare of "artificial moonlight," we speculated as to the difficulty of making a successful bridgehead across this traditional bulwark of the German nation. Few of us suspected how many miles and what bitter fighting lay between us and the day our crossing would be made. On the morning of the 9th we began a truck march to Montbronn where we were attached to the 100th Division upon arrival.

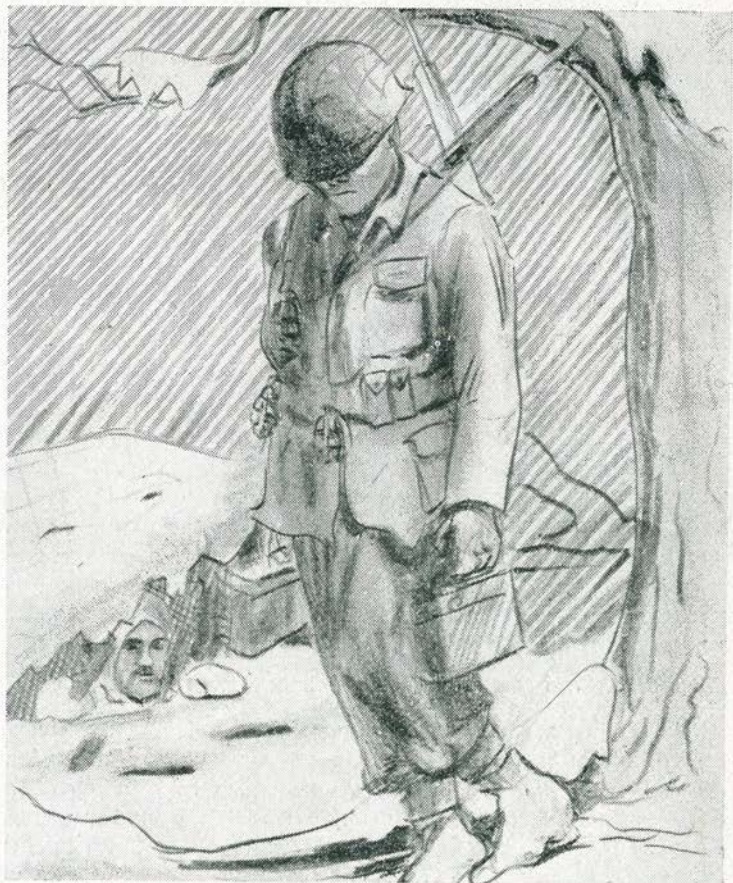
Thus ended our campaign in the Colmar Pocket.

However, we were not forgotten. On the 13th of February we received a letter from Major General John W. O'Daniel, Commanding General of the Third Division, which said, in part, "The Regiment has fought with outstanding gallantry and perseverance. The Third Division salutes all members of the 254th Infantry

as worthy comrades-in-arms. We are proud to have been associated with you and we regret your departure."

Two days later, we were visited by Lieutenant General Alexander Patch, Commanding the Seventh Army, who said he had come all the way to Montbronn to tell us that he was "mighty glad to have us."

In six weeks the 254th Infantry had acquired a fine reputation. We meant to keep it in the months to come.



Chapter III

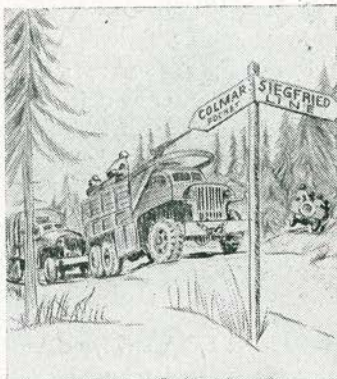
The Attainment: Siegfried Line

At 0050 on March 15 we were again tensely poised for the launching of another attack—the most important of our combat career. As we watched the artillery preparation, we recalled a few of the past events that had preceded this vital assignment.

From the 8th of February until the 17th, we had remained attached to the 100th Division in the vicinity of Montbronn, France as division reserve. Then, on the 17th, we received the orders we had been awaiting so long: instruction to return to our parent unit, the 63rd Division.

We reported to Willerswald, France, feeling rather like a prodigal son who has left home, done well in the world and learned much, but is glad to be back. Our experience was immediately utilized as the First Battalion was attached to the 253d Infantry in the vicinity of Aursmacher, and the Second Battalion placed in division reserve at Steinbacher Hof. (The Third Battalion had remained with the 100th Division in St. Louis and did not return until the 23rd of the month.)

The last week of February and the first two weeks of March the Regiment fought as a unit, maintaining defensive positions northeast of Sarreguimines and conducting extensive patrols and raids. All during this time, we thought of the objective which someday awaited us: the breaching of the mighty Siegfried Line which Dr. Goebbels had described for so many years to the people of the world as "Germany's impenetrable Westwall."



And now, ten minutes before "H-hour," 0100, we realized how difficult was the task which confronted us. The enemy, in the preceding weeks, had been slowly pushed back until he now occupied his last, most formidable barrier. We knew that he would be determined to hold this at all costs. We knew, too, that the ground which lay before the Siegfried Line was also well defended; trip wires, mines, and barbed wire criss-crossed the territory guarding these massive concrete structures, making a maze of deathly, easily defended barriers.

Most of us felt strongly the responsibility of the confidence which had been placed in us. Two days before, the Corps had been assigned the mission of breaking the Siegfried Line in its sector. In conjunction with this, the 63rd Division had been given the task of making the initial attempt, and our regiment was chosen as the assault element.

The plan of attack had been skillfully prepared, and was easily divided into three phases — first, the uncovering of the ground stretching before the Siegfried Line by the First Battalion; second, the establishment and holding of a block by the Third Battalion; and third, the breaching of the Siegfried Line by the Second Battalion assisted by the First.

The First Battalion was to strike with such speed and impetus that all outposts and fortifications lying before the Siegfried Line would be eliminated before the enemy had further time to increase the effectiveness of these outer defenses. In this zone of action were three towns: Hartingshof, Eschringen, and Ensheim.

At last 0100 arrived, the preparatory barrage ceased, and a great deal of tenseness which waiting always brings left as the First Battalion moved forward. C Company crossed the line of departure just east of Bliesranbach and began to move out of the Hinterwald Woods just as a strong barrage of enemy artillery opened fire. Thus, before the attack had fully begun, ten men were casualties. Nevertheless, within fifteen minutes the leading two platoons, abreast, had advanced nine hundred yards and reached the edge of the small fortified village of Hartingshof.

This advance was so swift that the surprised enemy's rifle, automatic weapons, and mortar fire were ineffective. Advancing through a Schu-mine field, one platoon struck simultaneously

with the other. Immediately, the defenders called for an intense barrage of mortar, rocket, and artillery fire, ineffective to them in their concrete emplacements, although deadly to our exposed attackers. This, coupled with the large volume of automatic weapons fire pouring from the bunkers, provided a very bitter fight which lasted almost three hours.

