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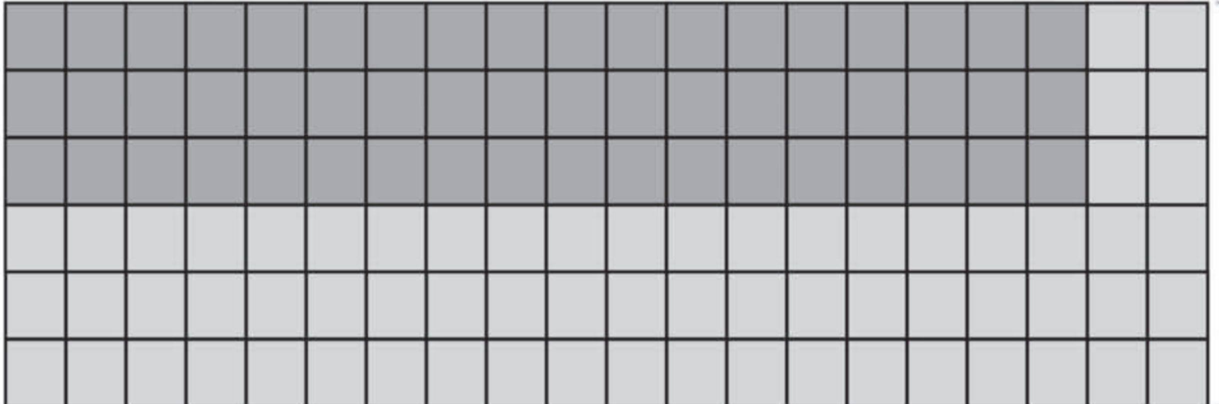

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'Hallowed war grave' is world's deepest discovered shipwreck

The Battle of Leyte Gulf, from October 23-26, 1944, was the largest air and sea battle of World War II. An important part of the battle took place off Samar Island on October 25, 1944.

In this engagement, four Japanese battleships (among them the giant *Yamato*, with her 18-inch main guns), six heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and 11 destroyers attacked a smaller U.S. task group known as "Taffy 3," commanded by Rear Adm. Clifton A. F. Sprague, made up of six small escort carriers, three destroyers, and four destroyer escorts.

Swarmed on by continuous American air attack from Taffy 3 and Taffy 2, the Japanese task force broke off contact and limped away, but not before several American ships were damaged or sunk. One of those that plunged beneath the waves was the U.S. Navy destroyer escort USS *Samuel B. Roberts* (DE-413)—nicknamed the "*Sammy B*."

Of the *Sammy B*'s crew, 89 died while the other 120 survivors clung to life rafts for 50 hours before rescue came.

The wreck of the *Sammy B* was discovered in June of this year at a depth of over four miles, thanks to Texas billionaire, adventurer, and retired naval officer Victor Vescovo, who owns a deep-diving submersible.

"We like to say that steel doesn't lie and that the wrecks of these vessels are the last witnesses to the battles that they fought," Vescovo told BBC News. "The *Sammy B* engaged the Japanese heavy cruisers at point-blank range and fired so rapidly it exhausted its ammunition; it was down to shooting smoke shells and illumination rounds just to try to set fires on the Japanese ships, and it kept firing. It was just an extraordinary act of heroism."

The BBC report said, "The vessel is famed for a heroic final stand against the Japanese. Outnumbered and outgunned, it managed to contain and frustrate several enemy ships before eventually going down. In the imagery captured by the adventurer's sub . . . it's possible to see hull structure, guns and torpedo tubes.

"The *Sammy B* has puncture holes from Japanese shells, and there is evidence in the stern quarter of one massive hit. From its crumpled appearance, it appears the vessel impacted the sea floor bow-first."

The bearded, 56-year-old Vescoso, the co-founder and managing partner of a private equity company in Dallas, was the first person to visit the deepest points in Earth's five oceans, has climbed the highest peaks on each of the seven continents; and recently went into space on *New Shepard*, the rocket and capsule system developed by Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos.

Vescoso said, "I always remain in awe of the extraordinary bravery of those who fought in this battle against truly overwhelming odds—and won."

The Navy said it has no plans to raise the *Sammy B*, as the site it considered to be a "hallowed war grave."

God rest the Queen

As we were going to press, we received news of the passing of Queen Elizabeth II. Although diminutive in stature, she was a giant on the world stage for 70 years, even serving in Britain's Auxiliary Territory Service (similar to the American WACs) in WWII. Well-deserved accolades came pouring in from around the world about her reign, death, and everlasting impact on modern civilization. We shall not see another like her in our lifetime, I'm afraid, but I am holding out high hopes for King Charles III.

—Flint Whitlock, Editor
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Joe Johnson's ordeal: a teenage POW of the Japanese feigned insanity to save his life.

Private Joe Johnson wakes on the floor of the Pasay schoolhouse, a few miles south of downtown Manila, capital of the Philippines. He sits upright, rubs his eyes, and peers through the gloom. It's spring 1943, and Joe checks his canteen, mess kit bowl, and spoon to make sure they haven't been stolen during the night. Besides the clothes on his back, they are his only possessions.

Joe knows he ought to lie down and try for more rest before the wake-up order is given, but he wills himself to stay sitting. The daylight has almost come. Across from him in the schoolroom is a chalkboard covered with Japanese words scrawled phonetically with English letters. Joe squints and looks closer as the light grows.

If any prisoner believes he has learned a phrase, he writes it on the board for the others to learn. Hurry up. Come here. Lift this. Carry that. The more of the Japanese language a prisoner knows, the fewer times he is hit.

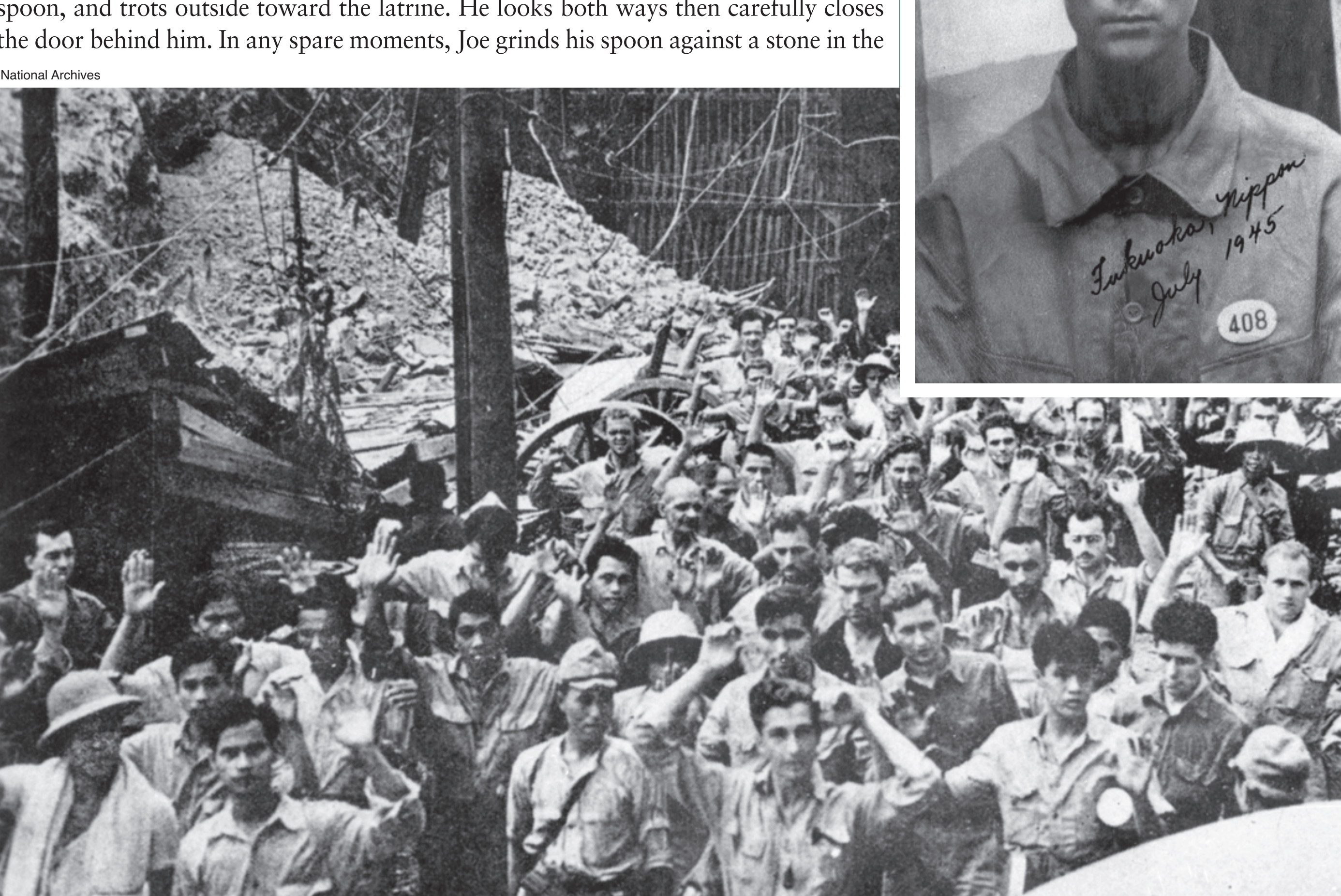
Joe studies the board for a few minutes, grabs his mess kit and canteen, pockets his spoon, and trots outside toward the latrine. He looks both ways then carefully closes the door behind him. In any spare moments, Joe grinds his spoon against a stone in the latrine, sharpening the handle to a razor's edge. He likes the idea of carrying a hidden weapon.

He shouldn't have been in the Army to begin with. At age 14, a year before Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Joe had run away from home and fibbed about his age to enlist, claiming he was 18. After being sent to the Philippines, he'd served as a bugler until the Japanese invasion.

He'd picked up his rifle and fought on Bataan until its surrender on April 9,

Photo courtesy of the author

National Archives



ABOVE: Captured Japanese photo of American and Filipino soldiers and sailors taken prisoner after the fall of Corregidor, May 6, 1942. TOP: Joe Johnson, age 19, photographed in summer 1945 after two years as a POW.

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LEFT: 15-year-old Joe Johnson (circled) shown as a member of Company D, 31st Infantry Regiment, at Fort McKinley, Manila. He stood 5′ 7″ and weighed 135 lbs. in 1941. ABOVE: After running away from home, joining the Army, and arriving in the Philippines, Joe (shown here at age 15 wearing a World War I uniform) underwent basic training at Fort McKinley.

1942, then fought on Corregidor until it fell a month later. Outgunned, outmanned, starving, and disease-ridden, the U.S. troops had few options. At last, General Jonathan Wainwright had raised the white flag. Young Joe Johnson became part of the largest group of U.S. troops ever to surrender.

Now, a year into his stint as a prisoner-of-war, Joe has just turned 17. As he eats a meager bowl of morning rice, he reminds himself to keep a sharp lookout during the day ahead. The prisoners are counted and marched from the schoolhouse to the Nichols Field worksite, a 45-minute trek by foot. The enemy is forcing POWs to extend an airstrip by hand. It will become the longest runway in the Pacific. Joe is handed a pickax and ordered to work.

Prisoners are already hacking into a ridge to his right, ripping away at the rocks and dirt with pickaxes. More prisoners shovel the debris into railway carts, while others lug the loads to a destination he can't see. Sweat runs across bone and sinew. Every man is a scarecrow.

A young prisoner off to the left has angered the guards. The work slows slightly as the others watch in short, furtive glances. Guards surround the prisoner. It's barely noon, and a guard nicknamed El Lobo beats the man across the back with his cane. Another guard strikes him hard across the mouth.

It's not the first beating that Joe has witnessed at Nichols Field. Most beatings don't last long, but some are known to stretch through the afternoon if the guards feel so inclined. For this man, the guards stop the beating and make him dig a hole. Joe knows this can't be good. The prisoner is tired and cut up, yet all afternoon he is forced to dig until it's late in the day.

Near sunset, the commandant appears and strides over to the prisoner. He's dug his own grave. As the soft diffusion of twilight descends over the field, the commandant beheads the man.

Joe's stomach lurches but he has no choice but to continue working until the order is given to stop. Joe has no boots. They rotted away in the rainy season. He has scaly sores on his legs and ankles. He runs a constant fever—his body sometimes burning, sometimes freezing—and he often shakes throughout the night. He's lost some of the feeling in his hands and feet. The membranes of his mouth and nose are inflamed. His gums are bleeding and swollen. His stomach hurts continually. He's grown to over six feet tall but weighs less than 110 pounds.

One of the rooms at Pasay is a small infirmary, and a medic has diagnosed him with dry beriberi, pellagra, scurvy, and a persistent case of malaria. The hard labor and starvation diet intensify the mix of ailments that steadily beat him down.

A season passes, and when summer 1943 arrives, the commandant raises the pressure. He wants the runway completed soon. Quotas are upped. Beatings become more frequent. One prisoner is shot without provocation. Another is beheaded. Several try to escape but are caught and executed. Joe notes the heightened irritability of the guards and vows to keep his head down.

But late one afternoon Joe's luck runs out. His crew is sluggish. The men are exhausted. Joe tries to rally the men. He

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Photo courtesy of the author

Sickly and malnourished, surviving prisoners of the horrific Nichols Field work detail are shown in front of the Pasay schoolhouse that served as their barracks. Joe, now 17, is second from left in the second row, circled.

picks up the slack on behalf of the others. But El Lobo strides over to check things out.

"Speedo!" El Lobo shouts to the men. It's the one English word all guards seem to know. He clubs the closest with his cane. It's Joe. El Lobo shouts again. Again Joe is hit.

"Can't you see we're trying," Joe mutters, his eyes focused on his work. El Lobo snorts and clubs Joe a third time.

The burning fuse reaches the dynamite. Explodes. On reflex, the boy snatches the cane out of the hands of El Lobo and breaks it across his knee. The moment the broken cane clatters on the gravel beneath his feet, Joe realizes he is dead.

El Lobo yells for support. Two guards run over and grab Joe. The other prisoners in Joe's crew glance in his direction and shake their heads. The guards hustle Joe to a guardhouse at the main entrance of the work area. They order the boy to stand at attention while they take turns hitting him in the ribs with their rifle butts. Another guard runs over and joins the fray. They hit his face. Shoulders. Arms. The side of his head. Kick him in the crotch. They shout in Japanese: "Why did you break the cane? Tell us! Why?"

Joe refuses to answer. Silence is his final dignity.

An American officer, a fellow prisoner, sizes up the situation and sprints over. He bows to the guards then shouts at Joe to answer his captors. "Tell them something. Anything! You can't just stand with your mouth shut when they're asking you questions."

The guards interpret Joe's refusal to answer as defiance. Joe knows this but doesn't care. He's hungry. Sick. Worn out. Furious. He tries to spit at the guards, but his mouth is so dry nothing emerges. Blood runs from one ear and marks a red trail down his face. His nose is bleeding all over his chin. One eye is swelling shut. He's lightheaded and feels like vomiting. He has lost the desire to live.

He hears the American officer yelling at him once more. The guards have started up again on his face. Joe's world swirls and turns black. He collapses. A bucket of muddy water is thrown on him. He awakens to find two guards pulling him up and off the ground. They prop him against a shed and point to a shallow hole that two prisoners are already digging to receive him.

The prisoners have been ordered to hustle; they're a foot deep already, and one pauses with his shovel long enough to say, "Damn it, man. Just speak to them. They're going to bury you if you don't."

Joe hears the words but doesn't move his lips. A crowd gathers: several guards, a couple of American officers, and El Lobo. The guards are laughing at Joe, shaking their heads. For reasons he never understands, the two prisoners are told to stop shoveling. Work on his grave halts, and Joe is shoved back in line as the prisoners march back to Pasay for the night. Maybe it's dinnertime for the guards, too. Nobody likes to kill on an empty stomach.

With the help of his fellow prisoners, Joe stumbles the three miles back to the schoolhouse. All he hopes for is a chance to lie down. But the prisoners are lined up in the inner courtyard for evening roll call,

and El Lobo stands with his arms folded. He calls Joe's number. Slowly and painfully, Joe steps forward. El Lobo and two guards drag him to the commandant's office at the front of the schoolhouse.

The commandant is finishing some paperwork behind his desk and doesn't look up when Joe enters. His second-in-command also stands before the desk. He's a tall, thin officer known as "Cherry Blossom" due to an insignia on the collar of his dark green uniform. Cherry Blossom has called in the U.S. Army medic who runs the dispensary. The medic looks at Joe but says nothing until the commandant looks up, stares for a moment at Joe, and says in English, "Examine this man. He can't talk. See what's the matter."

The medic pulls out a tongue depressor, steps in front of Joe, and says, "Open your mouth." Joe complies. The medic looks long and hard down Joe's throat before stepping back and answering: "He has a badly infected and swollen throat. No wonder he can't speak."

The commandant returns to his paperwork. Without looking up again he says, "Okay. We need all prisoners working. Try to cure him. Dismissed."

The medic grabs Joe by the elbow and ushers him outside and to the infirmary. Once inside he says, "You lucky sonuvabitch. I don't know what you did to land yourself in there, but they bought my bull. You'd better sleep here tonight. I'll try to clean you up. They messed with you good." Joe slides to the floor while the medic grabs alcohol and bandages and hustles to swab Joe's throat with iodine.

Cherry Blossom stands in the door. His voice is sudden, quiet yet firm. "Stand up, number 1176."

Joe struggles to rise.

Cherry Blossom hauls the boy to his feet. Like the commandant, he speaks fluent English. "I have a son in Japan who is about your age. We have a strong bond, and I wish to return home and see him again, just like I know your parents wish to see you again someday. Your survival has caused a loss of face for the guards. If you do not go to work tomorrow, you will be killed.

"But if you go to work, it will show them a strong character. They respect

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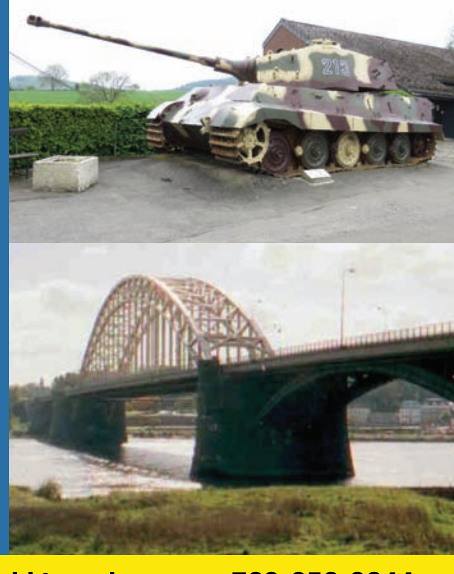

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Patients in the hospital ward at Bilibid Prison in Manila. Joe was sent here after a beating for attacking a guard and saved himself by pretending to be insane.

courage. Go to work tomorrow, and I will find you. I will arrange for you to have an easier job for the next few days. But you must show me that I have not misjudged your character. Am I understood?"

Joe nods. Cherry Blossom turns and leaves the infirmary.

The next morning Joe can barely walk to Nichols Field. Other prisoners in his column encourage him along. Once inside the work area, a guard singles out Joe from formation, leads him over to a cooking area, and points to two huge cast-iron pots filled with water. Another prisoner is already building a fire underneath the pots.

"You're supposed to help me today," the prisoner says to Joe. "Frankly, I'm surprised to see you alive. Everyone is. You stoke the fire and boil the water. Look useful. You'll live."

Every day for the next two weeks, Joe boils water and ladles it into five-gallon tin buckets to cool for drinking. Each day during the lunch break, Cherry Blossom sidles over to the fires and passes Joe some of his food. Rice. Eggplant. Slender white-root radishes called daikon.

Joe can't help seeing the camp's second-in-command in a new light. Some guards are kind. After two weeks, Joe is healed enough to hoist two five-gallon buckets of water onto a pole and carry them to the guards on the worksite. He makes the rounds several times a day and soon is on a first-name basis with many of the guards. Some warm to him. One, named Tanaka, is even friendly.

"You know 'My Blue Heaven?'" Tanaka asks one afternoon.

"The song?"

"Hai. I like very much. Teach me the words."

Joe chuckles. Soon Tanaka is crooning the song all over camp.

It's a brief reprieve; Joe is still in pain, though he's healing from the beating. Cherry Blossom notices the improvement and stops sharing his food. Joe is still feverish from malaria. His stomach aches. The open wounds on his legs and ankles aren't getting better. His weight is dangerously low. He knows they're going to return him to pick-and-shovel work soon. Either the work will get him, or the diseases will.

The walk to and from the field each day is becoming harder and harder. Escape is not an option—other prisoners have tried, only to be hunted down and executed. He stops trying to learn Japanese words on the blackboard. Joe knows he's going to die at Nichols Field. It won't be long now.

A dark plan begins to form in the boy's mind. He remembers when a prisoner had gone insane, the Japanese had given the man a wide berth. Mental illness was to be avoided in that subculture, even feared. Manila's Bilibid Prison houses a hospital where prisoners with mental illnesses are detained. The rations are more plentiful at Bilibid, and American doctors work there—still prisoners, but allowed to practice. If Joe can get to Bilibid, maybe he'll live.

Joe knows he must be utterly convincing. His new plan is so desperate—so bold and beyond common sense—he needs to pull off the performance of a lifetime.

The next morning Joe heads to the worksite. Walking up to the first guard he sees, Joe removes his shirt and whips out his sharpened spoon. The boy shouts in a string of semi-fluent Japanese: "I'm going to cut your throat from ear to ear!"

The guard blinks. Joe slices into his own arm and counts in Japanese. "Ichi. Ni. San. Shi. When I get to 21, I'm gonna cut you!"

The guard stares transfixed, his eyes growing larger. In a flash he emerges from his trance and runs the other direction with a shout: "Crazy!"

Blood spurts with every heartbeat. Joe has cut deeper than planned. Guards gather and stare at the commotion. Still yelling, Joe slices three long lines up his right arm. He drops his weapon and smears his face and upper body with blood. The guards shudder. They motion for two prisoners to grab Joe. He puts up a token resistance before he's restrained.

All the rest of that day, Joe lies hogtied on the dirt of Nichols Field, bleeding, fearing he's gone too far. At day's end, guards prod him to his feet, tie a long rope around his neck like a dog, and march him back to the schoolhouse. The blood has congealed on Joe's face and body, although many wounds remain open. Joe can barely stand.

Outside the entrance of Pasay lies an "eiso"—a boxlike cage made of rough-hewn lumber—about half the size of a coffin. The guards strip Joe, force him into the eiso, and padlock it shut. No prisoner, to Joe's knowledge, has ever left the eiso alive.

Joe cannot sit or lie flat. He holds a naked fetal position throughout the sleepless night. No food or water is given to him the next morning. Prisoners whisper

encouragement to him as they march toward the field. Guards yell at them to shut up. The day passes. Another night.

At daybreak, a guard pushes a rice ball through a small opening in the cage. Joe takes a bite and spits it out. It's loaded with salt, inedible—a taunt. That afternoon, two guards poke him through the slats with bamboo sticks.

At nighttime, a sharp wind blows from the north, slicing through the cage. Joe shivers and prays for death, shaking so hard he rattles the eiso. The skies open with rain. Water seeps in around the boards. The boy twists his head and drinks. Rain falls the rest of that night. All the next day. All the next night. All the next day. Afterward, Joe loses track of time. The water keeps him breathing, but he's finished.

Sunlight emerges at last. Voices surround him, mocking. He can't understand the words. The door of the eiso is flung open. His eyes strain to adjust. Hands grab his ankles and drag his body across the boards. The pain is unbearable and he tries to cry out, but no words emerge. Other hands grab his wrists. His body lands on the splintery bed of a truck. His eyes stare ahead but cannot see or comprehend.

The ride is a slurry of bumps and bounces, swords of brightness and smothering blackness.

He hears curses. Senses a sudden quietness. Lies still in a hushed room. A voice comes from above him. "Take it easy, son." A needle enters his arm. He no longer feels pain.

When he awakes, Joe's mind begins to clear. He opens his eyes, starts to understand his surroundings. Comprehends the voice.

"You're at Bilibid Prison, son. I'm an American doctor. You're going to make it."

Joe begins to laugh. He laughs and laughs, although the sound is only a croaking whisper. He closes his eyes and sleeps in triumph.

His audacious acting has brought down the house. ■

This article is adapted from Marcus Brotherton's latest book, A Bright and Blinding Sun, *a biography of Joe Johnson.*

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RONALD SPEIRS: 'Imperfect But Daring Leader'

Swirls of black smoke billowed high above the steeples and splintered roofs as Lieutenant Ronald Speirs surveyed the stucco exteriors of storefronts and dwellings pocked by the scars of urban battle. Carentan, the once ornate French commune nestled along the banks of the Douve River, was a charred and blistered shell—a ghostly visage of its former self.

Local citizens had long awaited the hour of liberation from Nazi tyranny. Deliverance thundered forth from a devastating barrage of heavy naval guns, American artillery, and mortars raining ruin upon their historic community. Such was the terrible price of evicting the despised German occupiers.

"The place was a mess," observed one witness to the carnage. "Buildings on fire, dead Germans lying around, smashed equipment, streets blocked by rubble or with gaping shell holes, and the not-too-distant crackle of small arms."

Platoon leader and eventual commander of the famed 'Band of Brothers' unit Easy Company, Ronald Speirs attracted loyalty and admiration as well as controversy.

BY JARED FREDERICK & ERIK DORR

And the battle for Carentan was not yet done.

Entrenched in the rolling terrain encompassing the city, paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division—barely one week removed from their turbulent arrival in France on D-Day, June 6, 1944—prepared for the next phase of combat.

Having snaked through miles of contested hedgerows, the fatigued troopers converged on the estuary city amid a mass effort to conjoin the American beachheads and thwart impending German counterattacks. As night cloaked the front, 2nd Platoon of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment's "Dog Company" settled in for another restless evening.

101st Airborne Division troopers, backed by Sherman tanks, battle the Germans in the woods surrounding Bloody Gulch in Normandy, June 1944, where Lieutenant Ronald Speirs and his men fought. The paratroopers had only rifles, machine guns, and grenades with which to conduct the battle until armored forces arrived.

Painting © 2023 Larry Selman / Valor Studios

Speirs, a Dog Company platoon leader, meandered through the coils of Normandy brush, maintaining a watchful eye on the frontline. His bulky Thompson submachine gun was casually slung over his shoulder.