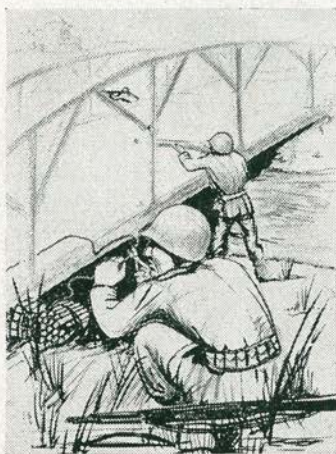
These reinforced positions were finally reduced by groups of **C** "buttoning up" the apertures while others under this covering fire, assaulted the bunkers hurling grenades through the openings. The company reorganized at 0400 to clear the surrounding woods; in doing this, the unit captured approximately fifty prisoners and forced the retreat of several German tanks by accurate bazooka fire.

While **C** was taking Hartingshof, **A** had struck simultaneously at Eschringen. Like the other two rifle companies, this unit had a platoon of heavy machine guns and a section of 81mm mortars attached from **D** and with this group moved through a minefield soon after leaving the cover of the Hinterwald Woods. By being extremely cautious, the company was able to penetrate this with only two casualties.

It was of vital importance that the two bridges in the town be taken intact to allow the armor which would follow later to cross

without delay. In view of this fact, **A** decided to strike each of these structures at the same time with one platoon. After taking the bridges, the platoons were to expand their gains, using the original objective as a center of operations.

About half way to Eschringen, a distance of little more than a mile, they encountered barbed wire entanglements booby-trapped with S-mines. After cutting a narrow path and passing through this in single file, the company deployed for the attack. Immediately



after the race to the bridges began, machine gun and small arms fire issued from the windows of many of the houses in the town. Nevertheless, both spans were quickly secured and the demolition wires cut to the large mines beneath them before the enemy was able to discharge them. In expanding their hold upon the town, **A** met fierce resistance which lasted only a short time, however. After capturing the town, it was necessary to send a platoon to one of the hills surrounding it in order to eliminate the shelling the unit was receiving from 88mm guns emplaced there. Eschringen was then outposted following the successful completion of this mission.

While **A** and **C** Companies were initially fighting for Eschringen and Hartingshof, respectively, **B** prepared to follow **A** as soon as that organization had cleared Eschringen sufficiently for **B** to pass through on its route to attack Ensheim. Thirty minutes after "H-hour," the unit crossed the line of departure and followed the route that **A** had taken. When the company arrived in Eschringen, the men found that the attackers had already taken the bridges and were in the process of clearing the town. Since speed was essential, they passed through the town immediately and started for their objective. However, in the darkness and under the fire of a heavy barrage, the company mistook the road leading into Omersheim for the one to Ensheim.

After advancing approximately five hundred yards on this highway, the company encountered an anti-tank gun emplaced in the middle of the road and well defended by infantrymen dug in around it. After a hard fight, with several casualties from the fire of the gun, **B** eliminated this obstacle and proceeded toward its objective. The advance was slow, however, for a series of saw-tooth trenches ran parallel to each side of the road; the enemy fought a delaying action from these.

Finally, they entered the outskirts of the village and after another difficult fight, in which large quantities of German artillery were poured at them, the company was able to occupy most of the houses in the western part of town. It was from these that they were able to drive off the numerous counterattacks that came until dawn. Both the company and the artillery radio had been destroyed during the fight into the village, so it was impossible to call for artillery support. Only the weapons of the company, itself, could be used in dispersing the counterattacks.

Just before dawn the company realized that it had taken the wrong road and was now in Neumuhlerhof instead of Ensheim; two volunteers, therefore, started back to Battalion Headquarters at Eschringen with this message just before the largest and most vicious of all the counterattacks struck. This was beaten off at the cost of most of the company's remaining ammunition.

When these messengers reached their destination, at about 0700, the First Battalion had already realized the error that **B** had made. However, the battalion had already reached a point almost a thousand yards in front of the unit to its right, and an attack on Ensheim would increase this to two thousand yards, leaving a greatly exposed right flank. Although **B** had made a tactical mistake, their position was strategically good, for it protected the otherwise vulnerable right flank. Therefore, the message was sent back to the company in Neumuhlerhof to hold and secure the ground they had taken until the unit in whose sector they were relieved them.

C arrived in Eschringen, after having cleared out all opposition north of Hartingshof, at about 0730 and received the order to attack Ensheim. After a short reconnaissance, the company decided to move up the draw slightly to the east of Ensheim and strike the southeastern part of the town. At the same time, a platoon of tanks would move up the road between the two towns and fan out in the fields before the objective to support **C** with direct fire.

As the company began moving forward, they met an enemy counterattack which was in the process of forming in this same



draw. The enemy, surprised, was completely routed, although a heavy artillery barrage began falling from the high ground to the northeast. At 0100, after friendly artillery had silenced the German guns, the attack was resumed.

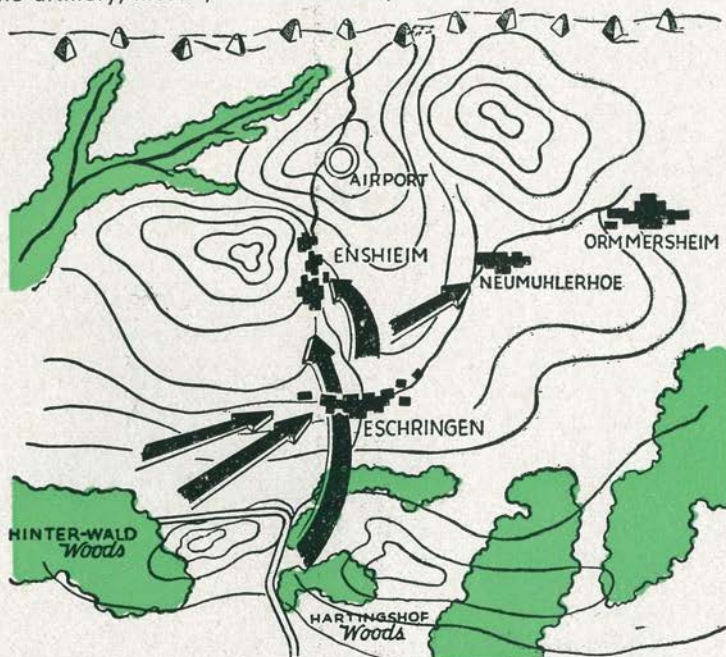
The attached tanks opened up at point blank range on the houses **C** was attacking in one of the finest examples of infantry-team cooperation that the regiment has ever witnessed. Although the initial resistance was very heavy from small arms and panzerfausten fire, the accuracy of the friendly tanks soon enabled the company to gain the foothold it needed in the southern part of town.

All morning this bitter fighting raged, as the enemy resisted from house to house; the Germans seemed determined that the price for Ensheim should be high. At 1330, **A** Company was also thrown into the desperate fight against the Nazis. Massive German Tiger Tanks delivered devastating fire at both of the units as well as the attached armor, but eventually were forced to retreat to the protection of the Siegfried Line as the Volksgrenadiers supporting them were slowly eliminated by the men of the First Battalion.

As darkness fell, the town was ours. All of us realized that the First Battalion had done an excellent job, and we resolved that we would uphold the example they had set. The stage was now set for the Third Battalion to begin its attack. In the early morning hours, this unit began arriving in Ensheim.

Very little was actually known about the Siegfried Line, as ground reconnaissance had been impossible; no one had ever tried to test the strength of the pillboxes which composed this supposedly finest of all static lines. Some things, however were known. We know that prior to our attack the enemy had withdrawn the bulk of his artillery and rocket projectors as well as men and other materiel to these fortifications. We were well oriented, also, on the fact that the line was designed to stop an attacker by its horizontal depth rather than by vertical depth, such as the Maginot Line. Intelligence had informed us that the pillboxes which studded the ridges in the area relied on interlocking fire by small groups of six or seven emplacements to mutually support each other and stop any attacker even as many as half of them were reduced. In addition to this, the ground between the emplacements was honey-combed with a network of fire and communication trenches which would probably be used before it became necessary to retreat to the cover of the concrete structures.

The terrain of this area was such that the only avenues of approach were over exposed slopes under direct enemy observation from the left, front, and right. Between Ensheim and Bishmisheim the defenses were based on the commanding ridges which overlooked all avenues leading north from Ensheim. The line at this point consisted of three belts, with the third containing most of the artillery, mortar, and rocket emplacements.



It was the task of the Third Battalion to seize a strongly defended hill in the Siegfried and block the line on the Division left flank. This unit was to act as a hinge on which the door to the Siegfried Line would be opened. If this hinge did not hold, the line could not be pierced with the rapidity which was desired. Therefore, the Third Battalion had two missions: to gain the initial fortifications, and to hold these positions at all costs.

The approach march began at 0400, under a fairly heavy barrage concentrated on the entire Siegfried Line; this was designed to be so light that the enemy would not expect an attack, yet intense

enough to serve as a screening tactic. The line of approach followed the main highway toward the Siegfried until it reached a small unimproved road which branched off to the west. After traversing this for several hundred yards, a cross-country route was taken to avoid the possibility of the roads becoming impact areas in case the attack was detected.

Daylight found the battalion assembled in the draw below the hill which was to be assaulted. While the companies deployed in the draw, a slight skirmish took place between scouts and the enemy in open emplacements. A hasty reconnaissance was then made and the three pillboxes which guarded the southeastern slope of the hill were chosen as the most propitious for the initial assault.

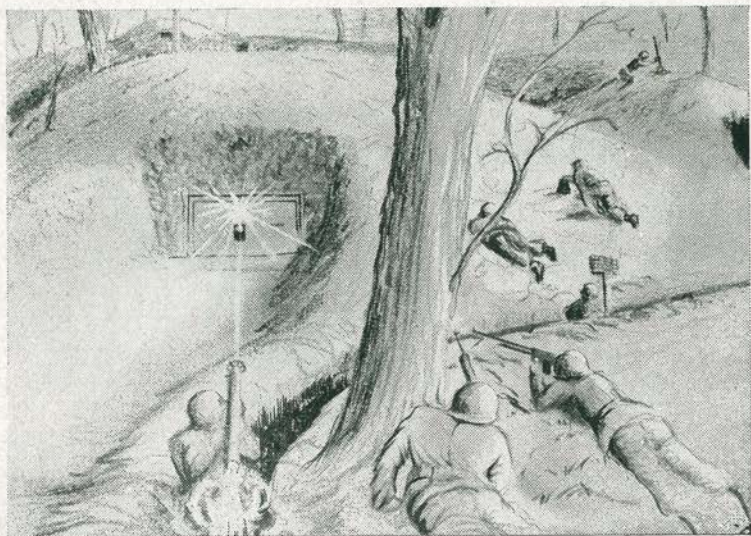
K was designated the assault company, and it was decided to use the platoon of heavy machine guns attached to that unit from **M** with the organic lights to neutralize the pillboxes by making them close their apertures. All guns would open up together at 1041, **K** would then rush the fortification as soon as they were neutralized.

The machine guns and two platoons of the assault element had just crossed the draw ready to deploy for the attack when suddenly it seemed as if all the fire which lay in the deep bellies of these mighty fortresses belched forth at once. The din of the artillery, mortar, and rocket fire was so tremendous that only occasionally could the staccato sound of the many machine guns in each pillbox be heard. This fire was so intense that one platoon of **K** found it impossible to cross the draw and join the remainder of the company.

Nevertheless, the attack began on schedule as the machine guns commenced their fire at the designated time on the pillboxes selected for the assault. It soon became apparent that the apertures could never be completely "buttoned up" by a concentration of automatic weapons. Therefore, **K**, bolstered by assault squads from **I** and **L** Companies, began its onslaught into the cones of fire to reduce the enemy by whatever means were available.

In this initial phase of the reduction of the pillboxes each of the three assaulting groups could only experiment with methods for the elimination of the emplacements and those within. Bazooka

teams braved all types of fire to stand up and use their charges against the heavy steel doors which guarded the entrance to the pillboxes. They watched, disappointed, as they saw the ineffectiveness of their rockets against the steel which far exceeded in depth the penetrability of their weapon. Men crawled within fifteen or twenty feet of the steel shields which protected the embrasures to fire antitank grenades which had no effect other than concussion. Others, with satchel charges, worked their way slowly and laboriously toward the pillboxes in order to place their explosives at the huge steel doors. Again, the results were the same.



Finally, one or two men volunteered to work their way to the roofs of the emplacements they were attempting to smash. Here each of these successful enough to gain the top found a ventilation shaft jutting from the top of the structure. First, ordinary fragmentation grenades were dropped down the small hatches; at least one of these men was wounded as all found that these charges merely rolled through a trap door only to explode in the open beside the pillbox.

The assault groups tried again. Two methods were at last found which drove the defenders from their huge emplacements. One group suspended a bangalore torpedo from the top of the pillbox down the ventilation pipe and detonated it. The great concussion caused by this explosion wounded or stunned those inside the structure and caused them to open their doors and surrender. The other two groups used a more dangerous, although just as effective, method. The machine gun fire which kept the apertures closed was lifted. When the Germans opened these in order to fire their guns, they found either a white phosphorous or a thermite grenade thrown at them by a man pressed against the side of the pillbox next to the aperture. The burns sustained by the defenders were so severe that they, too, surrendered in order to receive medical care.

That afternoon, at 1530, under the heavy artillery, mortar, and rocket barrage which was directed at our troops, the last of the seven pillboxes which studded the hill was taken. The two companies which were at the foot of the hill awaiting its capture had also been subjected to extremely heavy rocket, mortar, and artillery fire during this period. The ground in which it was necessary for these units of the Third Battalion to dig their foxholes was extremely wet. Water seeped in almost as fast as it could be bailed out.

I and L Companies were brought to the crest of the hill in a mopping up operation to eliminate some remaining resistance by snipers. Meanwhile, K had reorganized and at 1600 moved out toward Hill 386 in accordance with the original plan. The Operations Instructions had called for two companies to secure hills on an arc to the northeast as the remainder of the battalion advanced to the St. Ingbert Highway upon the completion of the breaching of the pillboxes which had just been taken. However, a few minutes after K had left for its objective, the battalion was ordered to "cease further offensive action."