A displaced victim of a petty officer rivalry, the lieutenant was a relative newcomer to Dog Company. Recent battlefield forays rapidly established the 24-year-old Bostonian's reputation as a man not to be trifled with. Conjecture regarding his actions against prisoners of war and one of his own belligerent sergeants swiftly became fodder for foxhole scuttlebutt.

The officer's steely squint, reserve, and boundless stoicism only enhanced his mysterious aura. Despite the intrigue around his thickly concealed persona, the platoon leader faced few challenges in gaining the absolute trust of enlisted men. His unfazed heroics repeatedly inspired those comrades otherwise gripped by fear or self-doubt. Speirs knew how to run an outfit.

This story begins on the night of June 10, while the moon ascended into a clear sky, illuminating the pastoral terrain above Carentan with the power of a searchlight. A great silence hung over the Normandy marshes, like a calm before a storm.

Before daylight on June 11, Speirs awoke to the mellow soundscape of the Douve River, flowing near the regimental bivouac. Lethargy endured despite several hours of sleep. "During the long night airplane flight into Normandy and the six days fighting which followed," Speirs recalled, "the platoon had only one full night of sleep, and the men were physically and mentally affected. Our food consisted of K rations with which we had jumped, and a resupply of the same after contact with the beachhead was made."

It was Sunday. Regimental chaplain John Maloney held service and administered the Eucharist to troopers who prayed for continued survival. Food and toiletries were welcome amenities in the ramshackle encampment. News bulletins were scrutinized. Correspondents seeking additional juicy tales roamed the platoons. Fierce-looking operatives of the French Underground, armed with confiscated Mausers, turned up at company command posts with the latest intelligence.

Nearby, liberated vehicles and horses were processed with equal precision. Some of the troopers joked of becoming "airborne cavalry" due to the large number of captured steeds corralled by the division. "Today you could see paratroopers riding nags of all sizes and descriptions," recorded correspondent William Stoneman.

Even further beyond camp, Graves Registration conducted its somber accounting of soldiers who would fight no more. Clerks combed through the personal belongings of the dead and tended to corpses shrouded in plain cloth bags. Many more of these bags would be filled by week's end.

In camp, some airborne men already exhibited early signs of psychological distress. Sleepless nights or occasional tremors often forecasted long-standing inner struggles. "Some were able to take the pressure better than others," recalled Art "Jumbo" DiMarzio, a 19-year-old member of Speirs's platoon. "Every day was a big problem."

The clash at Carentan would be no exception.

Perched northwest of Carentan on June 11, Speirs lifted his field glasses and gazed upon the smoldering town below. In those rubble-strewn streets, citizens formed bucket brigades and frantically pumped water into the hoses of overwhelmed and ill-equipped firemen. All the while, Germans covertly bolstered their defenses in anticipation of renewed American assaults.

These enemy troops were members of the feared-but-respected Fallschirmjäger Regiment 6 and 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division. As veterans of Italy and the brutal incursion into the Soviet Union, the tested ranks of the Fallschirmjäger comprised a force not to be underestimated.

In a series of interviews with airborne scholar Mark Bando, Art DiMarzio later acknowledged the aggressiveness of this foe, explaining, "German paratroopers and the SS troopers were good soldiers. Later on during the war whenever the 101st Airborne would appear someplace, the average German infantryman was definitely afraid of us. They were not capable of doing battle with us. So, the German airborne would come

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Werner Ostendorff (left), commander of the 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division, confers with Major Friedrich August Freiherr von der Heydte, the 506th PIR's main opponent in Normandy. Paratrooper Art DiMarzio, 101st Airborne, recognized that these German troops were aggressive and not to be underestimated.

National Archives

ABOVE: Like American tourists on a sight-seeing trip, members of the 101st Airborne Division casually walk through Sainte-Marie-du-Mont on their way to engage in battle Carentan. RIGHT: Six months after D-Day, Lieutenant Speirs, now CO of Company E, 506th PIR, poses for a photo in snowy Bastogne wearing his jump jacket, two grenades, and holding a Thompson sub-machine gun.

to try and hold us back." The Battle of Carentan proved a microcosm of this pattern.

The plan of attack "was to effect a solid junction of the Omaha and Utah beachheads by capturing the city of Carentan. These orders had come directly from General Eisenhower," Speirs reported. "The mission was given to the 101st Airborne Division. At the same time, V Corps was to attack from Isigny toward Carentan."

Over the course of the previous day, battalions from the 502nd Regiment plowed towards town but were stymied by murderous fire and obstacles. A mixture of marshes, railroad embankments, narrow causeways, and cunningly deployed enemy emplacements made for a galling task.

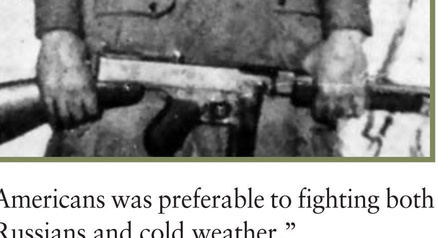
"Neither battalion was able to advance," noted Speirs of preceding attackers, "taking very heavy casualties because of the strong enemy resistance and good defensive positions. The flooded fields to either flank made it impossible to flank the defenders."

The 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment was therefore tasked with circling around the western edge of the city and pushing toward high ground on the southern outskirts designated as Hill 30. The worrisome enterprise, particularly the nearly unnavigable terrain, left an uneasy feeling in Speirs's stomach. He held no illusion as to the surprises Germans had in store.

Later assessing his thoughts in third-person, Speirs noted, "The platoon leader and his men were well aware of the German paratroopers' fighting capabilities because the Germans had defended Saint-Côme-du-Mont and Vierville in the earlier fighting to the north. They attacked strongly when ordered, and were armed with a high percentage of automatic weapons."

Fallschirmjäger troops sported distinctive camouflage jackets and oblong helmets, making them visually unique in contrast to standard German infantrymen.

"Their morale seemed good," Speirs added. "This was possibly because fighting the



Author's Collection

Americans was preferable to fighting both Russians and cold weather."

The hearty spirit of his enemy offered Speirs no consolation. He was further distressed by the presence of German armor in the Carentan sector. Only days prior, outside Saint-Côme-du-Mont, his platoon had encountered an armored car while safeguarding a bridge. The vehicle fired a burst of rounds—killing a GI—before withdrawing to Carentan.

Colonel Robert Sink, commanding officer of the 506th PIR, assembled his officers for a briefing at 10 p.m. Carentan's del-

National Archives

uged environment was a prominent topic of discussion. Paved roads led into the city of 4,000 residents but the surrounding landscape remained problematic.

"The entire area," Speirs reported, "with the exception of the city, and to the southwest, was swampy and intersected with drainage ditches, streams, and canals. Nowhere does the terrain rise above 30 meters."

On more open swaths of land, an array of cabbage patches and orchards offered intermittent concealment but hardly enough cover to halt a bullet. Furthermore, Speirs's platoon carried only one light machine gun since Speirs felt "that riflemen were more valuable during the constant attacking in which we had been engaged. Our light machine guns during the Normandy Campaign were not provided with the bipod, but only a tripod, which was not satisfactory while attacking in hedgerow country."

Manpower, or the lack thereof, was also a chief concern. Since D-Day, Speirs had lost over half his outfit. Following the briefing, Lieutenant Joseph McMillan—replacement of the deceased Captain Jerre Gross—pulled Speirs aside. "What's the strength of 2nd Platoon?" McMillan inquired.

"Fourteen, sir. Watkins caught some bits of mortar."

"Consider yourself lucky. Sergeants are running some of the platoons now."

"I know it."

"You watch yourself out there."

"Yes, sir," Speirs saluted with a reserved grin. Frankly, he was surprised to have survived this long. "Each parachute infantry platoon was authorized two officers due to the expected casualty rate," he reflected.

The wounding of his assistant platoon leader, Harold Watkins, demonstrated the foresight of such preparation. Watkins recovered from his wounds only to be killed in action in Holland that September.

Second Battalion moved out; Dog Company brought up the rear of the column. "Previously," Speirs noted, "each company had been given a horse and cart to carry equipment and ammunition. Being airborne, we had no organic transportation. These carts were kept to the rear of the column to eliminate noise."

Without the assistance of pack animals, the pace of Headquarters Company soon slackened due to its hefty jumble of machine guns, mortars, and rocket launchers.

Cautiously advancing in single file, the paratroopers crossed the four bridges spanning the various waterways outside town. "Up ahead," Speirs continued, "fires could be seen in Carentan, and the booming of the naval gunfire could be heard. The city was given a heavy shelling by the U.S. Navy and other friendly weapons as we moved in."

The blaze emitted a sinister orange glow in the night sky and cast bright reflections on the peaty fields. The spectacle presented a hellish montage that only further aggravated high anxieties. "The necessity for maintaining silence and keeping contact with the man ahead in the murk left no time for flank security," Speirs insisted. The men lurked in semi-blindness.

The column exited the roadway upon encountering a desolate farmhouse previously

engulfed by combat between German defenders and the 502nd Regiment. The terrain before them grew steeper, further slowing the progress of the encumbered Headquarters Company, and thus the whole formation.

Speirs and his team slung their weapons over their shoulders to help heave the heavy weaponry up the slopes. Fences and shredded debris from prior engagements littered the muddied yards and groves.

"At one gate," Speirs recalled, "there was a dead paratrooper, and every man in the long column stepped on him in the dark." The enemy remained silent as the battalion continued its winding probe through the vegetation. A hiss emanating from the fires of Carentan lent an air of boiling tension to the uneasiness.

Subsequent hours witnessed an unintentional game of hide-and-seek as companies lost and regained contact with units to their fronts and rears. Sporadic enemy fire was heard ahead but the trek persevered with sluggish, "uncertain progress," said Speirs. "The slow movement caused the tired men to doze off to sleep when the column stopped, and the officers in the companies had to wake men up and urge them forward."

Approximately three hours after the unit set out on its nighttime venture, 1st Battalion at last reached its objective: Hill 30. The Germans had largely left the Americans free to roam into position. Slightly to the west, Speirs deployed his men on both sides of the road to Baupte, where they maintained a watchful eye on the countryside—if they could remain awake.

Fatigue was all too apparent when troopers of Fox Company accidentally shot a 1st Battalion man who stumbled into their lines. Such tragic missteps were more common than soldiers cared to admit.

Company commanders conversed with Colonel Strayer at 2:30 a.m. to choreograph the next day's action. With heads hunkered under Captain Hester's rubber raincoat to conceal the flashlight beam, officers leaned in for instructions. From its new overlook, 2nd Battalion was slated to assault Carentan head on.

Bundesarchiv

ABOVE: With belts of 7.92mm ammunition around their necks, this MG42 team from von der Heydte's 6th Fallschirmjager Regiment prepares to move out against 506th PIR units that have dropped into the area. OPPOSITE: Aerial reconnaissance photo of Carentan taken before the heavy fighting reduced much of the town to rubble.

"The plan was to drive into town and join glider troops attacking from the other side," Speirs recalled. The companies were to move as one and dislodge German occupiers from the fortified streets, block by block if necessary. The movement was scheduled to step off at 6 a.m.

Shortly after dawn broke around 4 a.m. on June 12, battalion leadership was aghast to discover that, in the confusion of darkness, the regimental command post had established itself well ahead of its own companies. Concealed German gunners quickly capitalized on the error and fired at the misplaced headquarters. A company was promptly dispatched to rescue the besieged command post. From that point, the broader attack unfolded with daring swiftness.

"The desirability of getting into town quickly caused the 2nd Battalion to move straight down the main road in a column of companies," said Speirs. This tactical decision may otherwise have been considered illogical were it not for the essence of time and the limitations of terrain.

In any case, Fox Company led the way, with Easy and Dog Companies following. Easy Company—Speirs's future command—suffered considerable casualties when machine gun and mortar fire rained down destruction.

"At Carentan we really had to fight," wrote Pittsburgh paratrooper Charles Bray to his parents. "After being pinned out by German 88s for a couple of hours, we charged the outskirts of town. About halfway across a field a bullet ripped through the top of my steel helmet, knocking me about two feet in the air. I was dazed, reached up to the top of my head and didn't see any blood. I knew they missed me, got my helmet, and charged again."

When Bray neared a house, he was shot clean through the arm. "I couldn't use it very good then," he admitted, "so I fired with the other hand for a couple of hours. I was doing all right until I went down again. This time I got it in the side."

Amid this melee, Easy Company commander Dick Winters was struck in the leg by a ricochet while directing troops at

a key intersection. “He was not evacuated,” Speirs assured, “and in spite of a stiff and painful leg, stayed until the end of the campaign.”

Officers recognized the power of maintaining one’s poise under pressure. With much of Carentan cleared of enemy resistance, 2nd Battalion subsequently endured harassing fire from a cluster of houses on the town’s periphery. Troopers rushed to a neighboring home and lobbed a rifle grenade from an upper story, obliterating an enemy machine-gun position.

While the Germans commenced a harried withdrawal, a .30-caliber placed on the same floor violently mowed down scores of the scampering enemy. By 8:30 that morning, the brawl had largely subsided. “D Company was ordered to move into the city and did so,” Speirs concluded of the attack.

The level of carnage inflicted on Carentan was astounding, unlike anything Speirs had yet seen in Normandy. The city “had suffered heavily from the pre-attack shelling; whole blocks were ablaze, while many buildings were in ruins,” he observed. Sadly, the hard hand of war had yet to fully pass over the centuries-old commune.

Demanding chores remained for the 101st Airborne Division. Within hours of Carentan’s capture, division headquarters ordered the 506th Regiment to advance to the southwest and seize Baupte.

“When Lieutenant McMillan returned from a battalion meeting with this order,” Speirs recorded, “he was heard with amazement by the platoon leaders. He agreed that the plan, to say the least, was an ambitious one. Four phase lines had been designated” as benchmarks for the attack. McMillan’s platoon leaders—Speirs and two sergeants—“felt the company would be fortunate to reach the first” of those points.

“But the attack was necessary,” Speirs determined. “Otherwise, a German counterattack could pin the division in the city with the enemy in control of the high ground to the southwest.” The men clenched their teeth and prepared for the next round.

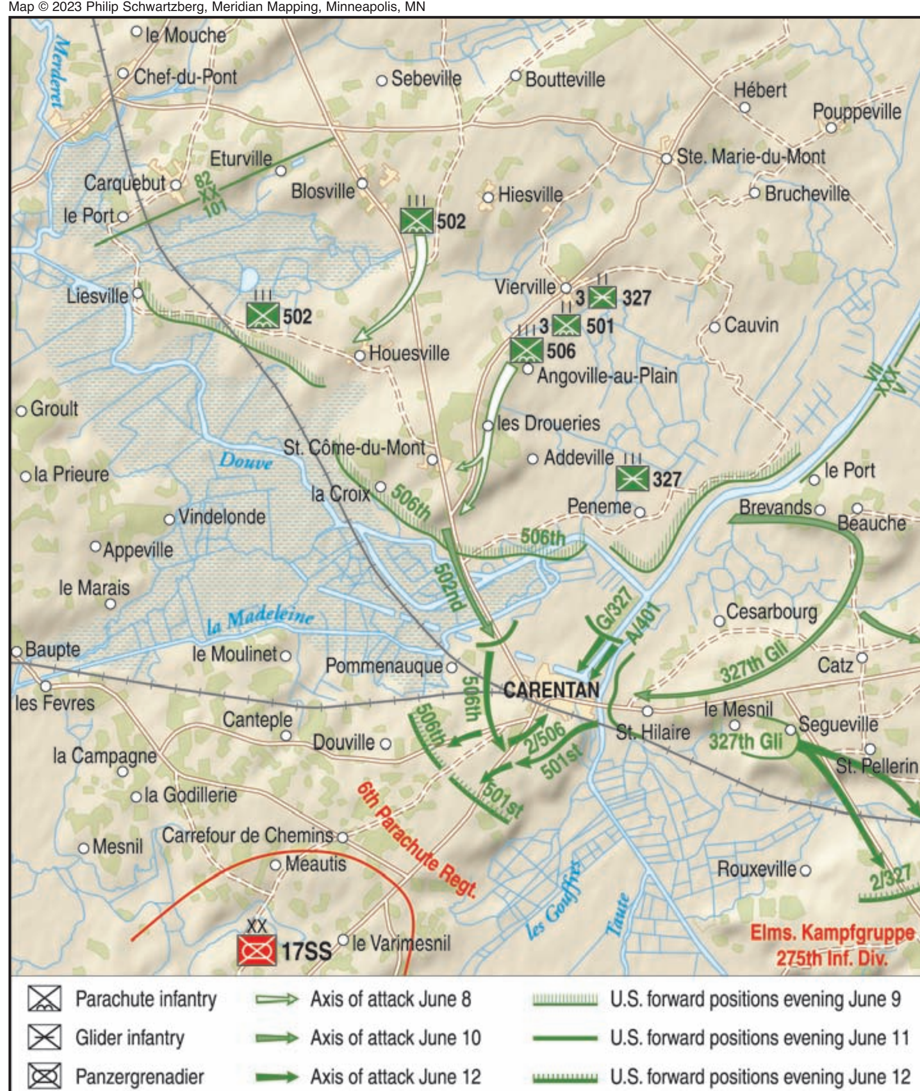
The afternoon sun bore heavily on the troopers while they roved in serpentine fashion. As the humidity further dampened their acrid uniforms, members of 2nd Platoon were tasked with clearing the Pommenauque area, a lightly populated suburb on the western fringe of Carentan.

While Lieutenant McMillan progressed with 3rd Platoon on the left, he encountered a lone Frenchman approaching from the general direction of the enemy. Addressing the civilian in broken French, Sergeant Allen Westphal inquired as to the whereabouts and strength of the Germans. The plainly clad resident pointed up the nearby railroad tracks, estimating there were perhaps a thousand combatants hidden beyond view.

McMillan’s shoulders slumped. “This was unhappy news to battered D Company,” Speirs confessed, “but the company pressed on.”

Given this unwelcome revelation, the platoon was relieved to discover only a handful of startled civilians in a smattering of weather-beaten structures. In one of these dwellings, Speirs found a gnarled Frenchman bloodied by the recent American bombardments. Without hesitation, the lieutenant urged the man to seek medical treatment at one of the aid stations in the city.

Map © 2023 Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis, MN



ABOVE: In four days of heavy fighting, elements of U.S. parachute and glider forces took Carentan and pushed west toward Pommenauge and Baupte. OPPOSITE: Smoke rises as paratroopers, ambulances, and a captured Kubelwagen populate a deserted street in Carentan in this colorized photo taken during the battle.

AKG Images

Such a pitiful sight underscored the bittersweet consequences of liberation. One United Press correspondent observed, "The French have come through much suffering. They have seen friends and loved ones killed, and they know that often our shells and bombs have done it, but they say: 'This is the price we pay for liberation.'"

The reporter later encountered a priest uttering burial rites over the remains of innocent victims. The clergyman slowly turned to the Americans and reverently declared, "We thank you for having delivered us."

Despite their initial feelings of suspicion and antipathy toward civilians, paratroopers endeared themselves to many townsfolk upon recognizing their appreciation and sacrifice.

"As the platoon moved out of the village to rejoin the company," Speirs continued, "it was brought under fire by long-range machine guns from the west. By infiltrating the men in rushes across the open fields, the platoon reached the shelter of the railroad embankment with no casualties."

Third Platoon, located some 500 yards down the cut, was not as fortunate. German machine gunners entrenched themselves in the tracks between railroad ties. From this shrewdly constructed position, they struck down the platoon's lead scout. Straddling the rails, Speirs's men scurried to the scene but were of little assistance in alleviating the bottleneck.

With bullets whizzing by, McMillan grasped his walkie talkie and barked into the headset for artillery support. Fellow companies confronted similar obstruction. "German rifle and machine gun fire was intense all along the line and the battalion was unable to advance in any part of the zone," insisted Speirs. When American artillery and mortars screamed overhead, Dog Company stayed put to avert friendly fire.

At dusk, McMillan received word on his SCR-300 radio to peel back toward battalion headquarters and reconsolidate under cover of darkness. The company's evening displacement left it bookended by Easy and Fox Companies.

"The boundary between companies was a deeply dug dirt road running back to the battalion command post," Speirs explained. "This area had very thick hedgerows with ditches on both sides and visibility was limited to the small fields between hedgerows." Potential confusion aside, McMillan safely shepherded his flock to the main line.

The officer generously permitted the bulk of his company a night's rest while a nearby skeleton crew pulled security at a junction of hedgerows. Those troopers who were granted a reprieve blissfully snored away their previous week of constant bustle.

While the ranks savored some rest, McMillan and Speirs made use of this relative calm to conduct a reconnaissance of the company sector. The two officers, craving a few hours of sleep themselves, casually inspected the right flank of their position as evening haze thickened. Out of the corner of his eye, Speirs spotted a squad dart through an orchard opposite his location. Who were these men?

"Night was creeping in and at first I thought it was a friendly patrol, and waved at them from 100 yards distance," he recalled. "The last two soldiers stopped and looked toward me, and I realized they were Germans passing our flank and headed for the battalion reserve line."

In a flash, McMillan raced to the command post to sound the alarm. Nervously stumbling through 600 yards of brush and pasture, the lieutenant ran toward the stone house occupied by Colonel Robert Strayer's headquarters, praying he would reach the structure before the Germans struck.

McMillan's heart sank when a sudden barrage of small arms erupted nearby. He was too late. The lieutenant arrived just as the Germans contacted battalion sentinels. Fortuitously, troopers of the strained Easy Company were at hand to help quell the sudden incursion.

McMillan's heroic sprint was not all for naught. While he regained his breath, six American light tanks rumbled into the command post area. Contrary to the wishes of Strayer and Sink, the leader of the armored pack refused to venture closer to the front for fear of becoming lost.

McMillan diplomatically approached the lead tanker, insisting, "You could do some good out there." The commander accepted the challenge, welcoming McMillan to guide his tank into place. The lieutenant appropriated the seat of the bow gunner and pointed the crew in the proper direction.

Dog Company enthusiastically welcomed this support at its forward position. Gratification was most notably expressed when the crew sprayed the tree line from which the German patrol had sprung only moments prior. On the company's front, the enemy remained silent for the duration of the night. The Germans temporarily delayed any aggression. The following day would reveal why.

On June 13, Speirs was entrusted with clearing a farmstead on the right flank, perhaps 400 feet below the city's southern rail line. "Just before dawn," he wrote, "the 81mm mortar platoon commenced firing at the house which the platoon was to attack. They fired a heavy concentration, causing the roof of the house to be set ablaze."

The men anxiously neared the property, advancing down the gentle slope to the dwelling encased by a stone wall. At this most inopportune time, the enemy counterattacked.

Bundesarchiv

ABOVE: Fallschirmjägers from FJR 6 take cover in an improvised shelter on the front lines near Carentan. BELOW: From their position in a hedgerow, .30-caliber machine gunners Walter "Smokey" Gordon (left) and Frank Millett, 506th PIR, stay alert for approaching Germans. OPPOSITE: 101st Airborne troopers guard a position along a farm lane in hedgerow country while a soldier holds his helmet up in the old trick of trying to draw fire so his buddy with a carbine can locate the enemy position.

Author's Collection

"We started out towards the farmhouse," Art DiMarzio remembered, "and when we got to the farmhouse, the Germans opened fire on us." All hell let loose. What became known as the Battle of Bloody Gulch had begun.

"At that moment," Speirs added, "a heavy mortar and artillery concentration landed in the area. One of the platoon riflemen was struck by this fire and lay moaning on the ground."

Unable to withstand this withering barrage, 2nd Platoon leapt into the large courtyard of the fiery farmhouse. The ferocity of German salvos intensified, and the precarious nature of the situation became evident to Speirs. "As I crossed the waist-high wall, I looked back up the hill and saw German soldiers running along the hedgerow we had just left."

A Browning automatic rifleman pivoted his weapon toward his former lines and peppered the trees. Enemy attackers let forth a stream of agonized cries and whimpers while 2nd Platoon ejected small mountains of brass. DiMarzio pulled the trigger of his M-1 with such hustle that the rifle overheated; the private could barely hold onto his weapon without blistering his hands. Sizzling grease oozed from the rifle's crevices. DiMarzio was soon on the prowl for additional ammo clips.

The stone wall afforded protection for only so long. In short order, "a shower of grenades was received from the west where the hedgerow blocked our observation," Speirs remembered. Time seemed to stand still as a downpour of Eierhandgranate 39 fragmentation grenades landed inside the enclosure.

The blows rattled the confined space and spewed shards of hot metal. Fragments of these "small egg grenades" flew into Speirs's right temple and knee. The punch of the blast jerked him backward upon the ground. He felt as if he had fallen into a swarm of angry hornets; a stinging aggravation was followed by swollen pain. His ears hummed with a hollow ring, dulling the chorus of bangs and booms.

Another grenade bounced off the chest of Private John Dielsi and exploded when it tumbled to the ground, leaving the enlisted man in a convulsing, bloody shambles. The blow left him "kicking and screaming on the stones of the courtyard." There was no opportunity to tend to the wounds. Germans "began firing from the hill at the machine gunner as he lay exposed behind the gate. The platoon machine gunner was killed, and the machine gun rendered useless."

Dreaded Fallschirmjäger troops then charged from a woodlot on the platoon's front. "They were about 25 yards away and firing as they came," Speirs reported. "The platoon from behind the wall cut them down with aimed rifle fire and killed them all before any reached the wall."

The costly success of maintaining the position inflicted a heavy toll on 2nd Platoon. Furthermore, supplies could not be easily replenished. The small outfit was on the verge of obliteration.

The onslaught intensified. Dog and Fox Companies fell back, leaving Speirs's platoon forsaken in the cloudy confines of the enclosed farmhouse. The enemy counterattack had "stopped the American regiment in its tracks," acknowledged the lieutenant. "The German intention was to recapture Carentan."

Despite his hazardous placement and physical injury, Speirs had no intention of being a passive observer to the enemy's inroads. Now was the time to vacate.

"There was no protection against grenades in the courtyard and the burning house was throwing out a suffocating heat and smoke," he explained. Speirs then noticed a ditch jutting out from the northeast corner of the yard that roughly trailed back to the battalion line. The watery conduit was perhaps the only means of escape.

"Second Platoon, on me!" the hobbled lieutenant bellowed. A mad dash commenced.