It was at this time that we completely realized in what a precarious position was the Third Battalion. No unit was abreast on either the right or left. The nearest troops on the right flank were 2000 yards behind, in Ensheim. The left flank had its support even further back. Therefore, the enemy could concentrate all his strength against this one battalion to eject it from the line. With

three sides exposed, offensive action against the unit would be a simple matter. It was scarcely feasible that reinforcements could be brought from the vicinity of Ensheim, for the deep draws that surrounded the hill were under excellent observation and murderous fire.



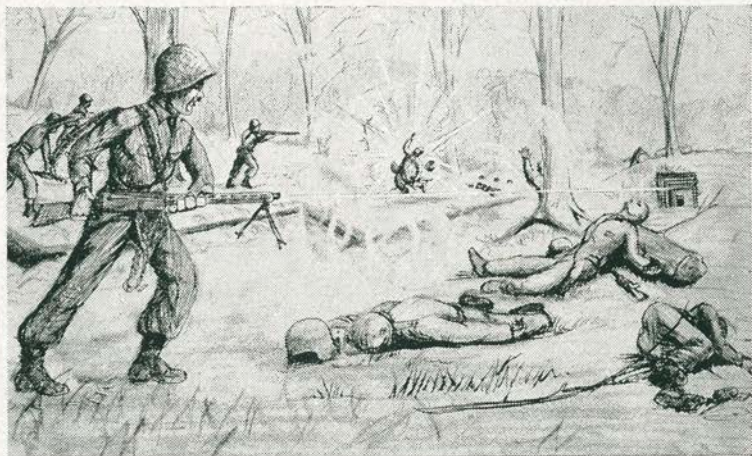
A patrol from I Company was fired upon by advance elements of a strong counterattack and in a few minutes the entire battalion, which had hardly had time to adequately outpost its defense, was engaged in an effort to drive this off. After a stiff fight, in which many of the Germans infiltrated to within a few yards of the battalion's line by means of the communication trenches which stretched all along the Westwall, the enemy withdrew that night under the cover of darkness.

By the time the message "cease further offensive action" had been received, however, K had already departed for its destination, meeting only light artillery resistance. Although an effort was made to contact the company, both the unit's radio as well as the artillery radio with the Forward Observer failed to operate. The company had just reached its destination and begun to dig in when a counterattack, supported by artillery, hit them from

the north, east, and west. The fight which ensued was of an intense nature, **K** suffered heavy casualties due to the fact that there had been insufficient time to prepare adequate defensive positions. Despite these casualties the attack was broken up shortly after dark, although attempts were made that night to infiltrate our lines.

Just after dawn the artillery radio was repaired and the message received, "Have King and friends come in tactically." This order, coupled with the sounds of heavy shelling, convinced the company that the battalion was sustaining another counterattack, the message was therefore interpreted to mean that **K** would have to fight its way back. At the time the withdrawal began another counterattack struck from the north; an artillery barrage was immediately placed on their recently vacated position to act as a screen.

So heavy had been the casualties during the hectic night that one entire platoon was used to carry the wounded between the two assaulting platoons. As **K** came within sight of the battalion area they found their premise to be correct: the battalion was engaging a large number of Germans. Unnoticed, the company moved within fifty yards of those who were attacking the lines of **I** Company. When **K** reached the absolute



minimum safety range between our artillery and themselves, they had the curtain of fire lifted and assaulted the bewildered enemy. The result of this one assault, by actual count, was seventy enemy killed.

Shortly after K had been assigned a sector in the perimeter defense, a patrol of platoon size sent to look for any remaining wounded intercepted a German major with a small group of men. The capture was easily made, and in an immediate interrogation the officer admitted that an even stonger counterattack was scheduled for that afternoon. Soon after this information had been disseminated, the enemy again struck in what seemed a last fanatical attempt to retake the hill. It was only after an hour and a half of very bitter fighting that these forces were turned back, with an estimated loss of fifty percent of the three hundred and fifty engaged in the attack.

This proved to be the last of the attempts by attack to regain the vital block the Third Battalion had established. Nevertheless, for the following two days and nights, the hill remained a virtual holocaust as the Germans began firing every available weapon in an attempt to drive the battalion from the hill through sheer fire power. 210 and 150mm artillery crashed into the soft earth with explosions that shook the emplacements and filled the air for a few seconds with hundreds of deathly steel splinters. High velocity shells from 88 and 75mm guns smashed into the sides of the pill-boxes and blended with sounds of the multi-sized mortar and fire-tailed rockets also crashing into the hill.

Never before had any unit in the regiment taken such a sustained, high pitched barrage. But the Third Battalion took all that the enemy had to give, knowing that every shell thrown at them was one less with which the units making the breakthrough would have to contend. The block had been made and would be held.

THE BREAKTHROUGH

The rest of us in the regiment, feeling as helpless as a cheering section in a football game, watched the magnificent fight the Third Battalion staged to take the vital hill which would serve as a block for our operations. Ensheim, lightly but persistently

shelled, was the scene of continuous activity as we prepared to strike the line with all our weight as soon as the block was firmly established. Casualties poured into ready aid stations when darkness permitted the evacuation of the wounded from the hill. Once again we marvelled at the speed and efficiency with which each case was treated by the medics, then sped to the rear toward an evacuation hospital. Somehow, each of us felt a bit more confident as we realized the care and swift attention we would receive if our luck momentarily deserted us.



From the better vantage points in Ensheim we could see, on this spring-like day, the entire line spread before us. The long belts of dragon's teeth, row after row as far as the eye could see, added to the formidable picture of hundreds of massive grey pillboxes commanding every hill, every slope. In contrast to the partially covered route the Third Battalion had been able to employ, the only approach to the fortification which guarded the main highway we must neutralize for the armor was through open ground, affording almost no cover. We knew that there was only one way the reduction of this maze of steel and concrete could be made — by moving straight into all the fire they could throw at us, take our casualties as they came, and reduce the pillboxes one by one.

Although the attack to smash the fortifications which guarded the Ensheim-St. Ingbert Highway was originally to start soon after dawn, the heavy counterattack that the Third Battalion was sustaining made necessary a postponement until this could be repulsed. However, the Second Battalion had already moved from the positions it had obtained by following the Third Battalion the previous day. These were almost due north of Ensheim at an approximate distance of a thousand yards along the unimproved road running somewhat parallel to the highway. Shortly after 0800 the Battalion was in an assembly area five hundred yards southeast of the blocking position. Not until they had received word that the counterattack had been repulsed did the Second move into the long-awaited attack.

E, assigned the position of assault element, was followed by **G**, while **F** remained in the assembly area as battalion reserve. Due north was the direction of the attack as shells and long range machine gun fire rained on the attackers in an attempt to stop the group before it reached the vicinity of the pillboxes which were to be struck. Even under this intense fire and regardless of the fanatical effort of the defenders to hold their ground, **E** was able to level two bunkers and capture two pillboxes by noon. This was accomplished despite the fact that one platoon had been pinned down by very effective fire from one of the emplacements. The other two nevertheless swung to the left to attempt the reduction of three large pillboxes on the left side of the road. After a savage fight which featured a long, uphill crawl by several men who braved the artillery and automatic weapons fire to throw thermite grenades into the opened apertures of the emplacements, this group of fortifications was eliminated and the entire company moved southward in an attempt to take from the rear the positions which were protecting the dragon's teeth.

G, meanwhile, had also been committed to attack northward and take the group of pillboxes in the draw to the west of the highway. Just as **G** was coming abreast of **E** at 1800, a large armor-supported counterattack struck from the direction of the draw to the east. Although the company saw the large body of Germans coming behind the deep line of tanks, it was impossible to get artillery on the attackers because the radio was temporarily out of order. (There is good reason for our maxim, "The radio always works — except when you need it the most!")

A few minutes later, **G** was engaged in the most caustic battle of its entire career. Our men were determined that they would not withdraw from the ground which held the pillboxes gained at the cost of many comrades' lives and shattered hopes. To be forced to give way at this time would mean that each yard, each trench, each fortification would have to be purchased again for the bloody price which had already been paid. **E**, directly behind **G**, was in a position that made it impossible to lend much support to efforts to staunch the drive of the two enemy infantry companies aided by two platoons of tanks. It was impossible to commit **F** because that unit was being very effectively pinned down by streams of fire from the emplacements which commanded the draw.

G managed to do the only thing which prevented its complete eradication — closed on the enemy so that the Germans could not call artillery for fear of annihilating their own unit. Our attached tank destroyers and tanks valiantly engaged the enemy's armor in a long range duel, keeping the German high velocity guns off us. For two hours the company was able to stave off attack after attack as all available ammunition was rushed from the other units in the battalion. At last, around 2000, so much had been expended that the situation became acute. The withdrawal order came and the depleted company, following the rest of the battalion, slowly pulled back to the positions it had occupied the night before along the unimproved road running parallel to the main highway.

Spirits were very low as we realized that all of the progress we had made that day had gone for naught. It was not until a reorganization began in **E** Company about midnight that it was discovered that eighteen men had been left in pillboxes the unit had taken. We hardly dared hope that there was a possibility that these comrades still held the emplacements. In the confusion that is always the keynote of battle, no one was sure how many of the eighteen were wounded; we only knew that some of the men had been left to guard and aid those who had fallen until evacuation could be safely effected. The demands which the counterattack made on us at the time of the withdrawal had driven all remembrance of them from our brain.

Early the following morning, two squads were sent from **E** to guard the litter bearers on their approach to the pillboxes with

the further mission of defending the fortifications if we still occupied them. When this group reached the emplacements, they found all eighteen men, ten of whom were wounded, still in possession. The casualties were carried back to "Weasels" parked along the road held by the Second Battalion. That afternoon a platoon from G relieved the two squads in the three pillboxes.



Two task forces were organized in conjunction with plans for the Second to continue the attack that day. Task Force Number One, consisting of a platoon from A, a platoon of tanks and a platoon of tank destroyers, was to guard a team of engineers as they prepared a crossing of the mined ground in front of the dragon's teeth. Moving out at about 1500, the task force moved along the highway north of Ensheim, the Ensheim-Stankelkapchen road, to take covered positions north of these tank barriers and provide protection from either an armored or infantry attack. Very little resistance was met until the group was within two hundred yards of their objective. Here they were pinned down by artillery and automatic weapons fire. Nevertheless, the mission was accomplished by 1930.

Task Force Number Two, which was composed of one platoon each of Company A, of tanks, and of tank destroyers, was to attack and take the small village of Ensheimer Hof. After leaving Ensheim at 1430, the task force headed through Gehrle woods

and Kinkelbach Creek to their destination, which was captured a hour and a half later under only light artillery resistance. The tanks and tank destroyers then returned to Ensheim while the infantry platoon outposted the town.

Once again the Second Battalion threw itself into the attack at 1630 that afternoon with **F** in the assault. Once again it seemed as if every gun in this mighty defense opened up as the defenders showed their determination to stop any advance. Using tank destroyers and tanks to full advantage, the company managed to reduce three of the large fortifications in the sector as well as several smaller ones. This was accomplished in the most devastating fire under which any unit of the regiment had ever fought. The exhausted state of those in the Second Battalion forced the ceasing of this offensive soon after dark. Again we noticed the phenomena which never fails to surprise men in battle: one may fight almost indefinitely without feeling fatigue, but as soon as he allowed to rest, all the exertion he has expended seems to fall on him at once, and he drops into a deep sleep.

The following morning the attack was resumed with **F** still the assault element. Although the first two pillboxes were taken with very little resistance, the enemy suddenly seemed, to realize that this day must be his last, most desperate attempt to stop the invader. For ten straight hours, from 1000 to 2000, we received the most intense shelling in our entire combat experience. Every weapon in that sector of the Siegfried Line was

trained on us in a saturation bombardment which consisted of every size German weapon — small, medium, and large mortar, light and heavy artillery, high velocity anti-tank guns, and all sized rockets were unleashed in a fury of explosion and fire. During all of this, **F** supported by the remainder of the Second as well as by tank destroyers and tanks, took a total of eighteen pillboxes.



C Company had also been committed with the mission of clearing the fortifications east of the crossroads. Just before midnight of this day, the 19th, the last pillboxes which guarded the highway were eliminated. In addition to capturing these boxes, **C** took prisoner almost an entire company as well as a battalion commander. The way was now clear for the mighty armor to be unleashed into the Rhine Valley.

The 254th Infantry was the first unit in the Seventh Army to blast a path through the Siegfried Line. In five days we had cracked a defense which had taken seven years to build, had drained the financial resources of the nation that built it, and had been called by many of the world's leading military strategists "impenetrable."

Although the highway was free of opposition, there still remained some fortifications in our regimental sector to clear. **F** Company, therefore, continued to the east and by 0400 had taken seven more pillboxes and captured the Germans who manned them. Two hours later the Second and Third Battalions were alerted for early offensive action as the armor rumbled through. At this same time Company **A** sent a platoon sized combat patrol to Ober Wurtzbach; two hours later this town had fallen after light resistance, and the unit captured forty prisoners. At 0900 the remaining two platoons of **A** reconnoitered the twelve pillboxes which remained untaken in our sector. Each of these was found deserted. That afternoon, as we waited to move through the defense we had broken, we watched the tanks roar past us, cutting deeper into the Nazi homeland. We realized then that the heavy price we had paid had not been too high. The world was one big day closer to peace.

After we had read the telegram sent us that morning, "Congratulations from the officers and men of the Third Infantry Division," we wearily started through the gap we had made. We wondered what new task lay ahead of us. Whatever it could be, we somehow knew that we would be able to do it.