Alamy

Amid the speedy withdrawal, one of the enlisted men attempted to retrieve the mangled Private Dielsi for evacuation. DiMarzio interceded. "I told him to leave him there because there was nothing we could do with him anymore. He was flipping around and groaning and was out of control. So we went back to our lines." The rushed decision to abandon Dielsi was one the men would deeply regret.

Sloshing up the gulley toward their lines, the troopers traversed the 400 yards, all but collapsing into foxholes upon arrival. Speirs was dismayed to discover that the overall situation had hardly improved.

"F Company had fallen back again to the high ground 100 yards in their rear. This was done without authority from the battalion commander. It was a serious move, exposing, as it did, the entire left flank," Speirs recalled.

The lieutenant felt this action was a consequential violation of common-sense tactics. In retrospect, Speirs did not consider the column of armor barreling toward Fox Company. That incoming tide greatly influenced the decision to peel back. In any case, "D Company was now filling in the gap between E and F," he said.

By this point, some of the rattled paratroopers were understandably hesitant to leave the security of their entrenchments. Speirs denoted their emotional state as "frightened, but not panic-stricken."

Recognizing that consistent gunfire had to be maintained against the adjacent enemy-occupied hedgerows, Speirs kicked the GIs out of their cautious complaisance and threw them back into the engagement. Lieutenant Thomas Peacock aided in this call to arms by funneling jeeploads of ammunition to the front via the sunken roads. Further back, paint burned off the scorched barrels of the 81mm mortars of battalion mortar platoon leader Frederick "Moose" Heyliger. His men lobbed over 1,000 rounds toward the enemy.

"Unknown to the battalion," Speirs continued, "help was on the way. Combat Command A of the 2nd Armored Division had been rushed to the area east of Carentan to meet an expected enemy thrust which did not materialize."

National Archives

ABOVE: A self-propelled howitzer, known as a "Priest," rolls down a street in Carentan. Speirs and his men were grateful to get armored help in the battle for the town. OPPOSITE: The body of a fallen American paratrooper mutely speaks of the courage and carnage that took place in and around Carentan from June 6 to the 20th, 1944. Although hit hard, Speirs and his men accomplished their mission.

At 2 p.m. deliverance was announced with the rumbling of 60 Sherman tanks, M5 light tanks, and self-propelled howitzers. "This was a beautiful sight to the battered 2nd Battalion," declared Speirs. "The tanks were firing as they advanced and doing a wonderful job."

With the assistance of these fresh reinforcements, the Germans were pushed back beyond Auvers. The vital link connecting the American beachheads thus remained unbroken.

Speirs's platoon relocated to the ruined streets of Carentan and was gratefully placed in reserve. Only 50 fatigued men of Dog Company remained standing. "The amazing thing was that there were not more cases of combat exhaustion," the lieutenant marveled.

"The majority of the men fought bravely, even though the companies were forced to yield ground. The battalion had done its part in defending Carentan, and the men and officers were proud of their job."

Nazi broadcasters apparently did not receive the word. "Berlin radio boasted that evening to all of Europe that the attack was successful and Carentan was again in German hands," Speirs recollected with amusement.

That same evening, the platoon learned of the terror that befell John Dielsi. Deserted at the burning farmstead by his overwhelmed comrades, the wounded private was left to the mercy of the Fallschirmjäger. The German paratroopers had none to spare.

Having spotted the GI quivering on the ground, one of the enemy plunged his bayonet

into the helpless Dielsi. The young American was left for dead. Amazingly, the stabbing failed to extinguish the paratrooper's life. Once the Germans fled the vicinity, Dielsi inexplicably mustered the strength to crawl in the direction of Carentan, yearning for assistance before he bled out. Medics eventually encountered the half-dead Pennsylvanian and whisked him to an aid station.

Dielsi survived his physical wounds and lived to old age. Sadly, he suffered from emotional trauma the rest of his life. Even in his later years, Dielsi dove under his kitchen table each time he heard a clap of thunder. The menacing sound of the guns never left him. Speirs long felt a sense of guilt for Dielsi's prolonged anguish. He likewise cast blame on himself for neglecting to submit commendations recognizing his men's valor on the Normandy battlefront.

Five years later, while enrolled in an Advanced Infantry Officer's Course at Fort Benning, Speirs reflected on his own shortcomings and successes in a revealing assessment of his platoon at Carentan. The 32-page monograph concluded with these judgments and lessons learned from the operation:

1. Strategic use of airborne is essential. The attrition of trained parachutists in extended ground combat operations as infantry is wasteful and should be avoided.

2. When assigning missions to lower units, the commander must consider the comparative strength of his units as reduced by previous casualties.

3. Bravery in combat must be recognized by decorations and awards. Morale is raised and incentive provided to perform well in future combat.

4. Tables of Organization and Equipment must be constantly revised to increase the fighting strength and capabilities of the unit.

5. Flank security during night movement is essential, regardless of the effect on speed and the physical condition of the men.

6. In night movement, all men must be alert to keep contact both to the front and to the rear.

7. When in contact with the enemy at night, one-half of the unit must be alert and in position to repel attacks.

8. Intelligence agencies must keep commanders informed of the enemy indications. Commanders can then adjust their plans in accordance, avoiding the possibility of surprise by the enemy.

9. Wounded men must be carried along when a unit is forced to withdraw.

10. The hand grenade should be used to full advantage in close combat. The present hand grenade is too heavy for long throws, and, too, it cannot easily be carried in sufficient number for a sustained fight.

11. Soldiers must learn that an enemy assault is repelled by firepower alone. When individual targets cannot be located, continuous area fire must be used.

12. Units are forbidden to withdraw without orders, however desperate the situation. Unit commanders must keep higher headquarters informed of the amount of enemy pressure, and request authority to withdraw prior to movement.

Most poignant of Speirs's observations was his self-condemnation for disregarding Dielsi's plight. "The platoon leader is to be severely criticized for failing to carry the wounded man back as the platoon withdrew from the house on the thirteenth," Speirs wrote.

"His assumption that the man was dead does not excuse him. His expectation of another enemy assault and his fear that this would find the platoon with no ammunition were the factors causing this grave mistake."

Speirs believed that steadfastness to able subordinates was a major underpinning of leadership. The obedience of enlisted men was to be repaid with decisiveness and a sense of stewardship. In the instance of June 13, Speirs believed he had succeeded in the former but failed in the latter.

Moreover, his frank meditation reveals he was not always the cold, heartless warrior some contemporaries thought he was. Speirs preached loyalty to those who earned it. In Dielsi's unfortunate case, however, the lieutenant had fallen short of his own expectations. He did not accept

Continued on page 90

Author's Collection

TARAWA: 'MARINE CORPS' TOUGHEST BATTLE'

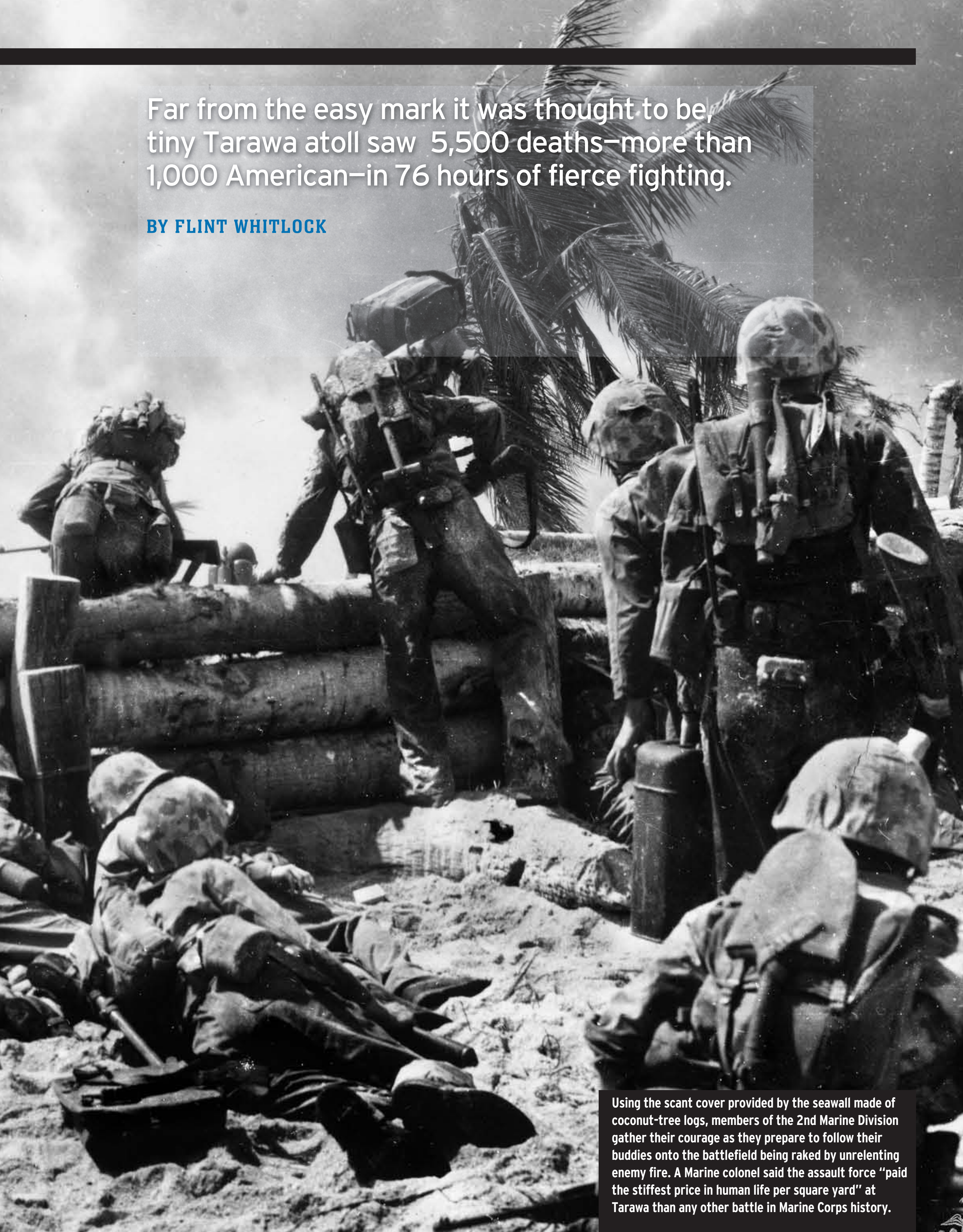
For a week before November 20, 1943, U.S. Navy and Seventh Air Force planes did their best to destroy the Japanese defenses on the tiny Pacific atoll of Tarawa. Along with shelling from ships on the morning of November 20, it is estimated that six million pounds of explosives hit the island before the U.S. Marines were due to land.

But on the morning of D-Day, some planned air assaults were delayed, cut short, or never took place. Military leaders were surprised to find some defenders on Tarawa had survived. A naval bombardment that lasted more than two hours took place as U.S. forces moved toward the tiny island some 40 minutes behind schedule.

The soaked, seasick Marines in the landing craft bobbing and churning on a rough sea toward their beaches were unaware of the screwed-up assault timetable. All they knew, if they could glance over the gunwales at the island ahead of them, was that the softening-up that had been promised seemed to be going well. Explosions kicked up huge plumes of water and sand and coral, and thick black smoke billowed up above the shattered palm trees.

But the full impact of the delays was about to be revealed. Invasion planners had miscalculated, missing the high tide. The Higgins boats, even with their shallow draft, crunched to a stop on the coral reef 500 to 800 yards from shore, and the men began piling out, wading inland with streams of machine-gun bullets coming their way. The first wave of Marines was

National Archives



Far from the easy mark it was thought to be, tiny Tarawa atoll saw 5,500 deaths—more than 1,000 American—in 76 hours of fierce fighting.

BY FLINT WHITLOCK

Using the scant cover provided by the seawall made of coconut-tree logs, members of the 2nd Marine Division gather their courage as they prepare to follow their buddies onto the battlefield being raked by unrelenting enemy fire. A Marine colonel said the assault force "paid the stiffest price in human life per square yard" at Tarawa than any other battle in Marine Corps history.

cut to pieces.

Comprised of more than 30 islets, Tarawa Atoll looks like every other Central Pacific paradise: brilliant blue waters, swaying palm trees, an abundance of colorful birds and sea life.

But in November 1943, to the U.S. Marines who were tasked with taking it, the one square mile atoll looked like hell—especially after they had been assured that taking Tarawa would be a "walk in the park" and "a piece of cake" that would only involve a few hours' work.

The speck of land—8,000 miles from Tokyo and 2,400 miles from Pearl Harbor and Australia—looks like a nice place to visit, but not important enough to die for. Yet, that is exactly what happened to some 6,000 Americans and Japanese (and Koreans) whose ultimate fate came together there in November 1943.

In February 1942, two months after Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Navy's Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Ernest J. King, saw the need for America to take over as many Pacific islands as possible. He stated, "The general scheme of things is not only to protect the lines of communication with Australia but ... to set up 'strong points' from which a general advance can be made through the New Hebrides, Solomons, and the Bismarck Archipelago."

Lying athwart America's supply lines to Australia, the Gilbert Islands (now Republic of Kirabati), which include Makin Island and the Tarawa Atoll, posed a problem. A Japanese presence there could threaten U.S. control of the Central Pacific.

Japanese leaders saw the Gilberts as a way to interfere with American activity in the region, and ordered the defenses there to be significantly upgraded. In December 1942, work began with the arrival of a combat engineer unit, the 111th Pioneers.

The Japanese scoured nearby islands, as Charles Gregg, author of *Tarawa*, put it, "for Australian and New Zealand coast watchers who, at great personal risk, had performed valiantly by providing intelligence to U.S. headquarters about [Japanese] ship and troop movements."

A year before the invasion was launched, October 15, 1942, the Japanese, angered at American air raids in the area and a raid on Makin Island, beheaded 17 captured New Zealand and five European coast watchers.

Brought in to defend Tarawa were the Sasebo 7th Special Naval Landing Force, the 6th Special Naval Landing Force, and a 4th Fleet Construction Unit—all under the command of 49-year-old Rear Adm. Keiji Shibasaki, who famously boasted, "A million men cannot take Tarawa in a hundred years."

He had good reason for such optimism, misplaced though it proved to be. A thousand Japanese construction workers and 1,200 Korean slave laborers had toiled for months under the broiling sun, turning the main island, Betio, into an unsinkable battleship.

There were 14 powerful 8-inch coastal guns, four of them captured at Singapore in 1941, guarding the shore. Forty other guns of varying caliber were positioned to rain fire on any approaching enemy ships, and scores of anti-aircraft guns and machine-gun nests were scattered across Betio's 291 acres. There were also 14 light tanks, and mortars had been preregistered to drop rounds onto any attackers unlucky enough to make it to the seawall. For its size, Betio was the most heavily defended piece of real estate on the planet.

Concrete pillboxes to house the machine guns were virtually invisible—and impervious to naval or aerial assault. Barbed-wire entanglements were strewn everywhere. A four-foot-high seawall made of coconut-tree logs lined the lagoon side of the island, making it virtually impossible for landing craft to deposit troops onto a sandy beach. If any attackers made it off the beach, they would be caught in the deadly crossfire of mutually supporting pillboxes. It seems that Shibasaki had thought of everything.

Even knowing all (or some) of this, Rear Adm. Howard F. Kingman, whose ships were scheduled to bring the 2nd Marine Division ashore, declared over-confidently that the

Naval History and Heritage Command

ABOVE: Rear Adm. Harry W. Hill (lower left) and his staff observe the pre-invasion bombardment from the 16-inch main guns of the cruiser USS *Maryland*, a survivor of Pearl Harbor. The well-dug-in defenders shrugged off the heavy shelling and came out fighting. RIGHT: Smoke from the naval bombardment shrouds the Betio shoreline as LCVPs (Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel—also known as "Higgins" boats) packed with Marines, head for the invasion beaches. Many Marines were cut down before they even reached the beaches.

Naval History and Heritage Command

Americans would not just destroy Betio but would obliterate it.

Kingman's plan was to pummel Betio and its defenders into submission using the combined power of B-24 bombers based in the Ellice Islands and his naval guns mounted on three battleships as part of Task Force 53: *Colorado*, *Maryland*, and *Tennessee*. To this would be added squadrons of fighters and dive bombers from the carriers *Bunker Hill*, *Essex*, and *Independence*. Five cruisers and nine destroyers would also add the weight of their munitions to the slugfest.

Nothing could survive such an onslaught, believed the American commanders, in this, the first battle by American forces to seize an enemy-held island in the Central Pacific. The 2nd Marine Division could just wade ashore—if there was any shore left on which to wade. As Maj. Gen. Julian C. Smith, commander of the division, told his men, "Our Navy ... will support our attack tomorrow morning with the greatest concentration of aerial bombardment and naval gunfire in the history of modern warfare."

Unlike some of his superiors, 2nd Marine Division chief of staff Colonel Merritt "Red" Edson, who had earned a Medal of Honor on Guadalcanal, had a more realistic assessment of what faced the Marines. "We cannot count on heavy naval and air bombardment to kill all the Japs on Tarawa," he said, "or even a large proportion of them. Neither can we count on taking Tarawa, small as it is, in a few hours."

After the unprecedented bombardment, Smith's Marines would head for the lagoon shore in LCVPs (Higgins boats) and LVTs (Landing Vehicle, Tracked), the latter also known as "amtracs" or "alligators," to perform "mop-up" work.

"The amtracs were far from perfect," wrote author Charles Gregg. "They had a prodigious appetite for high-octane gasoline.... These vehicles became unmanageable even in a mildly turbulent sea and they were difficult to maneuver under any circumstances. They had very little freeboard; even small waves washed over their low sides and soaked the waiting men. For this same reason they quickly filled and sank when stalled at sea.

"The amtracs were slow, and they had no ramp that could be dropped to let the men out. The Marines had to climb over the sides, exposing themselves to enemy fire... " But, Gregg said, "Without the amtracs, there would have been no effective landing on Betio. Their use as assault vehicles ... was one of the great tactical innovations of the Pacific war."

The one question to which no one seemed to have had a good answer was how deep the water was in the lagoon. This answer depended on the tides. At high tide, five feet of water would cover the large fringing reef, enabling landing craft to come close to shore. At low tide, the LCVPs, despite their shallow draft, would have to disgorge their troops a long distance from shore, thus exposing them to enemy fire; only the LVTs would be able to reach shore—and there weren't enough of them (only 125) to transport the entire invasion force.

Colonel David M. Shoup, who would command the assault force once it reached land, worried about the lagoon's depth. "We'll either have to wade in with machine guns maybe shooting at us," he told *Time-Life* war correspondent Robert Sherrod before the landing, "or the amtracs will have to run a shuttle service between the beach and the end of the [fringing reef]."

Impressed by the pre-invasion bombardment, and uninformed of the Marines' strategy, Sherrod wrote, "Surely, I thought, if there were actually any Japs left on the island (which I doubted strongly), they would all be dead by now." The correspondent, scheduled to come ashore with the fifth wave, was in for a rude awakening.

The Importance of Tarawa

Betio had a fighter airstrip that, if in American hands, would provide another base from which to launch attacks on Japanese facilities in the area and provide one more stepping stone toward Tokyo.

John Wukovits, author of *One Square Mile of Hell*, wrote, "The Gilberts existed as part of Japan's outer ring of defenses. An inner ring, standing closer to Japan, consisted of the Philippine Islands and other areas containing essential resources. An expendable outer ring existed to shield the inner one from attack as long as possible, and to draw out the American fleet so the Imperial Japanese Navy could destroy it in a massive ocean engagement. The Japanese did not intend to waste reinforcements on the outer ring. They would defend it as long as possible with the forces on hand until the fleet arrived to deal with the American Navy."

Realists among the defenders knew that the chances of the IJN coming to their rescue were slim to none, and that they were little more than sacrificial pawns whose main hope was to take as many Americans with them before they died.

Once recon flights had spotted an airstrip on Betio, American carrier planes made bombing raids on September 18 and 19, 1943, that destroyed half the Japanese planes on the ground.

D-Day at Tarawa

The planners of Operation Galvanic, as the Tarawa invasion was code-named, had established four landing beaches: "Red Beach," along Betio's northern shore, was divided into three sectors, from left to right, "Red Beach 1," "Red Beach 2," and "Red Beach 3" would be hit on D-Day. On D+1, November 21, the 1,000-yeard beach facing northwest, called "Green Beach," was scheduled to be assaulted by the rest of the division if a follow-up landing was necessary. On the south shore of Betio were two additional beaches, named Black Beach 1 and Black Beach 2.

The units selected for the Red Beach assaults were 2nd, 8th, and 18th Marine Regiments of the 17,000-man 2nd Marine Division. The division had its baptism of fire during the Guadalcanal-Solomons Islands campaign, and the surviving veterans, many of them still suffering the effects of malaria contracted on "the Canal," knew what battle was like.

To "soften up" the target, Navy dive bombers, torpedo planes, and fighters, along with B-24 Liberator bombers of the U.S. Seventh Air Force, pummeled Betio for a week before the invasion.

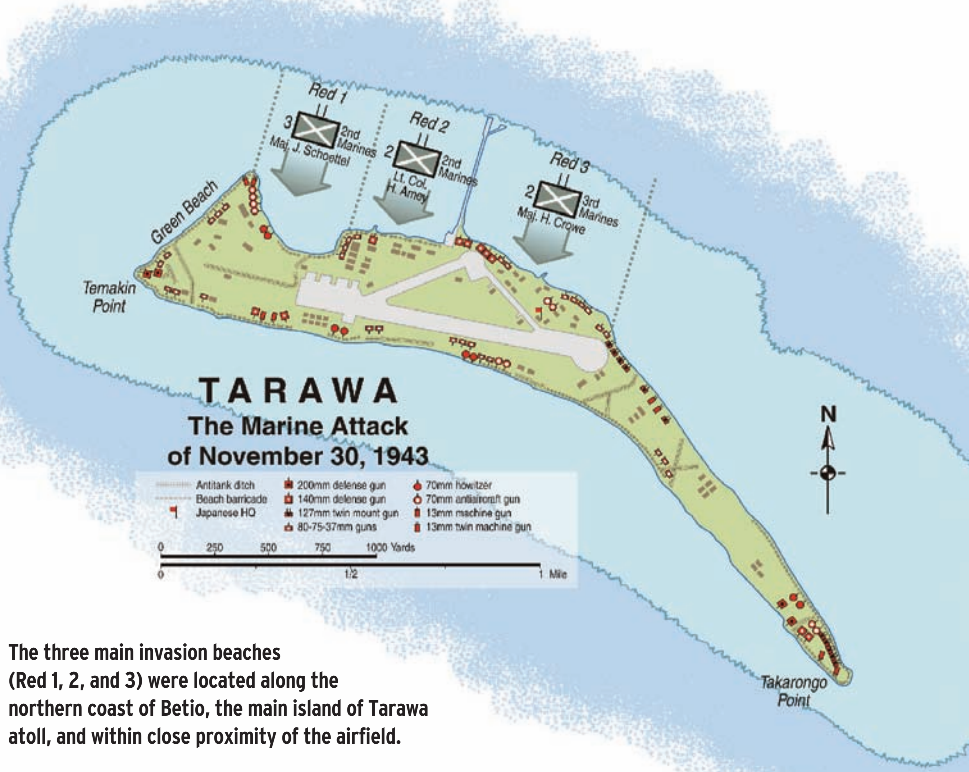
General Smith sent a "pep-talk" message to the Marines who were keyed up and ready for the invasion to begin: "We are the first American troops to attack a defended atoll. What we do here will set a standard for all future operations in the Central Pacific area.... Your success will add new laurels to the glories of our Corps."

More than one Marine probably shared the thoughts of a grizzled sergeant, wracked with malarial chills and a fever, who had survived Guadalcanal: "To hell with laurels and glory; I just wanted to make it through in one piece."

Other Marines, who had not yet tasted battle, no doubt imagined that, instead of hordes of Japanese soldiers, throngs of sarong-clad women would be waiting on the beach to greet them with hugs and kisses.

By 4:30 a.m. on Saturday, Novembr 20, the Marines in the first wave had loaded from their transports and were in their amtracs and LCVPs, heading southward toward the lagoon and Betio. The landings, which were supposed to have been carried out in the pre-dawn dark, were suddenly illuminated 10 minutes later by a red star shell fired from shore. The Japanese, who had supposedly all been destroyed, were still alive and ready to receive the invaders.

Shore batteries then opened up on the American ships, hitting some vessels and narrowly missing the *Maryland*. The battlewagon fired back with 10 salvos from her 16-inch guns. The rest of the ships of the fleet joined the chorus with a roar that sounded



The three main invasion beaches (Red 1, 2, and 3) were located along the northern coast of Betio, the main island of Tarawa atoll, and within close proximity of the airfield.

Map © 2023 Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis, MN

National Archives

Advancing through a forest of blasted palm trees, Marines head for a sand-covered Japanese bunker. Fewer than 200 defenders, most of them non-combat Korean laborers, survived the onslaught.

like the finale of a Wagnerian opera. A salvo from the destroyer *Ringgold* made a direct hit on an ammunition dump that resulted in a spectacular pyrotechnic display.

The first wave of landing craft was supposed to have hit the beach by 8:30 a.m. but, because of various delays, it did not happen until 9:10.

The battleships and cruisers opened up, but ceased firing after only 35 minutes in anticipation that the carrier-based planes were about to begin their bombing runs. But the carrier planes were a half hour late, allowing an interval for the defenders to recover from the first shelling. This gap in time, when nothing was hitting Betio, permitted the Japanese to begin firing at the approaching Marine-filled transports.

When the carrier planes finally arrived, they bombed for only seven minutes instead of the planned 30. A scheduled B-24 strike, for unknown reasons, did not take place at all.

When the last plane flew off, the fleet resumed shelling—a battering that lasted for two-and-a-half hours. All told, the Tarawa Atoll had been subjected to a bombardment of six million pounds of explosives.

One Marine recalled thinking during the run-in, "There were fires up and down the length of the island. The feeling was good." Another remarked, "It's a wonder the whole goddam island doesn't fall apart and sink."

Perhaps because they thought the landing would be "easy," Marine leadership allowed a greater-than-normal number of war correspondents—both military and civilian—to go in with the assault waves. Army Sergeant John Bushemi, a correspondent and photographer for *Yank* magazine, wrote, "The Marines were to hit the sandy beach immediately after these softening-up operations ceased, and everybody in the boats was happy because it seemed like very effective fire, the kind of intense blasting that would make the Japs 'bomb happy.' But that wasn't the way it worked out."