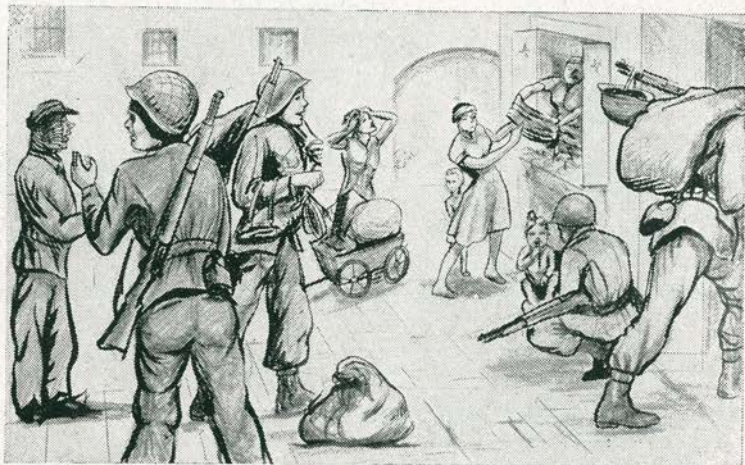


Chapter IV

The Realization

The Siegfried Line had been breached; as troops and equipment began to pour through the hole we had made, a new problem presented itself throughout the Seventh Army front: the enemy must now be sought in order that he be completely defeated. The situation was fluid. There were no more definite German lines just as there were no longer any static friendly ones. For a week the only uniformed enemy we saw were the those who raised their hands high over their heads at our approach.

For the first time we saw entire towns and villages fully peopled with the "Master Race." The population, for the most part, seemed dazed as we would enter a town, contact the Burgo-meister, and requisition the best homes for ourselves. There were always a few who would greet us with broad smiles and enthusiastic waves and another few who could not disguise the hate which burned in their eyes and glowed in their faces. The great

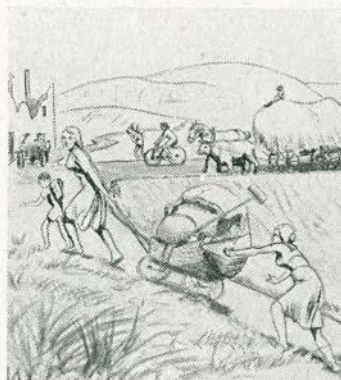


majority were so deferential that their attitude approached servility as they lavished us with food and liquor.

We found that the famous German schnapps, which they seemed to enjoy so much, tasted to us like an unholy combination of gasoline, kerosene, and ether, with just a dash of quinine. The beer was little better; instead of the thick, heavy brown liquid we had expected, we were given only a light amber substance which tasted as bitter as our Halazoned water. Only the cognac, vermouth, and recaptured French wines met with the approval of the those who enjoyed the pleasure of the bottle.

Perhaps we were most amazed at the clothing these people wore. A stroll down the main artery of Neunkirchen or Mitfel-Bexbach (the street was probably named Adolf Hitler Straße — every town had one) on Sunday afternoon seemed little different than a similiar promenade along Main Street in Peoria or Hoboken. Women wore well-cut woolen suits or dresses, silk stockings, and silly hats; furcoats were no more uncommon than in the States. Only the well-worn shoes indicated that Germany had been waging war for seven years. There were no young men; only boys and old men represented the male population. The youngsters had shed their leather week-day shorts and wore knickers with soft shirts and sport coats. The men dressed just as all old men dress — conservatively, in blue or gray or black.

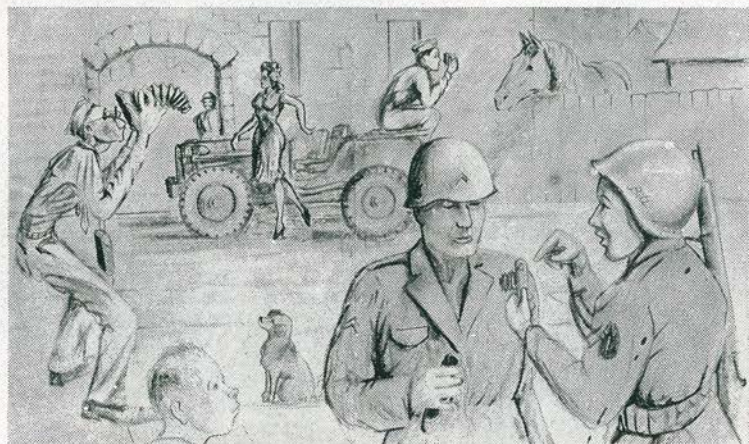
In sharp contrast to the excellent garments afforded by the natives was the clothing worn by the DP's, or Displaced Persons. These unfortunates, who had been taken from their homelands by the German war machine to relieve the critical manpower shortage which total mobilization had caused, had been treated on a par with our slaves in American Colonial Days. Individual treatment varied with the respective "owners," but even those who were well fed were extremely ill-clad.



As we rolled deeper into Germany, the roads became more and more clogged as these people fled from those who had enslaved them. Nothing seemed important except traveling as far and as fast as possible toward their native lands each day. French, Belgians, and Dutch hurried westward walking, bicycling, or pushing baby carriages and carts; Poles, Slavs, and Russians fled eastward with their miserable possessions strapped on their backs or piled in wagons. We enjoyed many cups of black coffee because we knew that the condensed milk which came in our "10-in-1" rations had gone to feed a tiny Polish baby whose starved mother was unable to feed it. We took clothing, warm clothing, from the houses of the Germans to give it to those who were once again returning to life.

In southern Germany we found that the people were very devout, went to church regularly, and refused to work on the Sabbath. We could never reconcile these Nazi homes filled with religious paintings and books. Across the room from a copy of "The Last Supper" was sure to be a photograph of Der Fuhrer; in the bookshelves, "Mein Kampf" would rest beside the Bible.

Most of the homes in this territory were new with all modern conveniences. In the farm villages, many of the houses were heated with steam, had electric stoves, and beautiful furniture;

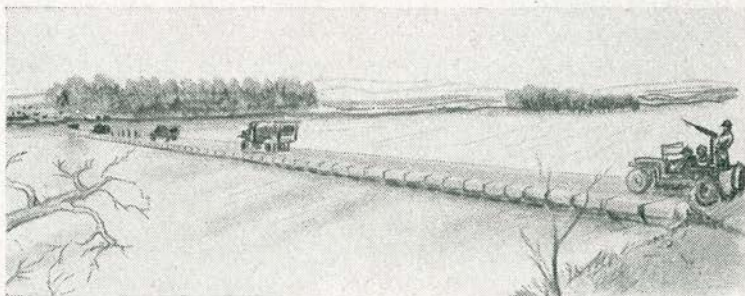


even the poor possessed new, expensive looking furnishings. Germany had done well in her systematic rape and loot of Europe.

Looting was strictly forbidden, but cameras, field glasses, and pistols seemed to appear everywhere. Our corner meetings began to sound like a convention of the National Photographers Guild as focal lengths, depth of focus, the relative merits of Scheiner and Din tests, and the advantages of Leica over Contax became the center of discussion.