The first group of Marines to reach Betio was 2nd Lt.William "Hawk" Hawkins' Scout-Sniper Platoon of Landing Team Two. Their mission was to wipe out any enemy troops who might be in possession of a 500-yard-long pier jutting out between Red Beaches 2 and 3. Hawk's men were initially successful and pushed on toward shore, crawling over the seawall, but the Japanese infiltrated back onto the pier as the day wore on. For two days the pier would repeatedly change hands.

Hawkins continued to expose himself to enemy fire, which resulted in him being hit by shrapnel. Refusing medical attention, he continued to lead his men as they cleaned out Japanese emplacements. But he had not yet accomplished his mission.

After Hawkins and his men had fought their way onto Betio, the next group of amtracs and LCVPs approached the lagoon shore at about 9:10 a.m. Now at low tide, many of the landing craft ran aground a quarter mile or more from the beach.

A machine gunner on an LVT, Marine Private Newman Baird, recalled later, "Bullets pinged off that tractor like hailstones off a tin roof.... We were 100 yards in now and the enemy fire was awful damn intense and getting worse. They were knocking

boats out right and left. A tractor'd get hit, stop, and burst into flames, with men jumping out like torches." About 30 yards from shore, he looked over at the driver, only to see him slumped down, dead.

Baird's loader was shot. "He was crumpled up beside me, with his head forward, and in the back of it was a hole I could put my fist in." Baird and three men out of 25 in his amtrac made it to the seawall.

"Those few hundred yards seemed like a million miles," wrote John Bushemi. "But the Marines kept coming on, across the corpses of other Marines whose lifeless heads were bobbing in the water."

Historian William B. Hopkins noted, "When LVTs approached the reef, matters changed quickly—for the worse. Many LVTs came to a complete stop. Marines had to leap over the sides into the water and began wading, their weapons held high. Other LVTs managed to go on, though incredibly slowly. It did not take long to realize the worst possible scenario had become a reality: numerous Marines would die as they struggled to get ashore.

"Higgins boats had no chance of crossing the reef because of the low tide. Shibasaki's garrison survived the ... naval and air gunfire in large numbers. Attacking Marines were shocked to find that the naval bombardment had eliminated so few defenders. The Japanese destroyed the incoming amtracs with such regularity, it is difficult to see how any Marines survived to reach the protection of the seawall."

In one Higgins boat, Lt. Col. Herbert Amey, commanding Landing Team 2 heading for the log seawall at Red Beach 2, had earlier told his men, "We are very fortunate. This is the first time a landing has been made by American troops against a well-defended beach, the first time over a coral reef, the first time against any force to speak of, and the first time the Japs have had the hell kicked out of them in a hurry." Amey was killed during the wade-in; his place was taken by Lt. Col. Walter Jordan.

It was a slaughter. The 42 amtracs in the first wave turned into sitting ducks when their fuel tanks exploded or fell into shell holes or had their tracks blown off by artillery. Some went wildly out of control when their drivers were killed, spinning in circles like toy boats and smashing into other landing craft.

At one point, a frightened amtrac driver refused to go in any farther and ordered the Marines onboard to jump ship. They did, but were so overloaded with gear that many of them sank beneath the waves and drowned.

M5 Stuart light tanks crawled out of the surf on Red Beach 3, took enemy positions under fire, and themselves fell victim to heavy fire, land mines, shell holes, and, in one case, the attention of a U.S. Navy dive-bomber.

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TOP: A Marine lies dead (foreground) as a machine-gun team, taking cover beside an LVT amphibious tractor (also called amtracs), prepares to advance toward the airfield. ABOVE: Marine with fixed bayonet and a bandage on his wounded hand, left, leads others around a barbed wire entanglement on the beach at Tarawa. OPPOSITE: Crouched behind the remains of a tree, a Marine looks for a target behind a small opening on the Japanese bunker in the distance.

Enemy fire was relentless—and accurate. Wrote author Raphael Steinberg, "The Japanese began firing while the three lines of amtracs were 3,000 yards from shore. At 2,000 yards, Japanese long-range machine guns opened up. At 800 yards, the drivers of the amtracs started their treads going and the vehicles waddled up onto the reef fringing the island's lagoon side—only to meet a barrage from every gun in range."

By the time the battle was over, only about 20 of the original 125 amtracs were still operable.

United Press International correspondent Richard W. Johnston recorded his impressions: "The inside of the lagoon was like a smoldering volcano. The long, flat island was canopied in smoke, its splintered palms looking like the broken teeth of a comb. At many points orange fire studded the haze and at dead center a great spiral of black smoke curled up from a pulsing blaze that now was red, but at first had been white and hot as a magnesium flare. An ammunition dump."

A desperate message from one of the few working radios reached the fleet: "Have landed. Unusually heavy opposition. Casualties 70 percent. Can't hold!"

Small Japanese tanks rolled toward the line of invaders and were met by American tanks and 37mm anti-tank guns that had been delivered to the shore.

National Archives

In spite of the rising carnage, Marines continued to brave the fire and make their way to shore. A civilian reporter noted, "In those hellish hours, the heroism of the Marines, officers and enlisted men alike, was beyond belief. Time after time, they unflinchingly charged Japanese positions, ignoring the deadly fire and refusing to halt until wounded beyond human ability to carry on."

Richard Johnston wrote, "On the sand plateau above the [seawall], the Japs had erected defenses unlike anything the Marines had ever seen. There were big blockhouses and small pillboxes and worst of all, row on row of protected machine-gun nests, staggered in support of each other, made into tiny fortresses by sandbags and concrete and coconut logs—fortresses which withstood rifle fire and grenades, and had to be reduced by explosives and flamethrowers."

In spite of the enemy's best efforts, the subsequent waves of Marines came on, delivered to Betio by amtracs that plowed their way through floating islands of dead Marines. The still-living Marines jumped into the warm, milky white water made opaque by the constant shelling that had turned the undersea coral into powder, their rifles held high over their heads to keep them dry, the shoreline looking a million miles away. Everywhere continuous white geysers shot up as Japanese bullets smacked the water or found their marks and sent a Marine to his death.

The fifth wave, made up of LCMs (Landing Craft, Mechanized), disgorged their cargo of more a dozen M4 Sherman tanks, which went to work trying to neutralize enemy strongholds. Tragically, many wounded Marines, lying tightly packed together on the coral sand, were crushed when the tanks rolled over them. By day's end, only two of the 14 Shermans that had made it ashore were still operational.

The observation plane from the *Maryland* flew over the bloody landscape in hopes of pinpointing targets for the battlewagon's guns. The pilot later wrote, "The water seemed never clear of tiny men, their rifles held over their heads, slowly

wading beachward. I wanted to cry."

Carl Jonas, a Coastguardsman, recalled the aerial and naval bombardment: "It happened almost immediately. A holocaust dropped from the sky, our fighter planes strafing and searing ... the Japanese. From far to the right came the deep, whooming blast of naval gunfire, and the whole Jap side of the island seemed to rise in splinters and flame."

Incredible stories of heroism came out of the first few hours of the assault. In one open-top amtrac was Marine Corporal John Joseph Spillane, a Major League Baseball prospect. When the amtrac that he and 20 others were in came close to shore, Japanese defenders began lobbing grenades into the craft; Spillane scooped up five like an infielder and tossed them back as his comrades bailed out over the sides. A sixth grenade, however, exploded in his right hand; a surgeon later had to amputate it.

Yank correspondent John Bushemi noted, "The Japs were too well dug in. Their blockhouses were of concrete five feet thick, with palm tree trunks 18 inches in diameter superimposed on the concrete. And superimposed in the trees were angle irons made of railroad steel. On top of these were 10 to12 feet of sand and coral rock. Only a direct hit by a 2,000-pound bomb would cave in or destroy such blockhouses."

The Height of the Battle

At about 10:30 a.m., the amtrac carrying Colonel David Shoup and a group of Marines was hit by Japanese fire and everyone jumped out and headed for the long pier separating Red Beaches 2 and 3. Seeing that the men behind him were hesitant to leave the minimal shelter of the pier, Shoup yelled above the noise, "Are there any of you cowardly sons of bitches got the guts to follow a colonel of the Marines?"

While Shoup was trying to run the final 100 yards to the beach, a shell screamed in and knocked the him down, with splinters ripping into his knee. Another shell exploded, killing two men near him, but he continued his advance inland, establishing his command post near a captured bunker at about noon. By now, there were some 1,500 Marines hunkered down on shore wherever the slightest bit of defilade offered protection.

ABOVE: The effects of naval shelling are clearly visible on the rear concrete wall of Rear Adm. Keiji Shibasaki's command bunker. A dead Japanese soldier lies beside a knocked-out Type 95 Ha-Go light tank. OPPOSITE: A Marine (center right) tosses a grenade at a Japanese position while his buddies prepare to make contact with the enemy, just a few yards away.

Correspondent Richard Johnston noted, "It has been my privilege to see the Marines, from privates to colonels, every man a hero, go up against Japanese fire with complete disregard for their lives."

One of those colonel-heroes was David Shoup. His Medal of Honor citation reads, "Colonel Shoup fearlessly exposed himself to the terrific and relentless artillery, machine-gun, and rifle fire from hostile shore emplacements.... Upon arrival on shore, he assumed command of all landed troops and, working without rest under constant, withering enemy fire during the next two days, conducted smashing attacks against unbelievably strong and fanatically defended Japanese positions despite innumerable obstacles and heavy casualties.

"By his brilliant leadership, daring tactics, and selfless devotion to duty, Colonel Shoup was largely responsible for the final decisive defeat of the enemy." (Shoup would go on to serve as the 22nd commandant of the Marine Corps.)

The courage displayed by Marines at Tarawa resulted in four Medals of Honor. Besides Shoup's, another went to Staff Sgt. William J. Bordelon, a member of an assault engineer platoon of the 1st Battalion, 18th Marines. On D-day, most of the men in his amtrac were killed but Bordelon scrambled ashore, assembled demolition charges, and put two pillboxes out of action. While assaulting a third position, he was hit by enemy machine-gun fire just as a charge exploded in his hand, seriously wounding him.

Waving off medical attention, Bordelon remained in action and, although out of explosives, grabbed a rifle and laid down covering fire while other Marines scaled the seawall. Disregarding his own wounds, he unhesitatingly went to the aid of one of his demolition men, wounded and calling for help in the water, rescuing this man and another who had been hit by enemy fire while attempting to make the rescue.

Still refusing first aid for himself, he again made up more demolition charges and sin-

glehandedly assaulted a fourth Japanese machine-gun position before he was instantly killed by a burst of fire from the enemy.

By early afternoon on the first day, the 2nd Marine Division had committed all its forces, save for one battalion—the 1st Battalion of the 8th Marines. It would not be nearly enough to overcome the opposition that seemed unfazed by the day's bombardments and invasion.

Maj. Gen. Julian Smith had only one ace left up his sleeve. Following an urgent request from Shoup, he radioed Maj. Gen. Holland "Howlin' Mad" Smith, commander of V Amphibious Corps, to see if the 6th Marine Regiment could be released from Corps reserve at Makin Island, 105 miles away, and sent to help the rest of the 2nd Marine Division at Tarawa; Holland Smith said yes; the 6th Marines were no longer needed in the battle for Makin Island.

With the assurance that Colonel Maurice Holmes's 6th Marines would soon be on their way to Betio (the 6th Marines would not arrive at Betio until D+1), Julian Smith ordered the one remaining 2nd Marine Division battalion that had not been committed to the fight to land at Green Beach. But, due to a failure of communications, the battalion never received the message. (The 6th did eventually come ashore and was immediately thrust into the action, helping to stop a counterattack on the night of November 21-22.)

Communications were a nightmare. After being exposed to seawater, radio sets and batteries quit working; other sets were knocked out by shot and shell. Consequently, units on shore could not talk with one another, and communication between ship and shore was virtually non-existent. Orders for this unit and that unit to move forward, fall back, or move to a lateral position were never received. Commanders had little or no idea what units were where or how the battle was progressing.

Unusual acts of courage were performed by unlikely men. Navy Lieutenant Solomon Kozol was a dentist with the 8th Marines. He had volunteered to go in with the initial waves in case anyone needed facial wounds to be treated. He carried wounded men through the churned-up surf to the landing craft and returned with five-gallon cans of water. He was hit in the arm by a bullet during one of these missions; he was awarded both the Purple Heart and Silver Star.

Another officer who spent much of his day rescuing wounded was Marines Lt. (jg) Edward Heimberger, better known to Hollywood movie audiences as the actor Eddie Albert. Aboard a Higgins boat that was ferrying supplies to the island, he repeatedly braved enemy fire to pull injured men into his craft and evacuate them to the transports lying offshore.

As D-day raged on and turned into evening, the Americans were clinging tenaciously to their positions on Betio. The Marines, or what was left of them, held the narrow strip of Red Beaches 1, 2, and 3, and had pushed inland from 70 to 150 yards at various places.

National Archives

Ammo and drinking water and medical supplies were running dangerously low, and there was no food. Wounded and dying Marines moaned softly. As soon as it got dark, the Marines were sure waves of enemy soldiers would rush at them in their banzai charges. But no counterattacks, save for one nuisance raid by a single Japanese plane, materialized.

The Second Day

At dawn on D+1, with Sherman and Stuart tanks and 75mm artillery pieces arriving, carrier-based Hellcats roared in to plaster Japanese positions while the big guns of the Navy added their voices to the overall din.

National Archives

ABOVE: Once the island was secured, a Marine (left) walks through a grim landscape littered with burned and bloated Japanese corpses. OPPOSITE: Two Marines view the carnage on the beach, where scores of Americans died even before they could fire a shot at the enemy. The taking of Tarawa resulted in one of the highest casualty tolls in the Corps' history.

More Leathernecks arrived as the sky lightened. At 6:15 a.m., the 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, led by Major L.C. Hays, Jr., waded in toward Red Beach 2 from their boats (they had been waiting offshore for 20 hours) but were cut to pieces by Japanese who had, during the night, swum out to the disabled amtracs and Higgins boats lying offshore and used the abandoned machine guns.

Fire also came from a disabled Japanese freighter that lay like a dead whale just off the beach. Shoup ordered the Marines to silence both sources of this unexpected fire, and they did.

Robert Sherrod saw Hays's men fall in droves: "Within a few minutes I count at least 100 Marines lying on the flats.... There are at least 200 bodies which do not move at all on the dry flats, or in the shallow water partially covering them. This is worse, far worse than it was yesterday." Out of 800 men, the battalion lost 331 men killed or wounded. But those who made it gave Shoup the weight he needed to begin overcoming the defenses.

On Red Beach 1, arriving reinforcements were met with such an intense volume of Japanese fire that the Marines were forced to retreat back to the shelter of their landing craft.

A lieutenant colonel who earlier had been displeased with the reinforcements who had held back now praised them: "Once we got these men off the beaches and up front, they were good," he said. "They waded into the Japs and proved they could fight just as well as anybody."

Finally, a rising tide enabled the Higgins boats to release their human cargo closer to shore—and relative safety.

Lieutenant William "Hawk" Hawkins, still leading the Scout-Sniper Platoon despite the wounds he had suffered the first day, was hit a second time but again shrugged it off. He was at the head of his men attacking three more pillboxes when shrapnel from a Japanese shell ripped into him, killing him. For his heroic leadership and selfless sacrifice, he was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor.

Slowly and cautiously, the Marines, who now numbered about 5,000, continued advancing across the width of island, reaching the airfield, and progressing farther to the south, destroying or bypassing enemy bunkers and pillboxes.

Shibasaki Dead

Early on D+2, Admiral Shibasaki, perhaps knowing that the defense of the atoll was futile, sent a final message to General Headquarters in Tokyo: "Our weapons have been destroyed and from now on everyone is attempting a final charge.... May Japan exist for 10,000 years!"

Shortly thereafter he met his death. Historian Joseph H. Alexander wrote, "[Shibasaki] gave up his concrete blockhouse to be used as a hospital for his hundreds of casualties, assembled his staff in the open, and began to move to a secondary command post several hundred yards away. In one of the ironic flukes of battle, a Marine with perhaps the only working field radio on the island spotted the cluster of officers in the open and quickly called in naval gunfire."

The shells from two destroyers fell on the group, killing Shibasaki and his entire staff. The defenders were now, for all intents and purposes, leaderless. Without anyone to coordinate the defense of Betio, it was only a matter of time before the island would fall.

National Archives

But there was still more savage, no-holds-barred fighting that would take place before the Marines could declare Betio secured.

Correspondent Robert Sherrod noted that the tide had receded during the night, leaving dead and wounded Marines lying exposed on the sand: "Further out on the flats and to the left I can see at least 50 other bodies. I had thought yesterday, however, that the low tide would reveal many more than that. The smell of death, that sickly sweet odor of decaying human flesh, is already oppressive."

Another correspondent, Robert Johnson, noted, "The smell was inescapable. It was everywhere.... It suffused the Marines' hair, their clothing, and seemed to adhere to their bodies."

The battle for Betio was reaching a crescendo, with scenes of horror unlike any seen before. Carrier-based planes swooped in to strafe and drop ordnance on Japanese positions (and, sometimes accidentally, on Marine positions as well), and tanks rumbled forward to blast the pillboxes with their main guns. Marines risked death to toss grenades, blocks of TNT, and satchel chargers into the firing slits of bunkers.

Artillery pieces on both sides barked and land mines exploded. Machine guns kept up a steady rattle while flamethrowers burned stubborn defenders out of their emplacements. A number of enemy snipers tied themselves high up in the fronds of battered, forlorn palm trees, and killed many Marines before they themselves died. In their surrounded bunkers, many of Dai Nippon's finest elite soldiers chose to commit suicide rather than surrender.

The dwindling number of Japanese soldiers seemed more determined than ever to prevent the main prize—the airstrip—from falling into American hands, and some of the toughest fighting took place around its perimeter. But the Marines would not be stopped, and many of them made it across the airfield all the way to the island's southern coast.

With the tide of battle beginning to turn, Maj. Gen. Julian Smith sent in his just-arrived reserves—the 6th Marine Regiment.

At 5 p.m. on D+1, bloodied and bone-tired David Shoup radioed to Smith: "Casualties many, percentage dead not known. Combat efficiency: We are winning." The wounded and exhausted Shoup was relieved by Smith's chief of staff, Colonel Edson, who took overall command of Marine forces on land and in the lagoon.

John Bushemi wrote, "After the second day, the [Marines] were able to penetrate to the opposite shore of Betio ... and by this time the critical period was past. But the fighting was not 'officially' over until 76 hours had passed from the time of the assault, and even then there was still a handful of Jap snipers in trees and dugouts that had to be picked off."

The Third Day

On the third day of battle, bleary-eyed Marines crawled out of their foxholes and bomb craters and advanced grimly forward, attacking every bunker and pillbox and killing every enemy soldier they could find.

Another posthumous Medal of Honor went to 33-year-old 1st. Lt. Alexander "Sandy" Bonnyman Jr., executive officer of the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines Shore Party,

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The IJmuiden Raids: NONE CAME BACK

Two raids by B-26 Marauder medium bombers over IJmuiden Holland in May 1943 met with disaster. | BY ALLYN VANNOY

Even as they were being integrated into the European Allied air campaign, the use and operation of American B-26 Marauders, and other medium bombers, was still being worked out—with sometimes, as at IJmuiden, Holland, disastrous results.

As Lieutenant Colonel Robert M. Stillman, the newly assigned 322nd Bomb Group commander and a 1935 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, who had recently been shot down and captured, entered the gates of the German POW camp, he encountered a fellow American officer. The officer was stunned to see Stillman. "You can't be here—you're dead. We saw you crash. I've already reported you and your entire crew as dead."

Stillman should have been dead. But somehow, he had managed to survive the catastrophic crash of his twin-engine B-26 Marauder as it plowed into the earth at over 200 miles an hour.

The commanders of the U.S. Army Air Forces had entered the war knowing exactly what they wanted to do in terms of strategic bombing, and did a superb job of explaining it to the layman. The newspapers covering the air war knew what strategic bombing meant and why it was being carried on.

Press releases about a given raid were simple to interpret in terms of their impact—smashing a ball-bearing factory, destroying an aircraft manufacturing plant, or knocking out a key railroad line. But tactical bombing operations were not generally covered by the press and if so, poorly explained.

Senior commanders had difficulty in figuring out how to best employ the new medium bomber units. Some proposed that they strike from low altitude like a fighter-bomber, though in North Africa flying low-level bombing had been found to be less than successful.

National Archives

Developed primarily for low-level bombing raids, the B-26 Martin Marauder initially had few fans among the crews, who called the plane a "widow maker." Pressured to bomb "on the deck"—below 1,000 feet—a raid on May 17, 1943, resulted in all 10 Marauders being lost, with 37 men killed and 21 taken prisoner.

Three medium bombardment groups were assigned to support Operation Torch—the Allied invasion of French North Africa in November 1942. They initially carried out low-level attacks against heavily defended targets, incurring heavy losses with poor results, before switching to medium-altitude attacks.

While the medium bombers operating from bases in England included A-20 Havocs and, later, A-26 Invaders, most of the groups were equipped with B-26 Martin Marauders.

The B-26 Marauder was a twin-engined medium bomber that had the distinction of being the first aircraft designed during the war to see active service. The Marauder was unique in that the war prevented the usual design and construction of an experimental prototype airplane prior to quantity production.

The effort drew on the experience of U.S. Armed Forces, the Glenn L. Martin Company, designers, and American's allies to produce a superior design. The principal specifications of the Marauder called for speed and performance that surpassed existing aircraft of its type, combined with firepower and superior bombing equipment. Martin would build 1,585 Marauders at its factory near Baltimore, Maryland.

A crew of six or seven included a pilot and co-pilot, bombardier, navigator, radio operator, and two or three gunners. The aircraft had a maximum speed of 287 mph, with a bomb load of 4,000 pounds. Though small, the Marauder was well-armed with 11 .50-caliber machine guns—one in the nose, four forward firing in blisters on the sides of the fuselage, two in a dorsal turret, two in a tail turret, and two in waist positions.

The B-26 was a shoulder-winged monoplane with tricycle landing gear. The body was a streamlined, circular fuselage. Originally designed with two bomb bays fitted mid-fuselage, it was capable of carrying 5,800 pounds of bombs. However, in actual practice it was determined that such a bomb load reduced range too much, and the aft bomb bay was usually fitted with additional fuel tanks instead of bombs.

The aircraft was powered by two Pratt & Whitney R-2800 Double Wasp radial engines—the same engines used in the F4F Hellcat, P-47 Thunderbolt, and F4U Corsair. The wings had a low aspect ratio and were considered relatively small in area for an aircraft of its weight, producing the required high performance.

The small area also resulted in a wing loading of 53 pounds per square foot, which, at the time, was the highest of any aircraft accepted for service until the introduction of the Boeing B-29 Superfortress.

When first introduced, the Martin B-26 Marauder was the object of jokes and scorn by heavy-bomber crews as well as the public. After entering service with U.S. Army aviation units, the B-26 received a reputation as a "widow-maker" due to the early models' high accident rate.

The aircraft's short wings and high wing loading required a high landing speed of 120 to 135 mph, making it tricky to land since it came in steep and fast. It had to be flown at exact airspeeds, particularly on final landing approach or when one engine was out. The B-26 also required constant attention while in flight by a skilled, well trained pilot at the controls.

Imperial War Museum

ABOVE: B-26 Mauraders from the 386th Bombardment Group flying over English countryside enroute to a mission over Europe. BELOW: Mauraders from the 322 Bombardment Group line up for take-off behind "Clark's Little Pill." OPPOSITE: Shown briefing his men, Lt. Col. Robert Stillman, CO of the 322nd Bomb Group, was shot down on the May 17 raid, severely injured, and spent two years in a POW camp. He later became the first commandant of the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Both: National Archives

In an effort to overcome reservations about the plane's operation and use, demonstrations were conducted with the Marauder operating on a single engine, including by Colonel Jimmy Doolittle, taking off and landing with only one engine. In addition, 17 Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) were trained to demonstrate the B-26, in an effort to "shame" the ego of male pilots.

The B-26 entered service with the U.S. Eighth Air Force in England in early 1943. Five medium bombardment groups in the ETO were outfitted with the Marauder—the 322nd, 323rd, 344th, 386th, and 387th. As the medium bombers were starting to be deployed, Major Glenn C. Nye and Major Grover C. Brown of the Eighth Air Force's 3rd Bombardment Wing were developing an operational plan that called for low-altitude bombing and navigation, successfully used by the RAF and to a certain extent by B-26s in the Pacific.

In March 1943, the 322nd Bombardment Group arrived in England at Bury St. Edmunds. Major Nye was appointed as the commanding officer of the group. Crews were told they would be conducting all their bombing and navigation at zero altitude!

However, crews reported to Major Nye that not only had they never flown at zero altitude, but not even below 1,000 feet, had little experience in formation flying, and many gunners had never even fired their guns while airborne. It was apparent that an intensive low-level bombing and navigation training program was needed. For eight weeks the crews trained and practiced, yet many of the officers held reservations as to the practicability of operating the Marauder at low altitude.

Major Brown argued to higher headquarters, after studying and flying with the RAF, that the B-26 was not suited for low-level attack missions in the ETO—not just because of its poor performance at low level, but also due to German anti-aircraft defenses. His opinion and concerns were shared by most of the pilots in the 322nd as the German defenses were much stronger than anything encountered in the Pacific. However, despite the dissenting voices, training went on.

During the spring of 1943, there was intense political pressure on the American air commanders to get everything available into action as soon as possible. In addition, it was thought that low-level bombing in German-occupied countries would be more accurate and would produce fewer civilian casualties.

By the second week of May, the B-26 squadrons were considered ready for combat. On May 12, Lt. Col. Robert M. Stillman, who had replaced Major Nye as 322nd Bomb Group commander, was informed that their first combat mission would takeoff on the morning of the 14th and would be part of a combined Allied operation.

The target was a power-generating station at Velsen near IJmuiden, Holland. The plant provided power to a large industrial complex, a U-boat base, and the rail

system for the Amsterdam-Rotterdam area. The same target had already been hit twice, on May 4 and 5 by the RAF, but with little success.

It was believed that damaging or destroying the target would disrupt the German electric power grid; however, power plants and relay stations were usually small, calling for an unusually high degree of bombing precision. But the generating equipment was vulnerable to large bombs and was extremely difficult to replace. Due to this vulnerability, the Germans routinely massed anti-aircraft guns and fighter defenses around and near them.

The field order from the 3rd Bomb Wing called for the maximum number of bombers available to each carry four 500-pound bombs. The crews were selected and briefed on the mission, which was to fly from Orfordness on the Suffolk coast to Noordwijk on the Dutch coast, then inland following canals and railways to the target at IJmuiden.

The target would be hit at 11 a.m. While no fighter support was available, Eighth Air Force B-17s and B-24s would be operating in the area at the same time, providing diversionary cover.

Both squadrons of the 322nd Bomb Group, the 450th and 452nd, were to participate in the raid. Winning a coin toss, Captain Roland Scott was to fly as the lead pilot. At the same time, Colonel Stillman and Brig. Gen. Francis Brady, the new 3rd Bomb Wing Commander, also elected to fly the mission.

At 9:50 a.m. on the 14th, Captain Scott took off, leading two flights of six aircraft each at 250 feet east towards the Channel; once over water the 12 planes descended to 50 feet. The bombers made landfall near Noordwijk and, as they swept inland, anti-aircraft gun emplacements opened fire.

Skimming over the countryside at treetop level, the pilots began aggressive evasive action while the navigators worked to keep the aircraft on course. Shortly after encountering 20mm anti-aircraft fire, Lt. Robert Fry's aircraft took hits in the rudder and left engine, requiring him to break off the mission and turn back.

As the bombers neared Amsterdam, they turned northwest toward the target area, then veered slightly off course, flying east of the planned route. They had picked up and followed a railroad track about eight miles from the coast, with a canal running along beside it. They did not make a course correction until the leader recognized the Noord Zee Canal. At that point, Captain Scott headed the formation towards the target.

But taking evasive action to avoid ground fire made it difficult to navigate. Crews

Both: National Archives

ABOVE: Aerial view of a damaged industrial site in IJmuiden from a later bombing raid. Despite low-altitude bombing, early B-26 raids were ineffective and resulted in extensive losses of men and planes. BELOW: 322nd Bombardment Group crew of "Too Much of Texas" photographed the day of the unit's first raid on IJmuiden, May 14, 1943. OPPOSITE: B-26 "Tondelayo" flies low over the English Channel before the first raid on IJmuiden, May 14, 1943. Lt. Col. Stillman piloted this aircraft with the 322nd Bombardment Group during the first raid.

National Archives

were instructed not to fire on churches or other civilian buildings while en route, but they found that some church spires were being used as flak towers. As the bombers flew down "on the deck" they maneuvered to avoid tall structures. Some crews reported people on rooftops shooting down at them. As the formation approached the target, heavy flak and machine-gun fire began to fill the sky.

Lieutenant J.R. Ryan, co-pilot of the "Chickasaw Chief," said that, when they got to the target, "We were flying so low we damn near hit a chimney in the plant." Ryan's tail gunner, S/Sgt. R.E. Miller, described shooting at gun emplacements with his .50-caliber machine guns: "I saw about 30 or 40 enemy soldiers running toward their guns and I started firing at them about the same time they began shooting at us. I saw my tracers going right into them."

As the tall smokestacks of the generating station appeared ahead, the Marauders began a climb to 250 feet to clear the stacks and release their bombs. The formation jockeyed for position in order to fly squarely over the target. As each aircraft flew over the target, the co-pilots, using their modified gunsight/bombsight, released the bombs within 15 seconds of their scheduled time over the target—5:48 a.m.

Suddenly, just after Captain Scott's aircraft had released its bomb load, a 20mm cannon shell impacted above the pilot's windshield. The explosion scattered shrapnel throughout the cockpit and practically blew off the right side of Scott's face. Captain Turner, in the co-pilot's seat, was slightly injured.

Despite his injuries, Scott flew on. He later described events: "I thought my face had been shot away, but I could see just enough with one eye to hold the aircraft. We struck the ground [in a grazing pass] with the camera hatch area of the aircraft [lower back portion of the fuselage], but we were able to regain control of the aircraft. I later had to get out of the pilot's seat and lie down on the radio compartment floor, as I was concerned I might pass out and endanger the crew and aircraft."

Several other aircraft in the formation received damage over the target, but none were shot down. In addition, light anti-aircraft fire was thrown up by a few coastal vessels, but no serious damage was done.

As the returning formation reached the English coast, a few of the severely damaged aircraft trailed the formation. Lieutenant John Howell's aircraft was having problems with a damaged aileron and severed hydraulic lines, causing difficulty with control.

Howell's ship had to remain aloft as the crew desperately attempted to get the landing gear down; however, only the nose gear would extend. After orbiting for half an hour, the decision was made to abandon the aircraft. As Howell held the aircraft steady, the crew bailed out. Then the aircraft suddenly went into a spin, crashed and burned; Howell did not escape. It was thought that the bomber went out of control as he attempted to leave the cockpit.

In the post-mission assessment, all but one aircraft had received battle damage, seven crewmembers were wounded, one seriously, and one was dead.

During debriefings, crews voiced concern over the heavy flak encountered over the target, which was much more than what they had expected. But the crews were also very optimistic as to the bombing results in that many, including Colonel Stillman, reported seeing bombs impact the target. The photographic reconnaissance to be done by the RAF the next day was eagerly awaited.

General Brady, riding as an observer in one of the bombers, described the mission as, "very well planned and very well done." But photo-reconnaissance analysts

determined the strike had failed. The bombs had been fuzed with 30-minute delays. Some speculated that the Germans had sent in bomb-disposal teams to deactivate the bombs.

Major Gove C. Celio, 452nd Squadron, recalled, "We had counted on the element of surprise. It didn't work, even though we were almost under the level of the German flak towers. They were ready for us and firing at us as we came in.

"Every one of our ships received damage. Looking down, I saw our bombs directed at the target, but the pictures taken later showed the power house still standing. Yet, every bombardier will swear the he hit the target. The Jerries must have Dutch slave labor carry those bombs off to a safe place before they went off."

On the 16th, Colonel Stillman was ordered to report to the 3rd Bomb Wing Headquarters. When he got there, Stillman was told by General Brady that the Group had missed the IJmuiden power plant and they were to go back and hit it again the next day.

Stillman was mystified, arguing that Brady had been present, having been along on the mission and seen the bombs go in. But Brady insisted that they had missed the target, that the power house was still operating.

Stillman believed that poor results were due to the 30-minute British-provided, delay-fuzed bombs. Also, the British had been broadcasting to the Dutch that, when and if Allied bombers had to hit targets in Holland, they would use delay fuzes so that the Dutch people could get out of the target area before the bombs detonated. It was likely that the Germans were aware of this as well.

Stillman called the idea of going back to the target with the same bomb fuzes "stupid." Brady agreed, as did the others present—Colonel Russell L. Maughan, chief of staff, Colonel Harold Huglin, and Colonel Millard Lewis, the wing's A-4.

Colonel Lewis, in charge of materiel and engineering, probably knew more about the B-26 than anyone else then concerned with medium bombardment, having flown and evaluated the aircraft in September 1941, feeling that it was a possible answer to tactical bombardment.

After the first IJmuiden mission, he tested bomb fuzes like those that had been used, dropping some of the fuzes from a small liaison plane—finding they all worked. He was convinced that the principal trouble was not in the weapon, but with its employment—that they were trying to adapt the aircraft to operations for which it was not designed.

Brady responded to Stillman, "We've got to do what we're ordered to do."

Stillman asked if they couldn't run a low-level photo mission on the target. That it

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ABOVE: A flight of B-26s leave Dutch airspace after a raid. Note puff of smoke (upper right) from an exploding flak shell. BELOW: A waist gunner mans his .50-caliber machine gun in the tight confines of a B-26 fuselage. The Marauder had a crew of six or seven. OPPOSITE: A B-26 co-pilot/bombardier poses for a photo in the bombardier's position. Poorly fused bombs, fast speeds, low altitudes, and enemy flak and fighters contributed to less-than-satisfactory results.

National Archives

would delay the mission just 24 hours.

While Stillman was present, Brady called Brig. Gen. Newton Longfellow, commanding the Eighth Air Force Bomber Command, and told him that the second mission should not be conducted, and that if it was going to be run it should be made without delay-fuzed bombs. Longfellow's replied that the mission fitted in with plans for many other missions to be conducted that day and could not be delayed. The other missions included bombing of the port and U-boat base at Lorient, France, by 118 B-17s, while another 39 B-17s were dispatched to hit the docks and submarine pens at Bordeaux, France. But these targets were hundreds of miles away and had nothing to do with the anti-aircraft defenses in Holland.

Stillman did not object to the low-level bombing tactic, only with going back to the same target using the same delay-fuzed bombs. Somewhat exasperated, Stillman said, "Sir, I won't send them out." But he quickly realized that he might have been coming across as brash and not as respectful as he should have been.

After a moment of silence, Brady responded, " You will, or the next Group Commander will."

There was another pause in the room. Then, reflecting on the responsibility he had to his men, Stillman responded, "All right, sir, we'll go."

As Stillman departed, Lewis and Huglin left with him. They encouraged him to fly the mission and if it didn't work out, that tactics would be changed.

Stillman informed his Intelligence people of the decision, and to get preparations for the mission underway. Considering that he had already been to the target, he indicated that he would fly the second strike as well.

Crews were not informed of the targets until the morning's mission briefing. The field order that came through to the 322nd Bombardment Group for the morning of May 17, called for 12 aircraft to be loaded as before. The plan and route would be identical to that flown on the 14th, with the exception that six of the B-26s would break off and bomb the generating station and gas works at Haarlem as well as IJmuiden. The power plant at Haarlem was about seven miles south of IJmuiden. The two stations produced an output of over 100,000 KW each.

Because many aircraft were still being repaired as a result of flak damage from the previous mission, the 322nd could only muster 11 serviceable B-26s. The crews to fly the mission that day had, with the exception of four men, no combat experience. Colonel Stillman was to lead the formation aboard Lieutenant E.J. Resweber's Marauder, informing Resweber's co-pilot that he would not be going along. Stillman's deputy, Lt. Col. W.R. Purinton, was to lead the second flight of B-26s to Haarlem.

Despite the confidence of the crews that they could succeed in hitting the target, they expected to meet stiff opposition and many were convinced they would not return. An air of hopelessness prevailed in the briefing room. As Stillman left the briefing, Major Alfred von Kolnitz said, "Cheerio." Stillman responded. "No, it's

good-bye." Ignoring this strange response, Kolnitz said, "I'll see you at one o'clock."

"It's good-bye," repeated Stillman.

The weather was reported as clear with a slight haze over the North Sea. The Marauders took-off at 10:56 a.m, formed up on Colonel Stillman, organizing themselves into a 'javelin' formation, in two-ship elements, and headed east at 250 feet.

As they reached the English Channel, the B-26s dropped down to just 50 feet above the waves in an effort to get under German radar, and took up a heading that would guide them to their Noordwijk landfall checkpoint.

Some 30 miles from the Dutch coast, Captain Raymond D. Stephen's aircraft, flying on Lt. Col. Purinton's right wing, began to experience electrical problems, so Stephens elected to abort the mission. Since the crews were maintaining radio silence, Stephens didn't alert the others of his situation. Without any standard procedure for aborting, the aircraft turned 180 degrees and climbed to 1,000 feet.

Stillman learned later that in pulling up the aborting plane was picked up on British radar, so it was likely that German radar stations detected the aircraft as well, since the aircraft were close to the Dutch coast. Stillman recalled later that if he had been aware that the aborting bomber had pulled up and exposed itself, he might have made the decision to abandon the mission.

As the aircraft crossed the North Sea, several small vessels appeared ahead of the formation. Rather than climbing over them, Colonel Stillman turned the formation south. Once past the ships, a course correction was made. Due to the deviation around the ships, crews figured they would now be making landfall five to eight miles south of Noordwijk.

In fact, the formation was some 25 miles from their intended checkpoint and heading toward some of the most heavily defended areas in Holland.

As the raiders approached the Dutch coast at 210 mph, Stillman recalled, "Through the haze I could see flashes of light on the coast. They kept winking. I was new to combat and I remember thinking that they looked like signal lights. I didn't think much about it. I was intent on making the landfall and picking up [a] railroad track inland and getting to the target."

Suddenly, spouts of water appeared ahead of the formation. Stillman now realized that the flashes of light were gunfire from German coastal batteries. He dipped a wing, communicating that the formation should spread out in flights abreast so as to present a more difficult set of targets.

In an effort to pick up speed, Stillman opened manifold pressure to 40 inches and increased engine rpm's to 2,400 revolutions. As he took evasion action, his instruments indicated 235 mph and just 15 to 25 feet above the water. Stillman estimated their present position along the coast was just five miles northeast of The Hague.

As they were about to cross the coast, Stillman's aircraft encountered machine-gun fire. Situated among rolling dunes, dug-in and camouflaged, were machine-gun positions intended to deal with low-flying aircraft.

Stillman said, "Our planes were equipped with five fixed .50-caliber machine guns in the nose under the control of the pilot. I saw tracer fire coming from three different points in front of me, within an arc that I could cover with my guns. So I let loose on the places where the tracers were coming from. It was easy to aim my guns by using the rudder and elevator controls. The tracers stopped coming up from two emplacements after I had given each of them a long burst.

"Then the third gun started firing at me. It was at about an eleven-o'clock position with relation to my nose. I had just swung my nose over to him and was about to com-

Both: National Archives

ABOVE: Dramatic photo of a B-26 blown in half by an exploding flak round. There were no survivors. TOP: With flak damage to the left wing and the engine nacelle, a B-26 tries to limp home after a mission. None of the bombers returned from the IJmuiden raid of May 17.

mence firing when it happened."

Stillman lost consciousness for a second or two. When he came to, he found his aircraft was out of control. The rudders did not respond, the wheel was sloppy, and the elevator was out. He saw Lieutenant Resweber slumped in his seat, but couldn't tell if he was dead or alive. Then the ship started to snap-roll or corkscrew through the air.

Stillman said, "I wasn't scared. I didn't have time to be. But I knew this was curtains. I suppose I was still half groggy from having been knocked out."

The plane was knocked out of the formation. One wing of the Marauder went down. Stillman looked out the cockpit window and saw the ground coming up. He shut his eyes and stopped worrying.

The plane hit the ground upside down.

Within a few miles of Colonel Stillman's crash, Lieutenant V. Garrambone's aircraft was shot down, crashing into the Maas River estuary leading to Rotterdam—he and three of his crew survived.

With the leader gone, Captain N. Converse, who had been Stillman's wingman, moved forward to take the lead; however, during evasive maneuvering, he collided with 1st Lt. R.C. Wolf's aircraft, then just off his right wing. Both B-26s went down in flames with only two gunners surviving from each aircraft.

First Lieutenant D.V. Wurst, who was also taking evasive action, was directly behind the two colliding aircraft and so was forced to fly through the debris. Lt. Wurst, finding his aircraft now unmanageable, belly-landed in a field near Meiji, Holland, his crew surviving.

Only five aircraft now remained out of the 10 that penetrated enemy territory. Believing that they should have been approaching the target area, the pilots and navigators looked for landmarks, but they were several miles from their respective targets.

Lieutenants F.H. Matthew and E.R. Norton, the only remaining crews from Stillman's flight, were hopelessly lost and seeking to salvage something out of the mission, elected to form up with Lt. Col. Purinton's flight and bomb his target. However, Purinton and his flight were also lost and desperately trying to find a landmark that would help them locate their target.

After flying for over 10 minutes without recognizing a single landmark, Purinton had decided to abort the mission and return to base when 1st Lt. E.F. Jefferies, Purinton's navigator, spotted what he thought was the target, causing Purinton to direct the aircraft at what was actually a gas holder or storage facility on the west side of Amsterdam. The other aircraft attempted to bomb the same target, but all bombs fell short and caused no damage.

Unknown to the crews, their heading was taking them directly over the heavily defended port area near IJmuiden. Flak damaged Purinton's B-26 as well as that of Lt. Norton and Lt. J.A. Jones, all of which crashed once over water. The only remaining aircraft were those of Captain J. Crane and Lieutenant Matthew, speeding for the English coast.

The two remaining Marauders had gone about 50 miles when they were attacked

by two German Focke-Wulf 190A fighters. The Fw 190As had taken off with 26 others from Woendsdretch, Holland, after receiving an alert. Captain Crane's aircraft, already in trouble from flak damage, was hit first. After crashing in the water, two crewmembers in the tail section were able to escape before it sank and were later rescued by a British destroyer. Six minutes later Lieutenant Matthew's aircraft was shot down by the German fighters—there were no survivors.

Stillman's saga continued. He concluded later that his Marauder was probably doing better than 200 mph when it hit the ground. Regaining consciousness, the colonel found he was being carried on a stretcher. He passed out again, waking later in a hospital room along with nine other prisoners. There were seven officers and enlisted men, all survivors of the group. Two others were British.

One of the wounded men had been Stillman's tail gunner. Of the men from the 322nd, one had a broken leg, another had two bullet holes through an arm and shoulder, another had a shattered elbow and shoulder, and one was badly burned and in a good deal of pain. Near by was Lieutenant Tony Alaimo, a fellow pilot from the 322nd. They were in Wilhelmina Gasthaus, a Luftwaffe hospital in Amsterdam.

Stillman's injuries included three broken ribs, two black eyes, his left cheekbone had been knocked in, his left hand was broken, and there was a hole in his right leg.

From what he was able to piece together, all five aircraft of his flight had been shot down.

During five days at the hospital, Stillman learned from others some of the details of what had happened to his aircraft just before it crashed. They told him that after one snap-roll the plane seemed to recover momentarily. Then it began to yaw, completed half of another snap-roll and then hit the ground.

During their time in the hospital, they received a daily visit from a German doctor. Stillman considered them to have been decently treated and fed. From there, Stillman was transferred with the other POWs to Dulag Luft, a German interrogation center for shot-down airmen, and put in a hospital in nearby Hohemark, not far from Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany.

Placed in solitary confinement, he underwent interrogation, but was not mistreated. One of his interrogators had been a professor at Rice Institute in Houston, Texas. They talked football, but Stillman didn't disclose any military information.

They were next moved to Stalag Luft III at Sagan, Germany (present day Zagan, Poland). Arriving at the camp Stillman was greeted by Lt. Col. Purinton. Purinton could hardly believe that Stillman was alive, having witnessed the crash of Stillman's B-26.

Stillman arrived at the camp in the company of Lt. W.C. Kinney, Purinton's co-pilot. He found there nine others officers who had been part of the mission. The surviving enlisted men had been sent to another camp in Austria.

Miraculously, three of Stillman's crewmembers had also survived the crash, but would spend the rest of the war in German prisoner-of-war camps.

As General Brady and Colonel Nye awaited the return of the B-26s at Bury St. Edmunds, an RAF listening post reported interception of a German fighter radio transmission that indicated that two Allied bombers had been shot down over the sea. By the time the bombers were 40 minutes overdue, it was obvious that the aircraft could no longer be airborne and the realization that all 10 aircraft had been lost.

The next day General Ira C. Eaker, Eighth U.S. Army Air Force commander, ordered his inspector general to conduct an inquiry. However, the results of this investigation drew no conclusions as to a primary cause of this fiasco; no party was found negligent and no effort was made to ascertain why.

National Archives

After the failure of the IJmuiden raids, B-26s were used in medium-altitude missions. Here, a B-26 named "Son of Satan" flies above E-boat pens in Holland that have just been bombed.

Both: National Archives

ABOVE: General Henry "Hap" Arnold, commanding general of the U.S. Army Air Forces, meets with the injured Captain Roland Scott of the 322nd Bomb Group after the first IJmuiden raid. LEFT: Civilians inspect a factory that was apparently hit during Stillman's May 14 attack despite RAF reconnaissance photos taken the day after the raid that seemed to show no damage done.

The raid had resulted in the death of 37 crewmen and the imprisonment of 21 others in German POW camps.

The mission had seemed destined for disaster even before it began.

The target selection by the Eighth Air Force was made as a result of heavy pressure from the RAF to use the B-26s against the same type of installations the British light bombers were attacking, as well as the importance of IJmuiden as a target. The Eighth Air Force chose the target as the 322nd Bomb Group's first combat mission rather than an enemy airfield that was lightly defended and requiring only shallow penetration.

In addition, on October 29, 1942, the Eighth Air Force had received a directive regulating missions against targets in German-occupied countries. The directive, an agreement between the exiled governments of the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and the Allied powers, called for greater sensitivity to the civilian population in the occupied territory, and therefore required greater precision bombing.

Using the B-26 bombers in a low-level environment was thought of as a possible solution. Yet, the B-26s did not perform well at low altitude and the targets that the B-26s had been attacking in the Pacific were not as heavily defended as those that would be encountered in the ETO.

There were other factors which contributed to the failure of the second IJmuiden raid, as well. Both missions were heavily dependent on the element of surprise. Due to an agreement with the Dutch government, selected targets had to be approved by the Dutch Embassy. In addition, the embassy was allowed to warn its civilian workers of the impending raid through BBC radio. Undoubtedly, as stated earlier, the Germans had heard the broadcast and were ready and waiting for the bombers.

In addition, early in the war, the RAF found that daylight bombing missions without fighter escort were nearly suicidal. The 322nd Bomb Group operations plan indicated that: "Fighter protection is considered essential the same as with other types of bombardment. It is more essential than for heavy bombardment because of inferior armament."

However, Eighth Bomber Command would not supply the fighter coverage even after repeated requests from both Colonel Stillman and Major Von Kolnitz before the second raid. Also, a British reconnaissance mission was executed along the Dutch coast at the same general time and place as the Marauders' penetration, the reconnaissance aircraft possibly alerting enemy fighters.

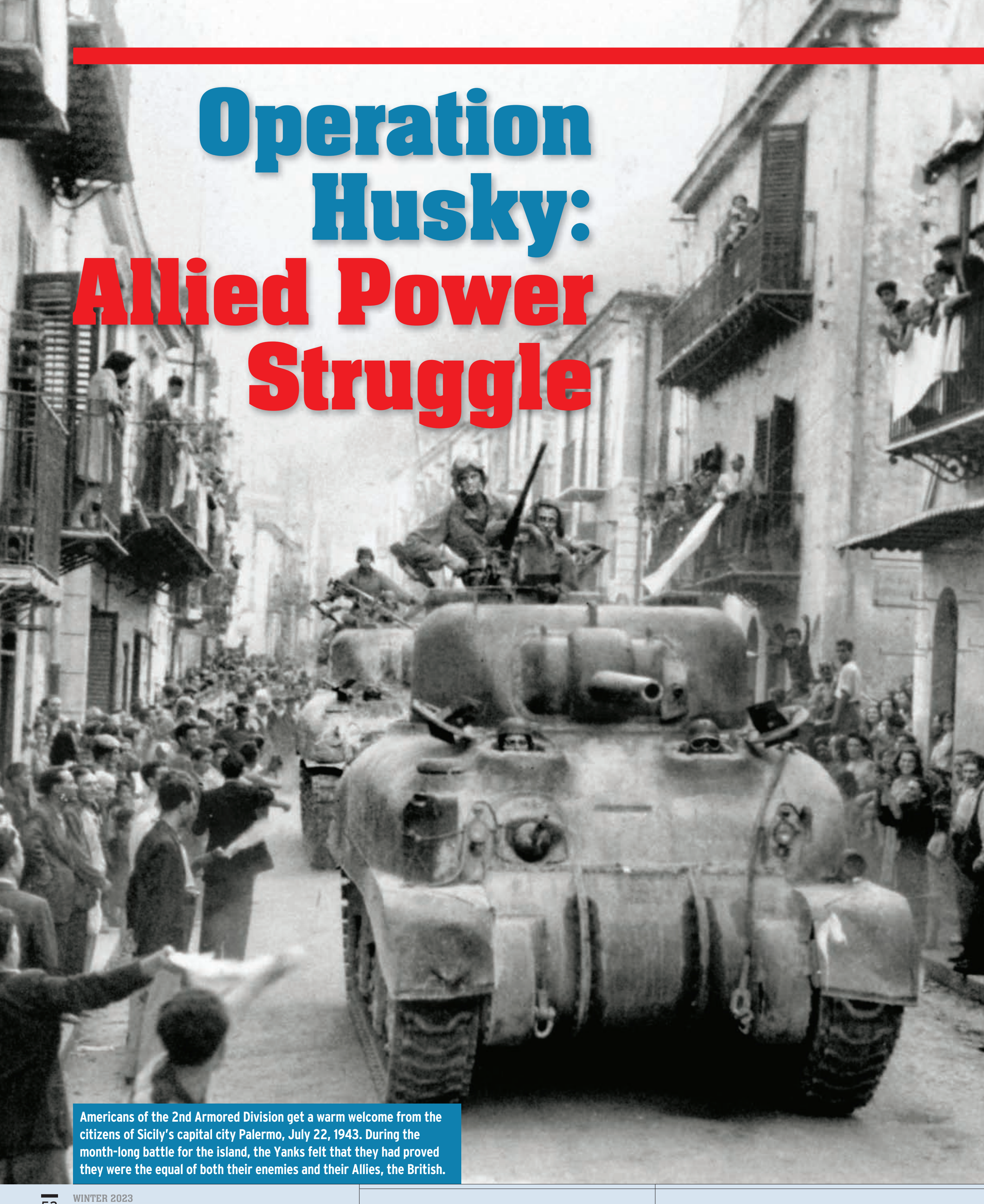
Despite the losses incurred, senior Air Force commanders continued to support low-level bombing with the medium bombers. On May 20, 1943, General Brady called Colonel Nye into a conference and directed him to take over the 322nd Bomb Group. He also said that a decision had been reached that they were going to run more missions at low level, and that the next time it would be "done right."

Colonel Nye, while continuing to believe in low-level bombing tactics, thought that the mistake made on May 17 had been in going back to the same target at the same time of day.

Despite the beliefs in low-level bombing, beginning in July 1943, the B-26s began operating at medium altitude. That November, the B-26s were transferred to the Ninth Air Force, to carry out tactical and interdiction missions.