We were never able to stay away from the children — even German children — and we soon learned what they meant by asking for "Cowgoomie." As we handed over a stick we might say something about "these darn Kraut kids," but they got the gum.

It did not take us long to realize that the average German was a bewildered person. All his sense of moral values and his philosophy of life were fashioned by the deluge of propaganda that had characterized life under the Nazi regime. Now everything he had been told to believe in — mainly Power and the Invincibility of the Wehrmacht — was being swept away by the surge of the allied armies sweeping into his homeland. In his hour of need, there was nothing to which he could turn. Religion, while outwardly a strong influence in his life, had been so subjugated to the stronger demands of the Nazi party that it could not now take the place of that dominant feature of each German's life. Education had become only a refined tool of Nazi propadanda. For the time being, at least, they could see no hope of salvation; everywhere we went we heard them say, "Alles, alles kaput."



Sixty-five miles and eight days after we had blasted a path through the Siegfried we were again on the banks of the Rhine.

As we rode on a pontoon bridge across this traditionally sacred stream, we could see in the distance the flash of big guns denoting that once again the German Wehrmacht was attempting to form some sort of a static line.

It soon became apparent to all of us exactly what they were attempting to do. By leaving small groups of their best troops, bolstered by the SS, they hoped to purchase, even at the cost of complete annihilation of these delaying groups, the essential time it would take to form somewhere a line defense.

Speed became as essential to us as time to them. So hard and so swiftly must we hit these holding troops that it would be impossible for the main body of Germans to again organize an effective defensive stand. So fierce and so sustained must be their fight that enough time would be gained to eventually stop us.

The troops we met, for the most part, were of the most fanatical type possible. They relied on the superior fire power of automatic weapons to supplant their lack of men. The partial success of these tactics is well attested by the fact that in the month of April, we had almost one hundred more battle casualties than in March. Almost twice as many men were killed in action than during the entire month when we hit the Siegfried Line!

We found, however, that the soldier had greatly changed since the days he fought in France or even in the Siegfried Line. Always before he had fought until there was no chance of winning, and then had withdrawn, if possible, or surrendered if not. Now the enemy was divided into two groups: those who fought fanatically for the Fatherland, willing to die for their Nazi beliefs, and those who saw that further resistance was futile and surrendered readily, even giving at times valuable information to help stop the useless destruction of lives, homes, and property.

Different than any other combat period we had ever experienced, there could never be any rest, any let down in alertness. None of us knew just where the enemy was. We would pass through two or three towns without encountering a single soldier; then, without warning, the fourth would be fanatically defended and we would have to fight hour after hour in order to enter some small village. Continually we moved. Day after day and night after

night the advance continued southward; we must not give them time to form another defensive line! We had to keep moving even though we were so exhausted that no longer anything seemed important except rest and sleep. And still the Germans fought for time.

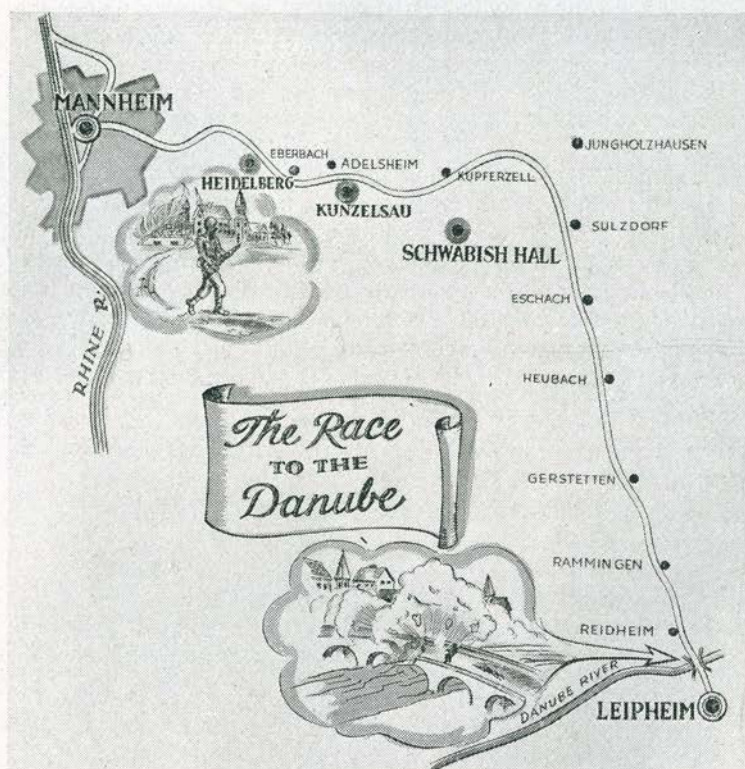


For the first time we felt the shocking impact of rear guard tactics. In our onrush, we would fail to uncover small pockets of German soldiers who would play havoc with our supply routes and communication paths until it became necessary to dispatch large numbers of our own troops to flush them from their hiding places.

In addition, it was impossible to maintain proper liaison between our own units and even neighboring regiments because of the rapidity of our advance. When a town was approached by elements of a front line unit, the group was often uncertain as to whether or not the town had been taken. Many villages were captured by a single jeep taking the wrong road; many men were reported missing when a wrong turn led them to a defended town. At times a company would suddenly find itself five to ten miles ahead of any adjacent organization; if the enemy realized this, he would strike, and another bloody battle would ensue.

It became apparent about the middle of April that the Germans were attempting to reorganize on the banks of the Danube River, and our headlong drive became known as the "Race for the Danube."

At times it looked as if we were going to lose that race. Our path was well marked with the bodies of our fallen comrades. There are places along this route that we shall never forget: Hoherot, Osterburken, Krautheim, the Jagst River, Dorzbach, Ingelfingen, the Kocher, Kunzelsau, Rublingen, Jungholzhausen, and



Schwabish Hall. There are other places, too—many of them among the 125 towns we took—that a single sniper will never let us forget. During this “complete rout” of which the headlines screamed, we received more than 600 replacements.

On the 24th of April, we realized that we were within a day of the Danube. A fast shuttling system which we had been using for several days had sped our progress considerably. Late that evening the First Battalion, which was the assault element, uncovered a strong enemy pocket at Gerstetten and were engaged in clearing that town when a message was received from Battery **B** of the 862d Field Artillery that they were being attacked by a company of German infantry. **C** Company was immediately motorized and moved quickly by truck to the town of Hinchstitten where

they routed the enemy unit. It was a great pleasure, they said, to come to the aid of those who had always supported us when our own position was precarious.

Advancing very swiftly under no resistance the next day, the First Battalion arrived in Reidheim on the northern bank of the Danube at 1500 on the 25th. Amazed, they discovered that the bridge was still intact. Immediately troops began to pour across under sporadic machine gun and artillery fire. However, only one platoon of **A** had made its way over the structure and into the town of Leipheim on the other side when a flag was waved from the church tower and the bridge was blown. Immediately, this one platoon began to receive very heavy fire from automatic weapons emplaced in buildings all along the main street of the town.