Stillman remained a POW for nearly two years. After the war, he directed training for the Third Air Force and later was Deputy Chief of Staff of Tactical Air Command. In 1954, he became the first Commandant of Cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy on Colorado. In 1959, *Sports Illustrated* magazine named him to its Silver Anniversary All-American football team. He retired from the service as a major general in 1965. He died on May 22, 1991, at the age of 79. ■

Operation Husky: Allied Power Struggle



Americans of the 2nd Armored Division get a warm welcome from the citizens of Sicily's capital city Palermo, July 22, 1943. During the month-long battle for the island, the Yanks felt that they had proved they were the equal of both their enemies and their Allies, the British.

Generals Patton and Montgomery engaged in a battle of wills in Sicily during Operation Husky—the first major Allied move against an Axis homeland.

BY WILLIAM DENNIS

By the summer of 1943, American forces felt that they had proven that they were as good as anything the enemy could throw at them. The British, however, still had their doubts. After all, the British had been fighting Hitler's and Mussolini's armies for three years—virtually alone. The initial poor showing by green American troops in North Africa had convinced many in the King's army that Roosevelt's boys were undertrained, poorly motivated, and just plain inept. Consequently, the British planners of Operation Husky had relegated the Americans to a largely supporting role. On Sicily, Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, Jr. was determined to show that the American fighting man was as good or better than any army—friend or foe.

On July 10, 1943, Patton's U.S. Seventh Army assaulted the coastline of the southeastern point of Sicily. Simultaneously, the British Eighth Army under General Bernard Law Montgomery landed on the eastern side of the point. Previously, Allied offensives had turned back the Axis attempt to conquer Egypt and cleared the Axis out of Africa. This would be the first time the Western Allies had initiated a major move against an Axis homeland.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill once quipped that Britain and America were two peoples divided by a common language, but it went far beyond that. Differences in equipment and tactical doctrine, plus the attitudes and personalities of the commanding generals, had major impacts on the campaign. For the Allies to effectively confront the Axis, Britain and America had to work through these problems.

Kasserine Pass in Tunisia was the first heavy combat the U.S. Army faced against the Axis in World War II. The troops had arrived in Africa half-trained and had been clumsily handled. It had not gone well. Combat leadership and discipline needed strengthening. Better training in patrolling, reconnaissance, and combined-arms coordination were also needed.

Until a few months before, little had gone well for the British Army, either, but that did not keep the British from being so negative about the American Army that even Lt. Gen. Dwight Eisenhower complained. British generals, including Sir Harold Alexander and Bernard Law Montgomery, did not hide their disrespect. Lietenant General Kenneth Anderson's British First Army in Tunisia had included an American corps. Toward the end of that campaign, he questioned Maj. Gen. Ernest Harmon, the commander of the U.S. 1st Armored Division, about how he planned to employ his troops in the rugged terrain of Northern Tunisia.

After the briefing, Anderson shook his head and twice muttered, "just a childish fantasy" as he stalked away. By that time, the U.S. Army leaders in North Africa were having success in improving their units' performance. But somehow the British generals remained unaware of it.

They also seemed unaware that differences in equipment and tactical doctrine meant the Americans could move much faster than British. Still, Alexander and Montgomery intended for the Eighth Army in Sicily to defeat Axis troops while the Americans merely covered their flank.

At the northeastern tip of the island, close to the Italian mainland, the city of Messina is overshadowed by Mt. Etna and can only be approached via a narrow route along the island's south coast or through rugged mountains north of the volcano. There is little cover for advancing troops. Dusty roads, open fields and observation points on high mountains made even a modest force of artillery highly effective. The typical

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Sicilian town is located on a defensible ridge top. The island is disease-ridden, hot, dry, and paradoxically humid.

In the summer of 1943, Sicily was defended by between 300,000 and 350,000 German and Italian troops. Some Italian units were mobile but most of them were assigned to coastal defense units. The Italian Sixth Army commanded more than 200,000 of these troops. The number was misleading as they were poorly armed, equipped, and led. Moreover, they were sick of fascism and the war it had lead them into.

Initially, they were "assisted" by two German divisions. The 15th PzG (Panzergrenadier) Division was still forming, but it could fight effectively. It was in reserve with one regiment deployed in the western half of the island with the divisional headquarters. One regiment was in the center of Sicily attached to the Sixth Army, and another in the east, attached to the Luftwaffe's Herman Göring Panzer (HGPz) Division.

For most of the war, Luftwaffe parachute divisions were exceptionally motivated, well-trained and equipped. The Luftwaffe infantry and panzer divisions were not.

The HGPz was originally Göring's largely ceremonial guard regiment expanded to division strength; most of it had been destroyed in Tunisia. It was being reconstituted, or as one historian put it, "cobbled together" primarily with men the Luftwaffe could spare from other duties.

Typically, they had little training or experience in ground fighting. Nor, according to its chief of staff, was most of the leadership up to handling their jobs. The only exceptions were its artillery batteries, which were well-trained and experienced.

Shortages meant Germany made extensive use of captured equipment—and even that was increasingly scarce. It was bizarre to lavish first-rate equipment on an inexperienced, partly trained and poorly led unit. As an "elite" unit, the only company of Tiger tanks on the island was transferred to the HGPz from 15th PzG.

The division's problems were compounded by moving its headquarters and about two thirds of its strength to the Caltagirone area near Gela, on the southern shore, shortly before the invasion. The remainder, with the attached panzergrenadier regiment, was near Catania, under Colonel Wilhelm Schmalz.

Before the campaign was over, the Germans would bring in the 29th PzG and 1st Parachute Divisions.

By the time of the invasion, the Italian Air Force was a shadow of its former strength. The Luftwaffe's presence in Sicily had been reduced to a handful of badly worn Messerschmitt Me bf 109s, flown by exhausted pilots; Focke-Wulf and bomber squadrons had been withdrawn to Sardinia. Axis naval activity was confined to supplying and later evacuating the island.

American Major General Carl Spaatz commanded the Northwest African Air Force, formed to support the invasion. Maj. Gen. James "Jimmy" Doolittle commanded bomber units, and Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Coningham commanded the tactical air units.

The Allies had more and better airplanes and better-trained pilots, but many fighters had only short-range capability; flying from Malta and Tunisia, they had little flight time left over Sicily. Therefore, it was imperative that the Allies promptly capture airfields there.

The transport units were not well trained in night formation flying. Another problem was Allied ground support doctrine emphasized wide ranging sweeps seeking enemy columns and supply convoys. That meant there were few aircraft available to provide direct support to troops actually in contact during fast-moving battles.

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ABOVE: British troops wade ashore from an LCI (Landing Craft Infantry) onto one of the invasion beaches on the east coast of Sicily, July 10, 1943. Bernard Montgomery's British Eighth Army ran into unexpectedly stiff opposition from the Germans and Italians, which slowed its progress northward. OPPOSITE: American ships come under aerial attack from German bombers off the coast of the southeastern city of Gela, where the U.S. 1st Infantry Division came ashore on July 10, 1943.

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The U.S. Army and Navy found the Army Air Force uncooperative, ignoring requests for aerial photographs of the American landing beaches until Maj. Gen. Lucian Truscott, commander of the 3rd Infantry Division, appealed directly to General Spaatz.

Historian Carlo D'Este sees the root of that uncooperation as their commander's desire to maintain the air services' independence and their almost hubristic insistence that airpower alone could win the war in Europe, probably without an invasion of the continent.

Allied naval units were strong enough to move a large force to the island with surprisingly little loss and to support the initial landing with very effective gunfire.

The British Eighth Army contained two corps. After landing, Lt. Gen. Sir Oliver Leese's XXX Corps, with the 1st Canadian Division, 51st (Highland) Division, and the independent 231st Infantry Brigade, would move northwesterly to make contact with Patton's forces near Ragusa. Oddly, the Canadians would sail directly from chilly Scotland into Sicily's heat and humidity.

Lieutenant General Miles Dempsey's XIII Corps, with 5th and 50th Divisions, would land further east in the Gulf of Noto. It was assigned an ambitious set of objectives, beginning with the capture of Syracusa and the coastal area, including the Catania plain, up to the flanks of Mount Etna. The army's reserve—the British 78th Division and the 1st Canadian Tank Brigade—remained in Tunisia for the time being.

Patton's Seventh Army landed in the Gulf of Gela, from Licata to Pozzallo, to capture nearby airfields. Maj. Gen. Omar Bradley's II Corps would land its 1st Infantry Division, under Maj. Gen. Terry de la Mesa Allen, on beaches east of Gela. "X Force," built around the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions, a battalion of combat engineers, three chemical mortar companies, and an engineer shore battalion would assault the city itself.

Major General Troy Middleton's 45th Infantry Division would land at Scoglitti on the right flank of the landing area. The separate "Joss Force"—Truscott's 3rd Infantry Division, plus the 3rd Ranger Battalion, would land near Licata and anchor the left flank.

Gela was the most crucial and the most vulnerable of all the landing spots. The key to its success was controlling high ground about five miles inland. Highway 117 runs north from Gela, crosses the ridge between two hills, and continues on toward Nisceme, Enna, and the north coast. Roads from Caltagirone and Vitoria fed into this road. Axis troops moving south to counterattack would surely use it.

A well-built strongpoint—the "Piano Lupo"—controlled traffic along these roads; Colonel James Gavin's 505th Parachute Infantry of the 82nd Airborne Division, with an attached battalion, were to land inland from Gela and capture the ridge. Allen's 1st Infantry was to advance as quickly as possible and relieve them.

Further south, about four miles from the beach, was more high ground overlooking the Biscari road and the Biscari-Gela road junction. Americans called it the Biazza Ridge. Paratroops would also land there.

The 9th Infantry Division remained in Army reserve in North Africa. Its 39th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) and the rest of the division artillery were ready to go wherever they were needed. The remainder of the 82nd was available to drop onto the island.

The Mediterranean Theater commander, Lt. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, played only a limited role in the campaign because the British had persuaded the Allies to adopt their traditional command setup, which here was a committee made up of the theater commander, the army group commander, and the two army commanders. If the army and army group commanders were in agreement, the theater commander could do little to override their decisions. In spite

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ABOVE: Montgomery's plan of attack was to drive northward along the east coast of Sicily, with Patton's U.S. Seventh Army protecting his left flank. LEFT: Lt. Gen. George S. Patton Jr. puffs on a cigar as his Seventh Army troops secure another Sicilian town. He felt that Montgomery had little regard for American soldiers—and was determined to prove Monty wrong. OPPOSITE: An amphibious GMC DUKW ("Duck"), mounting a .50-caliber machine gun, squeezes past a knocked-out German Mark VI Tiger tank from the Hermann Göring Panzer Division. The enemy division first tried to stop the Allied invasion but then fought a delaying action so that German and Italian troops could escape from Messina to the mainland of Italy.

of Ike's skill with "persuasion and hints," this arrangement worked poorly.

The army group commander, General the Honorable Sir Harold Alexander, was well regarded for "his easy smiling grace and contagious confidence." In World War I, he received multiple, well-deserved decorations for valor. But one British officer who worked closely with him wrote that he had never had an original idea in all the time he had known him. He had two other major failings: "His consistent failure to grasp the reigns of higher command" and, in spite of their successes, he never lost "his complete lack of faith in the American soldier."

In the latter part of the Italian campaign, when the American Army was clearly carrying the exhausted Eighth Army, Alexander disparaged the level of training in the American Army to visiting General George C. Marshall, who responded that, while American troops made beginner's mistakes, they quickly learned from them.

Initially, Montgomery shared Alexander's dim view of the American Army. But once he saw its impressive flexibility and mobility, he realized that these virtues were not fully shared by the British Army.

Montgomery's personality was somewhat different from his portrayal in the 1970 movie *Patton*. His papers showed he had no interest in racing Patton to Messina. He was preoccupied with the military profession and made a lifelong study of it. But he was an extremely difficult person who infuriated people all his life. He was simply unable to see anyone else's point of view or appreciate the impact his incessant arguing, even nagging, had on his personal relations.

Montgomery has been criticized for wanting every little detail in place before making even a short, set-piece attack. Also, his army's vigorous and incautious advance during the first days of the campaign spread the limited strength he had ashore too widely. Granted, El Alamein was a set-piece attack that did not start until Montgomery was completely ready, as were many of his later attacks in Tunisia and Normandy. But set-piece, limited-objective attacks were the forte of the army he had to work with.

By way of contrast, Germans found the American Army to be "extraordinarily flexible; they adapted immediately to a changed situation." That was following a tradition of moving quickly to take advantage of an enemy that is unready or off balance. It goes back at least as far as Washington's quick move against Princeton before the British were fully aware of his success at Trenton.

In World War II, this was facilitated by mobility that was superior to every other army. The British lacked rugged two-and-a-half-ton trucks and capable artillery-pulling tractors. Eisenhower would later have to assign a number of American truck companies to the British to allow them to advance from Normandy to the new front on the German border rapidly enough to keep pace with the Americans.

Patton was more complex. He deserves much of the credit for the American Army's improvements in Tunisia, and he was arguably the best U.S. fighting general in the war. A brilliant intellectual fluent in French, with a grounding in French culture, he could be quite charming, but he felt that he would be more effective if he came across as hard and fierce, so he developed a façade—"his war face"—to project those characteristics.

Admittedly, Patton sometimes sought the limelight. His despicable conduct toward soldiers in hospitals who he thought were cowards and shirkers is well known. But on another occasion, he was found crying in a latrine after visiting an amputee ward.

Once the British landing was secure, the plan was for them to move on to the Catania plain, which contained a number of airfields. It had looked like good tank country on maps and aerial photographs, but the terrain turned out to be filled with rock walls and ditches and studded with farm houses, usually in groves of trees, that were natural sites for anti-tank guns. It was a bad place for gliders and armor alike.

The Arapo River that lay between the landing beaches and the plain was a significant barrier unless the Ponte Grande bridge over it was captured intact. The British allotted a full brigade of glider troops—over 2,000 men—to the mission. The force took off for Sicily in 100 gliders but only 12 reached the designated landing zone.

That handful of men, and a few more, held the bridge against a mixed group of Italian servicemen until midafternoon when the last few, mostly wounded, glidermen surrendered. Troops advancing from the beach recaptured the bridge half an hour later.

That was virtually the only Axis success in the British sector for the first several days. Many Italian troops quickly surrendered and the only German unit initially facing the British, Team Schmalz, was far too weak to do more than slow the British advance.

If the landings in the British sector were "anticlimactic," there was much confusion on the American beaches, and the paratroopers were widely scattered. Still, by early morning, it was clear that both landings were succeeding, albeit slowly.

Facing larger, better-trained-and-equipped Allied ground forces, the Axis' only hope was to smash the landings during the first hours when the invasion was most vulnerable.

They focused their D-day counterattack on the Gela landing. Mobile Italian forces were to make the initial counterattack and more heavily armed German units would finish them off. If that did not work, retreating Axis forces would inflict what losses they could on the advancing Allies as they retreated toward Messina.

The Axis plan was for German and Italian units to make a coordinated attack on the beachhead, but communication problems and the incompetence of the HGPz resulted in piecemeal attacks instead.

Initially, two Italian columns from Gruppo Mobile E attempted to drive the Americans out of their lodgment. As anticipated, the eastern column moved south along the Niscemi road toward the Italian strongpoint at the Piano Lupo road junction. Before they reached it, they encountered a blocking position manned by men from Lt. Col. Arthur Gorham's 505th Parachute Infantry.

The Americans ambushed the approaching column and drove off a subsequent attack. Italian artillery opened fire and allowed them to fall back to hold the position at the crucial road junction, now also in American hands.

As they were preparing to move, naval gunfire began falling on the Italians, called in by an observer with the 1st Division's

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26th Infantry Regiment that was approaching from the beach. The Italian infantry went to ground but the tanks continued toward Gela. There they met the 16th Infantry, which knocked out several and forced the rest to flee into the hills.

The western Gruppo Mobile E column also tried another tank/infantry attack on Gela. The co-ordination was poor and the tanks arrived first without supporting infantry. The Rangers drove the tanks out of the city, then ambushed the enemy infantry when it arrived and, with the help of naval gunfire, destroyed it.

Because of the wretched roads, the available units of the HGPz, about the equivalent of an American RCT, were formed into two Kampfgruppen and sent to attack early in the morning. But the HGPz's lack of training and cohesion, together with its lack of familiarity with the area, delayed the beginning of its move until 2 p.m.

The western HGPz column, aimed at the Gela area, was a tank-heavy force that made good time until it encountered Gorham's 505th paratroopers—now reinforced by elements of the 16th Infantry and in contact with warships off the coast. The attack failed in the face of accurate small-arms fire, mortars, and naval artillery.

The eastern HGPz column, made up of a company of Tiger tanks and two battalions of panzergrenadiers, fared worse. Two of the temperamental Tigers broke down and the column found itself repeatedly having to countermarch around narrow village streets and other obstructions.

The panzergrenadiers reached the American positions first but were stopped by a few infantrymen supported by nothing heavier than their mortars. A major part of the problem was that the commander of the panzergrenadiers was a grounded (because of nerves) bomber pilot who had no experience or training in ground fighting.

The commander was replaced and the grenadiers again attacked the thinly held outposts of the 45th Division's 1/180th Infantry. This time they overran the Americans, capturing much of the battalion and pushing back the remainder until they encountered the 3/180th that was able to stand its ground.

Later that day, German tank/infantry columns attacked again, but small-arms fire stopped the infantry and more naval gunfire fell on the tanks. In mass panic borne of inexperience, the grenadiers fell back in disorder, and the attack was called off by 3 p.m.

There was no direct air support for the American landing; none of the requested flights arrived. Instead, there were squadron-sized sweeps of enemy-held territory by P-38s and P-51s configured as dive bombers that failed to stop the columns moving up to attack. Axis aircraft were plentiful, flying 481 sorties against the beachhead.

That night, more paratroopers from the 82nd arrived. Again, a lack of aircrew training and poor mission planning told. It was a terrible blunder that the flight path of the troop carriers passed over the Allied fleet and the invasion beaches that bristled with antiaircraft

guns manned by tired, jittery seamen and soldiers.

The Air Force refused to give the Army and Navy the routes of their aircraft until it was too late to ensure that all the antiaircraft gunners were notified. Probably not all of them received the word to hold fire as the airplanes passed over and, in fairness to them, they had already been subjected to sporadic attacks during the day and a night attack by the Luftwaffe.

This caused another fiasco that cost more American lives. American aircraft were shot down by American gunners; other planes were scattered so that the dispersal of the paratroopers was worse than the previous drop. Twenty-three aircraft disappeared, presumably falling into the sea. Surprisingly, some paratroops actually landed in or near their assigned drop zones.

The following day was the most crucial one in the battle for Sicily. During the previous night, the Americans had used the respite from the day's fighting to move several more miles inland, allowing the defenders to engage the attackers further from the actual beaches. The HGPz and the Livorno Divisions marshaled six columns for the attack. Their attack forced back the outpost line, including the paratroopers' blocking position and penetrated well into the beachhead, but only at great cost.

Livorno's columns attacked the Rangers' around Gela across harvested wheat fields and took more than 50 percent casualties before being forced back. Livorno was finished as a fighting force.

A panzer column broke through the 1st Division positions and into the Gela plain, raking the supply dumps with fire. The infantry resisted with bazookas and antitank guns that destroyed several panzers.

As the morning went on, American artillery and mortars began to play an increasing part. More guns came up and Shermans broke free of the soft sand and the barbed wire clogging their tracks. Their 75mm guns outranged the 50mm guns on the Pz3s that made up the bulk of the attack and had greater penetrating power. (The German army considered even the older Lee tanks they met in Africa superior to the Panzer IVs. This was before the IV was upgunned and up-armored.) The panzers' attack was repulsed with heavy losses.

Allied naval support was crucial. The ships' guns equaled four or five battalions of medium artillery, and they pounded the German columns as they advanced until they were mingled with American units. As

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ABOVE: Tracers from Navy ships off the southern coast of Sicily light up the sky as they try to bring down German aircraft. Tragically, American planes, some filled with paratroopers, were also shot down as a result of nervous Navy gunners, who fired at anything flying after suffering deadly attacks from the Luftwaffe. TOP: Men of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, begin bailing out of their transport plane. The paratroopers were to have played a key role in the invasion, but many were mis-dropped or killed by friendly fire. OPPOSITE: American soldiers on an M3 halftrack are greeted by civilians in the liberated Palermo suburb of Pioppo while captured Italian soldiers (left) are marched to the rear.

the enemy withdrew, the guns pummeled their broken remnants again.

East of the Gela plain, the 180th Infantry was forced back to the beach. Here, too, naval fire support played a crucial role as the destroyer *Beatty* fired 800 rounds of 5-inch shells into the advancing Germans.

Near the eastern flank of the lodgment, Colonel Gavin arrived from where the drop had left him in time to organize scattered groups of paratroops and men of the 45th Division into a thinly stretched defense along the Biazza ridge. They had only a few 81mm mortars and two 75mm howitzers in support of their stand; the shale of the ridge prevented them from digging in.

The Germans were still paying the price for manning the HGPz with poorly prepared Luftwaffe personnel. They were "nervous," and their attacks were confused and lacked aggressiveness. This was fortunate for the Yanks, given the "vast mismatch between the [strength of the] two sides." Throughout the day, U.S. soldiers and small units joined the fight. Toward evening, six Shermans arrived and Gavin mounted a counterattack; the Germans broke off the attack and went on the defensive.

That night, General Allen, always a proponent of hitting an enemy when it was off balance, ordered his 1st Division to make another night attack.

For the first three days, the British faced negligible opposition and pushed their troops hard to take advantage of it. Their advance up the eastern coast was not checked until they encountered Team Schmalz east of Syracusa.

General Alexander told a historian after the war that he didn't develop an overall plan for Sicily's conquest beyond the initial landing areas, preferring to see how things developed. When the beachheads were large enough to allow logistical buildup and maneuver room, his intention was to strike north across the island. But that intention was not developed into a detailed plan.

Here, British failure to understand how much the American Army had improved—and Alexander's reluctance to commit, ahead of time, to a plan for the rest of the campaign—combined to create a serious problem for the Allies.

On July 13, Alexander visited Patton's headquarters with a party that did not include any of the American liaison officers assigned to him; Patton and Bradley were quite insulted. He should have learned at the meeting that Patton's troops were fighting effectively and were well positioned to push across the island.

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ABOVE: Lieutenant General Omar Bradley, II Corps commander (right), and 1st Infantry Division commander Maj. Gen. Terry Allen discuss plans to advance across Sicily. Bradley was not an Allen fan and did much to remove him from command of the Big Red One after the battle of Troina. TOP: British airborne soldiers in training for their upcoming mission to grab key Sicilian bridges and hold them until ground troops arrived. For the most part, they were successful. OPPOSITE: The crew of a self-propelled 75mm gun motor carriage awaits orders to go into action during the 1st Division's assault on Troina, August 7, 1943. The tough, nearly week-long battle cost Terry Allen his command.

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Bradley expected to move north on the axis Vizzi-Enna. The inter-army boundary was east of the road that linked them and he could reasonably infer from Alexander's silence that he had permission to do so. Alexander did give Patton permission to extend his beachhead further west to the vicinity of Agrigento—as long as he avoided major engagement. But he did not disclose that he had already decided the Eighth Army would make the advance across the island. The Americans were to hold in place and protect Monty's flank.

The Eighth Army was ordered to move boldly to trap the forces facing the Americans. Alexander made this decision before Montgomery developed the same plan and proposed it to his superior the day before. Alexander's order arrived that evening.

Alexander's motivation can only be inferred. He seems to have had the fixed idea that there was a need to protect Montgomery's left flank from a counterattack out of the western part of the island. But, by the 12th, the Allies were receiving abundant signal intelligence that made it clear that there were only a few small German units there. There were a considerable number of Italian troops present, but they war-weary and could be ignored.

Alexander's decision meant that the inter-army boundary, which had been set before the invasion and which Montgomery's troops had already crossed without authorization, would be shifted westward. This would give the British the use of the road from Vizzini, which they had just reached, on to Enna in central Sicily and the north coast.

It was a bad decision, poorly implemented. On the 14th, before the order arrived, American infantry and artillery of the 45th joined in the British attack on Vizzini on the initiative of the local American commander. In spite of the distraction of a German counterattack, the 45th could have committed considerably more power to the British attack on the town.

Instead, the order for a boundary shift meant 45th had to be redeployed to the left of the American position, a 90-mile trip, taking it out of action for days.

When Patton's headquarters received the order, the Americans were appalled. As Maj. Gen. John Lucas, Ike's representative at the headquarters, put it, "Once the momentum which we have gained is lost, momentum is difficult to regain." Bradley was still furious about it in the 1980s when he was writing his second autobiography.

The American Army was the right army to make the attack across the island. It was led by a former cavalryman whose audacity would become legendary. It was better equipped than the British, with more and better supporting vehicles making it far more mobile. But Alexander's plan showed his contempt for the American Army and, because of that, his plan would waste its mobility and striking power.

The Eighth Army was the wrong army to make the attack. Montgomery had insisted that the British assign only battle-hardened formations to the invasion, but there was a strong feeling in those formations that they had already done their part. Further, Montgomery had been impressed when Italian units in Tunisia, their backs to the sea, fought desperately in the last weeks of that campaign. He expected Italians in Sicily to do the same, so he had allocated much of his supply tonnage to ammunition at the expense of vehicles, many of which went down with a ship.

When Italian opposition simply melted away, the Eighth Army was not in a good position to take advantage of it. The easy advances Montgomery's troops had experienced encouraged Monty to drive them hard to advance as far as possible before the defense stiffened. By this time, many of the British troops had already walked more than 50 miles carrying full kit plus extra food and ammunition in humid, 100-degree weather. They were fatigued and more than a little "browned off."

Monty's plan was for XXX Corps to

drive northwesterly behind the HGPz troops facing the American beachhead and trap them. Then it could continue along Highway 117 toward the north coast. Meanwhile, XIII Corps would drive to the northeast along Highway 114 toward the Catania plain and its airfields.

Almost immediately the northwesterly drive ran into problems at Vizzini. There it hit its first serious opposition from HGPz troops who were beginning to learn their business. They held the town for two days and fell back only a short distance to a new position from which to continue to slow and inflict casualties on the British. American artillery was well positioned to pummel the retreating Germans but was forbidden to fire into Eighth Army territory.

Montgomery turned his attention to the northeasterly advance. The 50th Division would begin by driving Team Schmalz from their positions around Lentini while the 5th Division would advance along the coastal road. The advance would not move much further unless the British first captured the bridge over the Lentini River and the Primsole Bridge over the Simeto River. The first was close to the sea—and to existing British positions. Commandos captured it and were quickly relieved.