Fortunately, however, the demolition job had not been thorough, and the other two platoons of **A** were able to lay boards across the uprights under the protection of a strong base of fire built by the remainder of the battalion. Nevertheless, it took some time to obtain the material for the ramp and to correctly place it on the uprights while under fire, and for an hour and a half the one platoon across the river held alone a tiny bridgehead in this last, desperate bulwark of the once "invincible" Wehrmacht.

At last, around 1630, all of Company **A** managed to cross the makeshift bridge, and two hours later the rest of the battalion was also in Leipheim. Only a few minutes after the town was lightly outposted, and while the houses were still being searched for snipers, a counterattack struck from the direction of the airport to the southeast. Two companies and three tanks smashed into the left flank of the town, which was being defended by **B** Company, and after two hours of intensive fighting, in which the enemy inflicted twenty-four casualties on that unit alone, the attack shifted to the part of town being held by **A** Company.

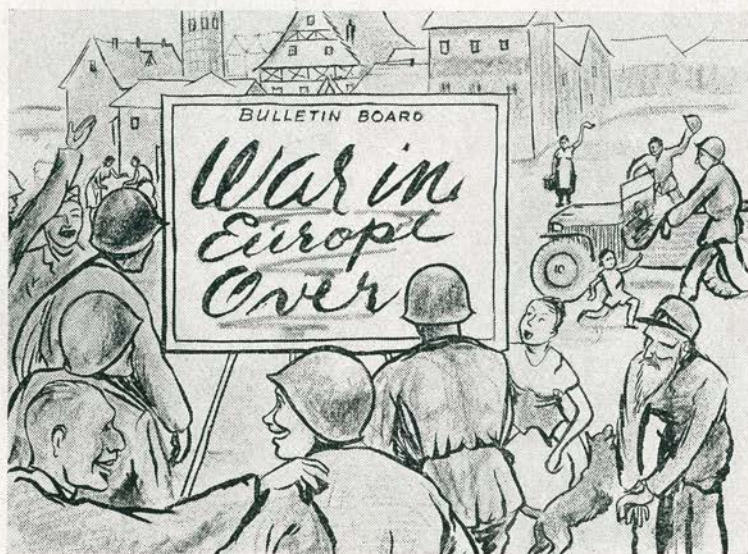
The enemy was well supported with two and four barreled 88mm anti-aircraft guns which they leveled at the town in a barrage which approached the intensity of that received in the Siegfried Line. All artillery within range was called in an effort to turn back the attackers; the Second Battalion was brought from Reidheim, and finished crossing the Danube at about 2200.

Two hours later, after suffering many casualties, the regiment drove the Germans from the town.

Once more the enemy struck, this time at dawn the next day. Even larger numbers of German troops poured from the vicinity of the airfield. This time we were better prepared, and the full impetus of the attack was never allowed to reach the town, although small groups of Germans managed to fight their way into Leipheim. This attack was also broken up; actually, the retreat of the enemy became almost a rout, with the result that our two day prisoner count was swelled to 698, the largest of any like period in our history.

For the first time since we had been committed on the 1st day of January, we were pulled off the line for a rest. We were to guard targets in the vicinity of Rothenburg, Germany. Our combat days in Europe were over. For two weeks we listened to the radio and waited for the news we knew was sure to come. No longer did we hear the roar of the artillery, the death rattle of the burp gun, the crack of the sniper's bullet.

On a day like any other day we heard the news that was flashed all over the world. For a brief moment we were intoxicated with the



joy of the thing of which we had so long dreamed. And then we remembered. We remembered Colmar and Leipheim and all the rivers and the woods and the streams and the towns and the men who lay between. We remembered another city and we wondered what rivers and what woods and what streams and what towns and what men lay between.

On June 15, 1945, just two years after our activation, we received the word that the Regiment had completed its work; it was to go back to the United States for deactivation. Most of us did not have enough "points" for discharge, so we would be scattered throughout other units in Germany.

Following this announcement was one which made us all very proud: we had been awarded the highest honor an organization may receive, the Presidential Unit Citation. As long as we were in the army, wherever we went, all of us would wear pinned on our right breast, by itself, a royal blue ribbon rimmed with gold. But many of us would carry forever, where it could never be removed, the pride of having built the 254th Infantry Regiment.

Presidential Citation

GENERAL ORDERS
No. 44
SECTION XIII

WAR DEPARTMENT
WASHINGTON 25, D. C. 6 June 1945

2. As authorized by Executive Order 9396 (sec. I, WD Bul. 22, 1943), superseding Executive Order 9075 (sec. III, WD Bul. 11, 1942, the following unit is cited by the War Department for outstanding performance of duty in action during the period indicated, under the provisions of section IV, WD Circular 333, 1943, in the name of the President of the United States as public evidence of deserved honor and distinction. The citation reads as follows:

The 3d Infantry Division with the following attached units:

254th Infantry Regiment,
99th Chemical Battalion,
168th Chemical Smoke Generator Company,
451st Anti-Aircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion,
661st Tank Destroyer Battalion (SP),
756th Tank Battalion,
IPW Team 183.

Fighting incessantly, from 22 January to 6 February 1945, in heavy snow storms, through enemy-infested marshes and woods, and over a flat plain crisscrossed by numerous small canals, irrigation ditches, and unfordable streams, terrain ideally suited to the defense, breached the German defense wall on the northern perimeter of the Colmar bridgehead and drove forward to isolate Colmar from the Rhine. Crossing the Fecht River from Guemar, Alsace, by stealth during the late hours of darkness of 22 January, the assault elements fought their way forward against mounting resistance. Reaching the Ill River, a bridge was thrown across but collapsed before armor could pass to the support of two Battalions of the 30th Infantry on the far side. Isolated and attack by a full German Panzer Brigade, outnumbered and outgunned, these valiant troops were forced back yard by yard. Wave after wave of armor and infantry was hurled against them but despite hopeless odds the regiment held tenaciously to its bridgehead. Driving forward in knee-deep snow, which masked acres of densely sown mines, the 3d Infantry Division fought from house to house and street to street in the fortress towns of the Alsation plain. Under furious concentrations of supporting fire, assault troops crossed the Colmar Canal in rubber boats during the night of 29 January. Driving relentlessly forward, six towns were captured within 8 hours, 500 casualties inflicted on the enemy during the day, and large quantities of booty seized. Slashing through to the Rhone-Rhine Canal, the garrison at Colmar was cut off and the fall of the city assured. Shifting the direction of the attack, the division moved south between the Rhone-Rhine Canal and the Rhine toward Neuf Brisach and the Brisach Bridge. Synchronizing the attack, the bridge was seized and Neuf Brisach captured by crossing the protecting moat and scaling the medieval walls by ladder. In one of the hardest fought and bloodiest campaigns of the war, the 3d Infantry Division annihilated three enemy divisions, partially destroyed three others, captured over 4,000 prisoners, and inflicted more than 7,500 casualties on the enemy.

By order of the Secretary of War:

Official:
J. A. ULIO
Major General
The Adjutant General

G. C. MARSHALL
Chief of Staff

The Trail of 254 Thru Blood and Fire

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