Primsole was a greater challenge. Some of the Luftwaffe's 1st Parachute Division had dropped in and were defending the east side of the river. They were among the most determined and effective infantry in the world. The area near the bridge was covered with vineyards and orchards that gave good cover to defenders and made daylight attacks nearly suicidal. British glider troops were tasked with capturing and holding it until the 50th Division arrived.

Their drop on the night of the 13th was as scattered and disorganized as the earlier ones. Several small groups assembled near the bridge and captured it from an Italian security force. They held it for 16 hours until German counterattacks forced the remnant of the glidermen to withdraw.

Later that day, a battalion of Durham Light Infantry (DLI) arrived near the bridge and the next morning made an assault that was reminiscent of British attacks in France in WWI—and about as successful. It was repulsed with crippling losses.

The British were preparing to make another daylight assault when Lt. Col. Alastair Pearson, commander of 1st Battalion of the Parachute Brigade, muttered, "I suppose you want to see another battalion written off, too." The commander of the Parachute Brigade persuaded the 5th Division to delay the attack until late that night and to follow a covered, more indirect route.

Initially, that attack was successful but, not for the last time, British radios failed at a crucial moment. The follow-up force was not ordered to advance until after daylight, giving the Germans time to prepare. The British continued to attack into the teeth of the German defenses until the 18th, taking more crippling losses. The operation, which Montgomery had planned to break open a quick route for the British to Messina, was a failure. Catania would not fall until early August.

Patton received Alexander's order on the 13th stoically, not realizing that, according to British Army practice, commanders at his level were entitled to argue for an order to be modified or rescinded. Montgomery told Patton that if he received an order from Alexander that he did not like, he should ignore it; that's what he—Monty—did. Montgomery was serious. His attitude was not common among British generals, but it was almost unheard of among Americans.

After the stuttering start in North Africa, it was "imperative" that the troops, the people back home, and the British all saw American soldiers operating boldly and effectively. For the alliance to function well, both parties needed to have an accurate understanding of the other's strengths and weaknesses.

Patton flew to Tunis to make a case for an American advance north and west. Alexander claimed he had intended Patton to do just that, but his staff had not yet sent the orders.

The plan, however, was ill-considered. There was no fight left in the Italians and the

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ABOVE: The Germans tried to slow the American advance from Palermo to Messia along the rugged northern coast of the island by destroying the roads. Here, American combat engineers work to repair the damage so the drive could continue. OPPOSITE: Urban fighting took place in Sicily's large cities and small villages. Here, men from the 6th Inniskillings, 38th Irish Brigade, 78th Battleaxe Division, search for enemy soldiers in a house during the battle for the town of Centuripe, August 2-4, 1943.

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Germans were abandoning that part of the island as fast as possible. It would not have taken much more than a battalion of MPs to handle prisoners, a Civil Affairs detachment, and an armored division combat command to provide muscle and overrun the western half of the island.

Meanwhile, the bulk of the American Army could have been advancing to the north and east while the Germans had not completed developing their defenses in that area. General Lucas wrote in his diary on the 15th that that would have been the better plan. Bradley said much the same in his memoirs.

Patton formed a provisional corps of the 3rd Infantry, 82nd Airborne, 2nd Armored, and two Ranger battalions to make the advance to the west over primitive roads and rugged terrain— brilliant demonstration of American mobility. One battalion marched 55 miles over mountain trails in 33 hours. The advance on Palermo on the northern coast began from positions the 3rd Division occupied on the left flank of the American sector around Agrigento on the 19th; by noon on the 22nd, the 3rd was overlooking the city.

The German withdrawal allowed them to form a shorter front, make the Allies pay a high price to attack it and possibly be a base for a counteroffensive. They fortified a series of strong points along the Etna Line that ran from Paterno on the east to Leonforte in the west, facing the British and Canadian troops that were moving toward the northeast. The strongpoints blocked the few routes through the rugged mountains.

The line marked the end of the Germans' voluntary withdrawals, and the thinly stretched British and Canadian units fought valiantly to break it. First, Assoro needed to be captured to clear the way for an attack on Leonforte. The Canadians assigned the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment—"the Hasty Petes"—to capture Assoro. The lynchpin of the defenses there was an 11th century Norman castle topping a crag above the town, with only a single winding road up to it.

The commander and an intelligence officer moved forward to evaluate the situation, but the Germans spotted the reflection from their binoculars. They were both killed, which left Major John Stewart, the Lord Tweedsmuir, in command. He formed a force of 20 volunteers and one officer from each of his rifle companies to infiltrate up the cliff on the eastern face of the crag to the castle.

Their gear was stripped to weapons, ammunition, water, and one long-range radio. On the night of July 20, the men set out in bright moonlight on an incredibly difficult forced march over some of the most rugged terrain in Sicily.

They made their way to the foot of the cliff below the summit. After a hair-raising climb, they reached the castle and captured its only occupants—an artillery spotting team with an excellent telescope—without alerting the Germans below.

As the Germans prepared their breakfasts and did morning chores, the Canadians opened fire. The day was spent holding off German counterattacks and enduring their shelling. Using a radio and the captured telescope allowed the Canadians to bring deadly accurate artillery fire on their attackers while Tweedsmuir brought the rest of the battalion forward. By the end of the day, the town was solidly in Canadian hands.

By this time, it was clear that Montgomery had miscalculated and that his plan to capture Messina by breaking the German defenses with attacks by the Eighth Army on both sides of Mount Etna was not working. Moreover, the left flank of his army was hanging in the air, vulnerable to a German counterattack. The attack up the coastal strip between Etna and the sea was abandoned in favor of a concentration on the other side of the mountain. Lack of

Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-567-1515-30, Photo: Haas

transport still slowed the Eighth Army's movements.

Monty's troops would fight well and doggedly. But after fighting for so long in North Africa, with more to come in Europe, they were less likely take the chances that greener troops would take. Spread thin, they needed rest and reinforcements.

Alexander and Montgomery had begun the campaign regarding the Americans as barely competent to guard the Eighth Army's flank. D-day and D+1 battles showed Montgomery that the Americans had become first-rate troops. The clearance of the western half of the island showcased their mobility. Montgomery realized it was going to require an all-out effort by both Allied armies to finish the campaign.

HGPz had shaken down into an effective unit and 15th PzG, a good unit from the beginning, had been joined by the 29th PzG. The terrain where the Germans had fortified their positions favored the defense as much as any terrain in the world.

Monty invited Patton to come to his headquarters for a meeting on the 25th to formulate plans for the rest of the campaign. As one historian commented, "it was noteworthy" that it was Montgomery and not Alexander that took that initiative.

Route 113 along the coast and Route 120 through the interior were the best roads in northeast Sicily. Patton was suspicious and surprised when Montgomery suggested the Seventh Army use them to capture Messina. He also gave Patton permission to cross the boundary line between the two armies if it would aid his attacks.

Toward the end of the meeting, Alexander, in a visibly testy mood, joined them. His mood was not improved by being told how the rest of the campaign was going to be conducted. He had no real choice but to issue orders to implement what the two armiy commanders had already decided. His lack of leadership was clear.

On the 23rd, the 45th Division reached coastal road Route 113 near Termini Imerese, and elements turned both east and west. The battalion moving east encountered newly arrived elements of the 29th PzG at Campofelice, about 40 miles west of San Fratello, the northern terminus of the Germans' main defensive position.

Route 113 crossed a series of ridges generally running perpendicular to the coast that provided good defensive positions. To clear them, the Yanks usually had to swing inland and flank the defenders. There were few practical routes to do so, which made American attacks predictable and casualties heavy.

Once a ridge was cleared, the engineers could move in to repair the road. Since the Germans had made liberal use of demolitions, only the engineers' excellent work allowed the advance to move forward at a reasonable pace. If the ridge was wide where it reached the sea, the road was built on a narrow ledge cut into the side of the ridge. If the ridge was narrow, the Italians had usually dug a tunnel through it.

For example, at Cape Calava, the Germans had collapsed a tunnel and slid a section of roadbed down a cliff. Within 18 hours, the engineers had hung "a bridge in the sky" over the missing roadbed that would carry a jeep. After another six hours of shoring, the bridge

was strong enough for larger vehicles.

The Allies controlled the sea above Sicily's northern shore, so attempts were made to flank Germans from that direction. The first American attempt landed a reinforced battalion behind German front lines. As the Germans fought their way past it, both sides took heavy casualties.

The second landing put a larger force ashore, including armor and artillery. Relief took longer than expected and supporting naval vessels had to be called back twice. Eventually, the survivors exfiltrated back to American lines. By the time the next landing was made, advancing troops on land had already passed the landing site.

Later in the campaign, Eighth Army reinforced a commando unit which landed in an attempt to cut off a German rear guard, but the Germans eluded the commandos.

The final phase of the campaign involved cracking the Etna Line and capturing Messina. Allen's 1st Infantry completed the capture of Enna and drove north to Petralia. There they turned east along Route 120 toward Troina—and nearly a week's fighting in one of the most controversial battles of the campaign.

There were no good maps, and fog prevented good aerial photos until late in the battle. Intelligence predicted the Germans would continue to fight a delaying action, inflict casualties, and then withdraw to positions about five miles east of the town. The attackers did not realize that the Germans had the whole of 15th PzG available.

Troina had significant advantages for the Germans. The barren terrain made German artillery observers especially effective, and there were good positions for their guns that controlled movement along Route 120 and overlooked the few avenues of approach, which made encirclement difficult.

Initially, only the attached 39th Infantry Regiment of the 9th Infantry Division was committed, which did not allow simultaneous movement against the town and the hill positions that were placing direct fire on Route 120. The attack made some progress, but the troops were thrown back by a counterattack that night.

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ABOVE: An American patrol moves through a street in Messina, August 17. More than 100,000 Axis troops escaped to fight another day in Italy. OPPOSITE: Preparing to stop any Allied advance on the outskirts of Messina, Fallschirmjägers of the 1st Parachute Division set up a 7.5cm PAK 40 anti-tank gun at a road block.

The next day, the 39th attacked again with the support of another regiment and a battalion of French colonial infantry. Strong German artillery fire stopped the French and the 39th's attacks in their tracks and kept the other regiment from advancing more than half a mile.

The next day began with an attack across the divisional front into the teeth of a tenacious German defense. German tactical doctrine called for vigorous counterattacks, and the defenders did so with a vengeance that day. Were it not for the massive American artillery support, some 165 guns, the lead battalion would have been overrun.

Another German counterattack came so close to the American positions that the American artillery had to stop firing in support. One move was defeated because German artillery observers could see the troops attempting to cross open, rocky ground. The battered German defenses held the attackers to gains of one or two miles. The next day's attack focused on the town but did not expel the Germans.

On August 5, the German defenses began to crack. The newly arrived 60th RCT of the 9th Division reinforced the attempt to attack the town from the north.

Meanwhile, the British and Canadians had made solid progress to the south and threatened to envelop Troina from that direction. The Germans had taken 1,600 casualties or about 40 percent of the 15th PzG, and air attacks had made their supply situation desperate. They began to withdraw to positions around Cesaro, but their vehicles and heavy equipment kept on going to evacuation points around Messina.

About two weeks before the Allied landings, the Germans, ahead of a withdrawal to the Italian mainland, had appointed a naval officer commander of the Messina transport facilities; he found a mess. There were several flotillas of ferries run by Ger-

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BY NATHAN N. PREFER

Massacre at MALMÉDY

The surrender did not begin well. As First Lieutenant Virgil Lary stood in the road next to a snow-covered field just south of Malmédy, Belgium with his hands raised, one of the German tankers poked his head out of the hatch and fired twice at him with his pistol. Lieutenant Lary ducked for cover. The tanker then shot and killed a captain standing nearby.

But as more and more of the Americans stood with hands raised, the Germans opened the tank hatches and came out to accept the surrender. One of them said, in perfect English, "First Panzer SS welcomes you to Belgium."

The 1st SS Panzer Regiment had ambushed Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion just south of the Baugnez crossroads in Belgium on the afternoon December 17, 1944. Within 10 minutes, Battery B was completely overwhelmed. The events that followed would make the name "Malmédy" synonymous with the single worst massacre of Allied troops in Europe during World War II.

The fateful encounter took place on the second day of the Battle of the Bulge, the German Ardennes offensive Operation "Watch-on-the-Rhine" (Wacht-am-Rhein). According to the plan, personally approved and insisted upon by German Chancellor Adolf Hitler, after the way west had been cleared of American defenders by infantry divisions, SS-Obersturmbannführer (Lt. Col.) Joachim "Jochen" Peiper was to dash ahead to the Meuse River and seize crossings there. The 28-year-old Peiper was leading some 5,000 officers and men of the 1st SS Panzer Regiment of the 1st SS-Leibstandarte Panzer Division. His command was one spearhead of SS-Oberstgruppenführer (General) Josef Dietrich's 6th SS Panzer Army whose mission was to reach the Meuse, cross it and strike for the critical Allied port of Antwerp.

Signal

ABOVE: SS Lieutenant Colonel Joachim Peiper, commander of the battle group that massacred U.S. troops near Malmédy, Belgium. OPPOSITE: The frozen bodies of U.S. solders lie in a snowy field at Baugnez, near Malmédy. An Army censor has obscured the face of the nearest casualty. Madame Bodarwe's burned tavern is in the background.

But the advance infantry units—Maj. Gen. Walther Wadehn's 3rd Parachute (Fallshirmjäger) Division and Maj. Gen. Gerhardt Engel's 12th Volksgrenadier Division—had fallen behind schedule. American resistance had been stronger and fiercer than expected in some places, and the infantry formations had been significantly delayed in their progress to clear a path for Battle Group (Kampfgruppe) Peiper.

Born on January 30, 1915, Peiper was a well-educated German officer, fluent in English and French, and with a reputation of being a highly capable commander of combat units. By the age of 25 he had already reached battalion command in an elite SS infantry division. By 1943 he was a regimental commander with experience in Poland, France, and Russia. In December 1944 he was commanding the 1st SS-Panzer Regiment of the 1st SS Leibstandarte Panzer Division. Described as tall, good-looking with light brown hair, he could be easy-going but also had a hair-trigger temper. On this December day in the snow-covered Ardennes Forest, he was fuming.

The advance infantry units—Maj. Gen. Walther Wadehn's 3rd Parachute (Fallshirmjäger) Division and Maj. Gen. Gerhardt Engel's 12th Volksgrenadier Division—had

During the Battle of the Bulge, an American unit surrendered only to be gunned down and looted in a field near Malmédy, Belgium.

National Archives

fallen behind schedule. American resistance had been stronger and fiercer than expected in some places, and the infantry formations had been significantly delayed in their progress to clear a path for Battle Group (Kampfgruppe) Peiper.

In an operation that had been launched with the barest levels of ammunition, food and fuel, every moment counted. Further, the operation counted on bad flying conditions, eliminating the presence of the much-feared Allied aircraft, which could not last forever.

Peiper also was aware that the longer the delay, the more coordinated the American resistance would become. Speed was the key factor for a German success. And now that speed was threatened by the delay in getting his command to the forefront of the fighting.

Impatient with the continuing delays, Peiper decided to take matters into his own hands. He attached a battalion of the 9th Parachute Regiment to his battle group, and then moved ahead on his own to his assigned route, Rollbahn "D," to accomplish his mission.

Knowing that the Americans were still resisting to his front, he decided to continue his advance during the night, knowing darkness would conceal his movements and strength.

Peiper placed two Panther tanks to the front of his column, supported by the paratroopers who were to protect and guide the tanks forward. The rest of the column rode on the nearly 800 following tanks, trucks, and captured vehicles that made up the group's motor column.

In complete darkness, the column slowly moved ahead. At the little German village of Buchholz, his men routed Company "K" of the 394th Infantry Regiment, 99th Infantry Division, most of whom were captured. But one gallant soldier of Company "K,"a radioman, hid in a cellar and reported on Battle Group Peiper's strength, route, and composition before being taken prisoner.

After securing Buchholz, the paratroopers halted to await the arrival of supporting artillery. But Peiper would not waste another moment and ordered the column to push ahead. It remained a difficult march, in the pitch darkness, over snow-covered roads, amid dense forests which came to the road edges in most places, and which most likely contained groups of the enemy, while the Germans were completely ignorant of where the next opposition might be waiting.

The next village was Honsfeld, a rest center for the 394th Infantry. Here, the Americans were anticipating the arrival of singer-actress Marlena Dietrich for a USO show. Instead, they received Battle Group Peiper.

Private First Class William Hawkins of the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion had arrived the night before. He said that he was "sleeping in the attic with three or four other buddies when I was awakened about daylight by one of our men and told to get up as the Germans had us completely surrounded. I kicked him downstairs and told him not to bother us anymore as I thought he was pulling a prank.

"Immediately one of our sergeants came up the stairs two at a time and informed us that this was no prank but the real thing, at which we all jumped up and began looking out of the windows and saw German soldiers everywhere we looked."

One of the SS soldiers later said, "There were [Americans] everywhere. We disarmed them at once and broke up their weapons. Then we drove them out into the street and started to count our loot in chocolate and cigarettes."

Suddenly, the Americans began to fight back. Sergeant Devers Bryant, a member of

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ABOVE: Men of Kampfgruppe Peiper pause to consult a map and road signs during the opening hours of the unit's attack. The officer has often been misidentified as Peiper in this captured war photo. OPPOSITE: Men of Lt. Col. David E. Pergrin's, 291st Combat Engineer Battalion were stationed in Malmedy at the time of the attack and heard German machine gun fire at the Baugnez crossroads. Company C, pictured here, was among the first to discover the bodies. Pergrin's report alerted U.S. First Army Headquarters and word of the massacre spread through the American Army.

the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion, jumped to his gun. "The Germans had taken cover in a barn about 50 yards away," he remembered after the war, "and were shooting at the house. I put a shell into the barn; hay, wood, and men flew everywhere."

Two other anti-tank guns knocked out two Panthers, then took on a King Tiger but the shells just bounced off it. The Tiger, in turn, blew both guns away.

Once again the Germans rounded up prisoners from the 99th Infantry Division, the 14th Cavalry Group, and other smaller units. Anyone resisting was cut down by automatic weapons fire from the Panther tanks or the paratroopers. One German propaganda photographer snapped a photo of the paratroopers stripping boots off dead American soldiers, a photo that appears in many books about the Battle of the Bulge.

But the resistance in Honsfeld, however brief, cost Peiper's battle group several vehicles. These losses were made good, however, by the capture of dozens of trucks, reconnaissance vehicles, M-8 armored cars, and anti-tank guns. It was also at Honsfeld that the first recorded atrocity by Battle Group Peiper occurred. At least fifteen (some sources say 19) Americans soldiers and three Belgian civilians, including a 16-year-old girl, were executed during the Germans' brief occupation of the village.

Evidence that time was growing short came when the battle group left Honsfeld as daylight was breaking. American fighter-bombers struck from the skies and destroyed several more of the group's vehicles. They were only deterred from additional damage by the appearance of German fighter aircraft.

But a more serious problem was developing for Peiper: his fuel supplies were growing short. The need to move slowly over the single road, the constant delays, and the combat had all depleted his fuel stocks to dangerous levels.

His orders allowed him to seize and use any captured American supplies of fuel he encountered, but none had appeared on his assigned route thus far. But he did learn of an American fuel dump at the village of Büllingen, a few miles to his north. Despite orders restricting him to "Rollbahn D," Peiper decided to go for the fuel. Without fuel, he knew he could never complete his assignment.

Leaving his assigned route, he directed his column to Büllingen. Along the way, he ran into eight American supply trucks, which he captured. Then he came across a small airstrip that had housed a dozen of the small L-5 artillery-spotting aircraft; 11 out of the 12 managed to fly to safety before his arrival.

The battle group continued to Büllingen, where once again their arrival was unexpected. Here, they captured a company of the 2nd Infantry Division who were lining up for breakfast. Those of this company

who did not escape were put to work filling the fuel tanks of the battle group's hundreds of vehicles with 50,000 gallons of gasoline. Fifty Americans were then taken prisoner.

Here, too, the atrocities continued when SS Lt. Col. Josef "Jupp" Diefenthal, commanding one of the battle group's battalions, executed a wounded American soldier. (After the war, Diefenthal would be tried and convicted of war crimes.)

Now aware of the battle group's location, American artillery hurried the exit of the Germans from Büllingen. The Americans feared that Peiper would continue north to Elsenborn Ridge and turn the flank of the defending 2nd and 99th Infantry Divisions holding that vital blocking position; neither American unit had any troops protecting its rear at the time. But the German plan had been extremely specific about which routes each attacking column was to take, and for Battle Group Peiper, that was "Rollbahn D." As a result, Peiper missed a great "what if" opportunity when he turned back to his assigned route to the Meuse.

The turn northward and the subsequent turn back south seems to have made things more difficult for the battle group. Instead of returning exactly the way he had come, Peiper turned southwest over a series of minor roads that slowed his advance and threatened to halt it altogether.

This part of the journey seemed to dissuade Peiper from continuing as he was, and he turned his column again, this time to the northwest to reach Route N32 at the Baugnez crossroads. This well-surfaced road would speed his advance and allow him to turn south over much better roads than he had been taking.

However, all this twisting and turning slowed the battle group's advance to, at times, as little as four miles per hour, costing it time and fuel, something that the Germans simply could not afford. Even then, Peiper knew that Route N32 was not his assigned route, but one assigned to the 12th SS Panzer "Hitlerjugend" Division.

He had no current information on that division's location and would not have been surprised to run in to it when he reached Route N32. But he believed it was the fastest way back to his own assigned route. If he could reach the Baugnez crossroads, he could again turn to Ligneuville and his assigned route over good roads, thus making up some time.

Along the way he continued to encounter small, jeep-mounted patrols, some of which began reporting his position and direction. This lack of resistance convinced Peiper that he had broken through the American resistance and that, other than the occasional enemy patrol, the way lay clear to the Meuse.

But news of the battle group's approach soon reached Ligneuvulle, and the headquarters of the U.S. 49th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Brigade quickly evacuated the town. Nearby lay the village of Malmédy, one of the larger towns in the Ardennes, not unlike St. Vith or Bastogne. A village of about 5,000 people, it dated back to AD 651 when a religious abbey had been founded there. The old stone buildings forming the village were located at an important crossing point over the Warchenne River.

During the current crisis, it had been designated as the assembly point for the 30th Infantry ("Old Hickory") Division, before it entered the ongoing battle. The "Old Hickory" division was rushing there from General William H. Simpson's Ninth U. S. Army as a reserve force.

Refugees had doubled the population of Malmédy, and German long-range artillery had already hit the town on several occasions, inflicting civilian casualties. As the Ger-

Both: National Archives

ABOVE: With their vehicles running low on fuel, Peiper's men stole 50,000 gallons of gasoline from a U.S. 2nd Infantry Division fuel dump at Bullingen. OPPOSITE: German soldiers dash across a Belgian road, reenacting their attack for German cameramen after ambushing an American convoy in the first days of the Ardennes offensive. Peiper's men had several encounters with U.S. units while on their drive to the Meuse River.

mans approached, Allied flags, readied to celebrate liberation, were hidden away, and American soldiers began destroying supplies stored in the vicinity.

American units based there, including the 47th Field Hospital, 546th and 575th Ambulance Companies, a reinforcement depot, a civil-affairs section, and other administrative units all packed up and withdrew. Fleeing civilians choked the roads west.

But Peiper was not interested in Malmédy. When his column finally reached route N32, they turned west towards the Baugnez crossroads. His attention was focused on getting back to "Rollbahn D" as soon as possible.

As his leading troops approached the crossroads, they reported sighting a small American convoy. They reported about 30 6x6 trucks, Dodge weapons carriers, and jeeps coming up the hill from Malmédy and turning at the crossroads. This was Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, that was headed for Luxembourg City. Battle Group Peiper opened fire on the unsuspecting Americans.

Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion was what the Army called an "orphan outfit." The battalion, and its individual companies, belonged to no higher headquarters, but were attached to larger units as needed. The individual companies were often miles from each other, serving as observation units for much larger artillery unit headquarters.

On December 12, 1944, Battery B had been stationed several miles north of the Ardennes in the Hürtgen Forest at Schevenhutte. It was to be part of the First U. S. Army's pending drive to the Roer River. Having come ashore in September, it had fought in France, Belgium, and Luxembourg before arriving in the Hürtgen Forest.

As 1st Lt. Virgil Lary prepared the morning report for Battery B on December 12, he noted that it had a strength of only 138 officers and men, along with about 40-odd jeeps and trucks. Many of the men who had trained together at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, before coming to France, were still with the battalion. They had just received their mail, including several Christmas packages from home, and were under new orders to move to a town most had never heard of, Bastogne.

The artillerymen began to pack up and load their vehicles. Unaware of the coming German attack, they proceeded alone along the dank forest roads toward their new destination, hoping that they would be assigned to some larger unit and no longer be an "orphan."

Unknown to Battery B, ahead of them another unit was also moving along these same roads. This was Combat Command Reserve (CCR) of the 7th Armored Division. The 2,400 men and 450 tanks and trucks of CCR likewise had no knowledge of Battery B trailing several miles behind them. By December 17, CCR was passing through Malmédy where Lt. Col. David E. Pergrin and his 291st Engineer (Combat) Battalion were stationed.

Aware of the closeness of Battle Group Peiper, Lt. Col. Pergrin tried to persuade CCR to leave some protection for Malmédy, to no avail. CCR had a mission to the north and could not be delayed or reduced in strength. CCR continued its mission, and headed to the Baugnez crossroads, where military policemen of the 518th Military Police Battalion directed them on their next leg of the journey.

After CCR had passed through the crossroads, one of the two MPs left to return to Malmédy, leaving the other at the crossroads. Neither knew of the approach of Battery B, miles behind CCR.

About 15 miles north of Malmédy, Battery B pulled off the road for the noon meal. As they resumed their journey, they picked up various stragglers from other units, some messengers, some medical corps men, oth-

ers going to or coming from other units. Exactly how many men were in the Battery B column when it passed Malmédy remains unknown. They passed through Malmédy soon after CCR, and asked directions from the MP there. Directed down the same road as CCR, they continued without pausing in the village.

As they entered the small grouping of homes at the Baugnez crossroads, one jeep pulled out of column to verify where they were and what route to take. They also inquired if any Germans had been in the area lately. Having received their responses, the three men returned to the jeep and rejoined the column. The weather was poor, with gray skies, snow squalls, and a cold wind blowing. MP Private Homer Ford waved them goodbye as they drove south out of town.

At about 1 p.m. on December 17, Battle Group Peiper arrive and opened fire on Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, south of the Baugnez crossroads. At a range of about 800 yards across the open snow-covered fields, the Germans caught the Americans completely by surprise. One group then traveled across the fields towards the American column while a second, larger, group went down the road and turned to catch the Americans from behind.

The 10th SS Panzergrenadier Company, 1st SS Panzer Regiment, set the ambush with using mortars to disrupt the confused American column. Lieutenant Lary had picked up a captain along the way, and now the two men in the jeep watched as the vehicle in front of them disappeared in a sudden explosion. Shell after shell ripped into the column, followed swiftly by machine-gun fire.

Lieutenant Lary frantically looked for an escape route, but there was none. Tanks and machine guns were all around the battery. Destroyed vehicles blocked the road while others had run off the road in a futile effort to escape.

The men of Battery B jumped from their vehicles and ran for cover along the road. Armed only with rifles, carbines, and some grenades, the artillerymen had no chance against tanks, machine guns, and mortars. One man tried to get a truck-mounted .30-caliber machine gun into action, but he was swiftly cut down by enemy fire. Others fell dead or wounded. Exactly how many could never be determined.

Back at the Baugnez crossroads, MP Private Ford had begun to think about a nice cognac at the local bistro when he heard shooting from the south. He recognized the distinct sound of German machine guns and intuitively knew that Battery B had been struck by enemy weapons. His first instinct was to run, but he did not. As stragglers came back to Baugnez, he gathered them behind a farmhouse for the moment. When a huge German tank pulled up nearby and blew up an ambulance, he led the group into a nearby shed where they hid.

Along the road to the south, American soldiers jumped into ditches or made a break for safety. Some made it while others did not. Back towards the middle of the German column, Peiper was interrogating a captured American officer when he first heard the shooting from the front of the column.

Peiper immediately became alarmed that the firing would give his position away to any nearby American combat units. He ordered his adjutant to rush to the head of the column and stop the firing. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Lary and the other officers of the battery, and the hitchhiking captain, conferred and agreed that there was no way out of the ambush. With considerable reluctance, the decision was made to surrender. The word was passed from man to man to cease firing.

Once the firing had slackened, Lieutenant Lary stood up with his hands raised. Soon others followed. Battery B surrendered en masse to Battle Group Peiper. It had fought for about 10 minutes against overwhelming odds.

BELOW: During their Ardennes offensive, German units captured thousands of GIs who thought they were occupying a "quiet" sector of the front. Here, Americans are being rounded up in a village before being evacuated to the rear. OPPOSITE: German troops march a line of Americans to the rear, where they will be packed into railroad boxcars and transported to POW camps deep inside Germany.

Bundesarchiv Bild 183-J28619, Photo: Max Büschel

Bundesarchiv Bild 183-J28533, Photo: Max Büschel

The surrendered Americans began to gather in small groups, for comfort and security. Many began grumbling about being surprised by such a superior force, wondering why they had not been told that Germans were in their area. American officers were telling them to stand fast, obey orders, and everything would turn out all right.

German infantrymen began to close around them, gathering them into one large group. Some began to take their rubber boots and gloves to replace their own worn-out equipment. Watches, rings, and other valuables also were confiscated. Some German officers and non-commissioned officers tried to find out which of the Americans were drivers, for they wanted their vehicles but needed drivers to be able to use them. Apparently not many of the Germans knew how to drive American vehicles. But, suddenly, not one of the Americans knew how to drive, either.

While this was going on, the main body of Battle Group Peiper passed without stopping, moving on to Ligneuville. Lt. Col. Peiper pulled out of the column to reprimand the leaders of the 6th and 10th SS Panzer Companies for the noise of the ambush, which he feared had alerted nearby American units. But when he saw the results of the ambush—prisoners and destroyed vehicles—he changed his mind and congratulated his troops.

He ordered them to turn over the prisoners to the 9th Panzer Pioneer [Engineer] Company while the combat troops resumed their march. Then he rejoined the column and proceeded west. For a while there was much activity at the Baugnez crossroads, with the German tanks and trucks rushing west and the captured Americans and their German guards moving east.

MP Pfc. Ford and the stragglers he had gathered in the barn watched as the prisoners were gathered outside Madame Bodarwé's tavern, where only moments earlier he had been about to enter for a cognac. They watched as Lt. Col. Diefenthal organized the renewed looting of the Americans overcoats, wallets, watches, dog tags, buttons, and anything that caught the eye of the looters.

Then he ordered the Americans gathered in a nearby field, requiring them to climb over a stone wall. As they watched, they saw a group of Germans heading directly for their barn. Knowing there was no option, Ford and his companions surrendered.

Belgian Farmer Henry Lejoy was watching this activity from across the road. He heard the Americans calling for medical treatment, saw others flushed from a small wood, hurried along by blows from rifle butts, while many wounded lay along the road. Others limped along on frozen feet, having lost their boots to the Germans. He was surprised by what he believed was the casual attitude of the prisoners, not understanding English nor American habits.

The slow assembly of the prisoners, the refusal of any to volunteer as drivers for the captured vehicles, and the delays by the wounded all served to aggravate the men of the 9th SS Panzer Pioneer Company. They hailed a passing self-propelled weapons carrier and asked that it point its 88mm antiaircraft gun at the assembled Americans to intimidate them into more cooperation.

But, as the armored vehicle moved into position off the road, it became bogged down in the mud, unable to direct its gun anywhere. Furious and frustrated, the officer in charge then hailed two passing tanks for support. These two vehicles pulled out of line and parked near the gathered prisoners. Several of the pioneers climbed aboard the tanks and sat with automatic weapons pointed at the prisoners.

Meanwhile, the German column continued to roll past the field. Time passed. The prisoners were held in the field, hands raised, but with no other efforts by the Germans to move them. Many wondered what was going to happen next. As the column rolled by, Tank Number 731 of the 7th

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Panzer Company was stopped by one of the 9th Panzer Pioneer Company officers.

The officer told the tank commander to join with the two tanks already guarding the prisoners and be prepared to "bump off" the American prisoners. He went on to say that permission had been received "from up ahead" to kill the prisoners so as not to slow the column.

The tank commander ordered Private Georg Fleps, already leaning out of his hatch, to fire on the prisoners since he was already holding a pistol. Private Fleps picked out a nearby target and opened fire. Lieutenant Lary thought at first that he was the target, but he and other officers yelled to the prisoners to stand fast, thinking this was just a provocation by the Germans to make them run, and giving them an excuse to fire.

With the first American to fall, the rest became anxious and nervous about what was to happen next. Private Fleps picked another target and fired again. The man fell. Then came a third shot, but Lieutenant Lary and the others did not hear this one clearly, since several German machine guns had also opened fire. Even individual German riflemen opened fire. Row after row of American POWs crumpled into the snow.

Dozens of Americans fell, some dead, others wounded. Many unwounded survivors found themselves trapped under a pile of dead comrades. Lieutenant Lary survived the initial burst, falling to the ground. But even there he was hit in the foot. All around he could hear men crying out in pain.

MP Pfc. Homer Ford was one of those not hit, but he lay flat on the ground, not daring to move, as German soldiers walked among the field to kill anyone still alive.

Minutes earlier, in Malmédy, Lt. Col. Pergrin of the 291st Engineers had been trying to match his maps of the area with the terrain around him. He took his jeep and rode up to a nearby height to orient himself on his position when he heard a huge amount of gunfire in the distance.

He could identify the guns as German, firing fully automatic without pause. He could not see clearly what was happening, but as he tried to discern what the ruckus was all about, four American soldiers appeared in front of him, claiming that American soldiers were being massacred at the Baugnez crossroads.

At the killing field, the Germans finally jumped up on the tanks and left, believing that they had completed their mission. But not all the Americans were dead. Lieutenant Lary and MP Pfc. Ford were alive, as were several others. They had survived by playing dead, holding their breath so it would not fog in the cold air. Most were wounded, some suffering several wounds. But their ordeal was not yet over.

As other German units, not from Battle Group Peiper, rolled past, many fired randomly into the field. These troops, from the 1st SS Panzer Division, had not participated in the slaughter, but used the dead for target practice as they passed.

After perhaps an hour, all the road traffic had passed, and it was quiet at the crossroads. Only a platoon of German troops and an armored half-track remained to secure the area. Quietly, a voice in the field whispered, "Anyone else alive?" Several whispers responded. As many as 25 men had survived the massacre. Unable to stay in the snowy field, the men rose at a signal and raced for shelter.

Another American reached the woods, where he survived until he reached the lines of

the 291st Engineer (Combat) Battalion. Those who sought shelter in a farmhouse were surrounded by the Germans who set fire to the house. As the Americans rushed out, they were cut down. MP Pfc. Ford and two or three others ran all the way back to Malmédy, despite their wounds. Still others played dead in the bloody snow and waited until darkness to make their escape.

Pfc. Samuel Dobyns, a driver in the 575th Ambulance Company, was one of those who managed to escape. After the war he testified, "I saw three or four German soldiers shoot the wounded that were crying for help." Another GI told a 1946 war-crimes tribunal that, after the Germans had stopped shooting, they went through the body-filled field "and went around kicking them. Anything that moved, they shot them."

The Germans guarding the road were stunned but recovered swiftly and opened fire. The men raced for cover in barns, houses, behind fences, and to any protection that looked secure. Lieutenant Lary raced to a shed where he and others took shelter. (Belgian civilians would later lead him to American lines.)

BELOW: The bodies of the massacred soldiers lay frozen in the snow until mid-January before U.S. war crimes investigators arrived to recover them and document evidence. Identification placards were placed on the corpses to aid the forensic investigation. OPPOSITE: Medical personnel examine the corpses of the slain Americans, many of whom were shot at close range. The exact number killed has never been determined, but the "official" count was at least 86.

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The precise number of American soldiers who were killed December 17 at the Baugnez crossroads has never been determined. No one kept any records of the men picked up along the way by Battery B. The best estimate suggests that between 113 to 160 officers and men were with the Battery B column when it was ambushed by the 1st SS Panzer Division. Many escaped the ambush before the surrender. At least 46 men were known to have survived the actual shooting, four of whom later died of wounds. The "official" count of the dead is 86.

In addition, the Germans killed Madame Bodarwe, even though she welcomed them with candy and cigarettes, and told them that her two sons were serving in the German Army. They also burned down her café.

Lt. Col. Pergrin quickly returned to his headquarters and issued the first news of the massacre. Probably because he issued his report from Malmédy, the deaths at the Baugnez Crossroads became known to history as the "Malmédy Massacre."

His report stated, "SS troops vicinity L8199 [map reference] captured US soldier, traffic MP, with about 200 US soldiers. American prisoners searched. When finished, Germans lined up Americans and shot them with machine pistols and machine guns. Wounded informant who escaped and more details follow later."

Within hours Pergrin's report had reached First U. S. Army Headquarters, which, on its own authority released it to the press. The Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. William Kean, wrote, "There is absolutely no question as to its proof—immediate publicity is being given to the story. General [Elwood] Quesada has told every one of his pilots [9th Tactical Air command] about it during their briefing." General Eisenhower authorized the story's immediate release to the press at home.

The area at the crossroads remained in German hands until secured by the advance of the 30th Infantry Division in mid-January 1945. At that time, 71 bodies

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Malmédy was mistakenly bombed on three consecutive days, Dec. 23-25, 1944, by U.S. Army Air Force planes targeting other towns in the region. The death toll from the bombings topped 200 and included U.S. soldiers. Many more were wounded.

were recovered from the snow-covered field where the massacre occurred. Considered a crime scene by the Americans, photographers recorded every aspect of the recovery. Full autopsies were carried out by the doctors of the 44th Evacuation Hospital. No attempt had been made by the Germans to conceal the deaths or their cause. Most had been shot to death, a few beaten to death, and there was no indication that anyone had attempted to escape.

The news of the massacre traveled quickly. Within hours American troops knew what had happened to Battery B, albeit without the details, and a new hard line was soon being taken with any Germans who attempted to surrender. German SS troops in particular were looked upon not as soldiers but as murderers, gangsters, and dangerous even when surrendering. Many did not survive the attempt to surrender.

There are many lingering questions about the Malmédy Massacre. It is unlikely that it was premeditated, since Battle Group Peiper had no way of knowing that they would encounter Battery B, or any other American unit. It is possible the German guards were sufficiently angered by the American refusal to drive their vehicles, and the apparent slowness of gathering into one group, that they acted independently. There was also the need to keep moving, as time and speed were the essentials of victory for the Germans, who were aware of this.

When the German Army surrendered in May 1945, an immediate investigation was conducted by American authorities as to who was responsible for the atrocity. After some discussion, attention focused on four German officers: Lt. Col. Peiper, commander of Battle Group Peiper, Lt. Col. Werner Pötschke, commanding the 1st SS Panzer Battalion, Lt. Col. Jupp Diefenthal, commanding the 3rd SS Panzergrenadier Battalion, and 1st Lt. (Obersturmführer) Erich Rumpf, commanding the 9th SS Pioneer Company.

By this time, however, Lt. Col. Pötschke had died in combat in March 1945, so only the remaining three officers were brought to trial. All told, there were 76 defendants, including Private Fleps.

Testimony at the trial determined that it was 1st Lt. Rumpf that gave the order to open fire on the surrendered Americans, but that he had received permission "from up ahead," either Lt. Col. Diefenthal or the late Lt. Col. Pötschke. Whether Peiper authorized the massacre has never been proven.

After the war, most of the participants gave differing versions of what happened, with many swearing that they had seen and done nothing unusual at the crossroads that day.

It should be noted that for the 1st SS Panzer Division, what did happen at the Baugnez crossroads was not completely unusual or out of character. Beginning with its combat debut in Poland, this unit, as did most SS units, had little regard for their opponents or the rules of warfare. After killing surrendered soldiers and civilians in Poland, the division went on to murder British soldiers during the battles around Dunkirk, and again in Normandy, where they executed dozens of surrendered Canadian troops.

Their record in Russia was also notorious for indiscriminate killings, burnings, looting and rape of a people they considered "sub-human." This was a part of the belief that only by terror could they impose their will on the enemies of the Third Reich.

Nor was this massacre the only incident of murder committed by Battle Group Peiper

PEIPER'S WAR-CRIME TRIAL AND DEATH

The outcome of a war-crimes trial held at Dachau in the summer of 1946 provided a death sentence for Lt. Col. Joachim Peiper, and 43 others; other SS men received lengthy prison sentences. But before the executions could be carried out, the advent of the Cold War and a post-war perception of degrees of guilt, along with the political posturing of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, commuted nearly all death sentences to either life sentences or long prison sentences.

As time passed, nearly all the surviving German officers associated with the events at the Baugnez crossroads were freed and released to West Germany. After 13 years in jail, Lt. Col. Peiper was released and went to work as a clerk at the Porsche factory in the Stuttgart suburb of Zuffenhausen, while being groomed for a higher position. The workers' union, however, protested Peiper's hiring and Porsche laid him off.

He then became an independent sales promoter, first for a Volkswagen dealer in Reutlingen and then for other companies. In 1967 he moved back to Stuttgart but the next year he was brought up on charges of killing 34 Italian civilians when he and his unit were stationed there in 1943.

Although the court received depositions from 17 Italians and 126 former members of his battalion, it ruled in February 1969 that there was insufficient evidence for formal charges to be brought.

Fearing for his family's safety, during the winter of 1970-1971 he and his wife moved to the small (280 inhabitants) village of Traves in eastern France, where he and his wife Sigurd had built a small house by the Saône River.

There he led a quiet life, translating books and writing articles about the war and motor sports. The couple's three grown children were living in Germany. He made no attempt to hide his identity. But in June 1976, a "hate campaign" was launched against him by a French Communist newspaper. On July 13, Peiper received anonymous letters and telephone calls threatening that his house would be set on fire; he sent Sigurd away for her safety. The next day—Bastille Day, July 14, 1976—unknown assailants struck around midnight.

Although he was armed with a pistol, shotgun, and two rifles, Peiper was killed. He was buried in the family plot in Bavaria. No one has ever been arrested for the murder of one of Nazi Germany's most prominent military commanders.

ABOVE: Joachim Peiper (circled) is shown at Dachau in 1946 with other Germans accused of war crimes. BELOW: Kenneth Ahrens, a survivor of the massacre, testifies at the war crimes trial. The woman at left is a court translator.

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during the Battle of the Bulge. As described, there were earlier incidents at Honsfeld and Buchholz. After Malmédy, the group captured some 20 American troops at Ligneuville on the Ambleve River. Angered by the delay and casualties caused by the defenders of Ligneuville, the Germans killed seven of the prisoners.

A similar incident involving soldiers and civilians occurred later at the village of Vau Richard—and at Cheneux, at Stavelot, at Trois Ponts, at Stoumont, at Wanne, at Lutrebois and Petit Thier. The U.S. Army's official total is 308 captured Americans killed, and 111 civilians murdered by the 1st SS Panzer Division. Other sources give a figure of as high as 749 combined murders.

Nor was the 1st SS Panzer Division the only German unit to commit war crimes. Many others did so, in many countries. ■

The 1st Polish Armoured Division

Served with Honor

Polish Major General Stanislaw Macze, commander of the 1st Polish Armoured Division stood tall and watched as General Guy Simonds, II Canadian Corps, delivered very harsh news to the half dozen German generals and admirals of the 1st Parachute Army, General Erich Straub commanding.

"You have not come here to negotiate with us; you are here to listen to the terms of unconditional surrender."

Simonds then read off a list of German locales and the units that would be occupying them, naming cities and Allied units. He then came to Wilhelmshaven and informed Straub that the great city would be occupied by the Polish 1st Armoured Division.

Straub and his retinue were stunned at the thought of German territory being occupied by Poles.

For Maczek and his countrymen who recalled the grim defeat of the Polish Army at the hands of the Germans in 1939, it was a proud moment.

A few days after the meeting, the men of the 1st Polish Armoured Division marched through the streets of Wilhelmshaven in a parade-ground formation. The "Black Devils," as the Germans had nicknamed them, made a great procession of world-weary and battle-hardened tankers.

As they passed the reviewing stand, they presented eyes right to their commanding officer, General Maczek. Billowing 25 feet in the air above the pride-filled men of the division flew red and white banners emblazoned with the Polish eagle. These Polish banners had been crafted from Nazi banners by the people of Wilhelmshaven on Maczek's orders.

For Maczek, Wilhelmshaven's surrender and occupation was the culmination of six years of hard work and the final leg of a journey that began in September 1939. Born in 1892, in Ukraine, Maczek was a career soldier, serving not only in the Polish army, but also the Austrian Habsburg Army during the

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ABOVE: Maj. Gen. Stanislaw Maczek led the 1st Polish Armoured Division—dubbed the "Black Devils"—before and through the end of the war. RIGHT: After crossing the English Channel to Normandy, U.S.-supplied M4 Sherman tanks of the 1st Polish Armoured Division's 10th Armoured Brigade assemble near Caen before the start of Operation Totalise, August 8, 1944.

Imperial War Museum

Avenging their grim 1939 military defeat, soldiers of the 1st Polish Armoured Division played an important role in the liberation of France, Belgium and the Netherlands.

BY WILLIAM STROOCK

Great War. He had commanded a battalion in the Russo-Polish War of 1920 and a cavalry brigade during the German invasion of Poland.

As the Polish military and state collapsed in the wake of the German-Russo invasion, Maczek led his brigade into Hungary, where they were interned by the Hungarian government. Maczek and thousands of his men managed to make their way out of Hungary to reform in France. The Polish 10th Cavalry Regiment fought in the Battle of France only to evacuate to Britain after France surrendered.

In less than a year Maczek and his brigade had fought losing campaigns which saw the virtual destruction of the nation they defended. Maczek had shown an instinct for survival and an iron will to persevere. Both traits served him well in Britain where the byzantine politics of the Polish government and military in exile continued apace. There was also the matter of the British military, which was not necessarily enthusiastic about dedicating already stretched resources toward the Polish exiles.

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ABOVE: Equipped with British uniforms and weapons, Polish soldiers run an obstacle course at one of their training camps in Britain. OPPOSITE: Maczek climbs aboard his Cromwell tank during training in England. The Poles were equipped with both British and American tanks and other vehicles.

With thousands of vagabond Polish soldiers floating around Britain, the Imperial General Staff organized the Polish 16th Armoured Brigade. As he had decades of experience and commanded armored forces in Poland and France, Maczek was the obvious choice to command the new brigade.

Though under-manned and equipped, the Polish 16th Armoured Brigade was a fact in the British order of battle. In the autumn of 1940, the General Staff stationed the Poles in Scotland on invasion alert, where they existed in a kind of limbo. They fell under the command of the Polish government in exile, led by General Władysław Sikorski, but were beholden to the British for their very existence.

Though they were twice exiled, Maczek and his men were lucky. Thousands in the Polish officer corps had been murdered by the Soviets in Katynwood. Hundreds of thousands more—soldiers captured by the Soviets, or simply Poles distrusted by Stalin—were shipped to labor camps above the Arctic Circle, some as far away as Kamchatka on the Soviet Pacific coast.

After the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Stalin was desperate for manpower and, after an agreement with Sikorski's government, released hundreds of thousands of Poles. The newly liberated prisoners then made their way to special camps set up for Polish army recruits in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

In this endeavor the Poles were on their own. The journey from the Siberian labor camps to the Polish army camps was an odyssey all its own. Most of the Poles coming out of the Soviet Union went through Iran and into the British Middle East. Here they were organized into the Polish II Corps, or "Anders Army"—so named after General Władysław Anders, its commander, and would see extensive action in North Africa and Italy.

Those Polish forces and refugees who made it to Britain were welcomed by the Churchill government. Serving under the Commonwealth Forces Treaty, Sikorski's government had absolute sovereignty over Polish forces; Sikorski was both the president and commander-in-chief, but his relationship with the British was at times difficult. Sikorski and his government-in-exile were themselves a fellow Allied power, more or less equal to Britain. However, to the British, and later the Americans, Poland was just another country conquered by the Nazis.

With Polish II Corps taking shape in the Mediterranean, Sikorski was keen to form a Polish I Corps in Britain that would be based on a Polish armored division, and he began lobbying for its formation in November 1941. Winston Churchill, who was always up for anything with a spirit of adventure and romance, lent his support to the idea of such a Polish force.

The Imperial General Staff, however, was leery. Where were they to find the equipment and men for such an endeavor? Stalin did like the idea of a Polish formation independent of himself and the Americans and British were heavily vested in keeping Stalin happy. The Poles, of course, regarded him as a bitter enemy.

A directive issued by Sikorski on February 16, 1942, formed the division. It was to be organized along contemporary British lines and would comprise the 10th Cavalry

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Brigade, the 16th Armoured Brigade, and the Corps Reconnaissance Regiment, with Maczek as General Officer Commanding; the newly formed Polish 1st Armoured Division remained in Scotland to train, equip, and receive soldiers.

Badly under-equipped, its predecessor in November 1940 only had 48 tanks. At one point the division had only 125 tanks in its inventory, mostly older Valentine and Crusader models. Sikorksi personally appealed to Churchill, who duly ordered the Imperial General Staff to treat the Polish 1st Armoured Division as it would any Commonwealth Force.

The Polish 1st Armoured Division was also badly undermanned as the tens of thousands of Poles making their way out of Russia were mostly earmarked for Polish forces in the Mediterranean; few Polish soldiers actually made their way to England.

Facing a chronic manpower shortage throughout 1942 and 1943, Sikorski looked for innovative ways to make up the shortfall. At first he ludicrously appealed to the patriotism of the large Polish community living in America. Having fled Poland to begin with, few Polish-Americans were interested returning to fight for the "Motherland."

In 1943, Sikorski looked to North Africa for personnel. The Germans had absorbed several thousand Poles into their own army, many now languished in American POW camps. Getting the Americans to release Poles in the German army was difficult, though Sikorski managed to get a few.

Manpower shortages were exacerbated by an early directive issued by the Polish staff stating that, "The Polish Army is a Christian army." In 1939, more than three million Jews lived in Poland, so this directive excluded thousands of potential recruits. In 1942 Sikorski managed to remove 8,000 troops from Anders' Army for Polish I Corps. Still, not until March 1944 would the division be fully staffed.

There was also the matter of organization. Originally, the Polish 1st Armoured Division was to have two armored brigades. Sikorski planned to take one and form a second armored division. However, the Imperial General Staff, after lessons learned in the North African desert, decided that one armored and one infantry brigade was the ideal makeup for a Commonwealth division. The British insisted that the Poles adhere to their guidelines. Seeking to assert his independence, Sikorski initially refused, but ultimately acquiesced as he barely had the manpower to fill out one armored division, much less two.

Whatever its size, the Black Devils fought under a banner based on the old Polish Hussars insignia: a plumed iron helmet flanked by the giant wings of a Polish Hussar. These were the heroes of Polish lore—armored knights led by national hero Jan Sobieski, defending the faith against the Islamic hordes of Istanbul. Sobieski won his greatest victory at the head of the Hussars relieving the Siege of Vienna in 1683. This was powerful imagery showing the Polish military was down but not out.

During the two-and-a-half years between its formation and its arrival in Normandy, the Polish First Armoured Division trained, first in Scotland, beginning in 1943, and then in England. The Poles were not ignorant of the art of soldiering. In fact, with thousands of veterans of the fighting in Poland and France in their ranks, the Polish 1st Armoured Division was among the most experienced in Britain.

Thousands of Polish soldiers attended special schools. Officers attended staff colleges and staff rides. But while individual units, battalions, companies, and the like were well trained and ready for action, the division itself only maneuvered as a whole twice before going to Normandy.

The Polish 1st Armoured Division trained throughout June of 1943, with Maczek conducting several wargames pitting one brigade against another, and later a division-wide maneuver against the French 2nd Armored Division. After these exercises, the Imperial General Staff moved the Poles to Aldershot and then London as a precursor to moving them to France.

The Poles were now ready—fully manned and equipped. The ancient Valentine tanks were gone. In their place stood 154 M4 Shermans of various types, 59 Cromwells and 33 M3 Stuart light tanks.

The Black Devils came ashore during the first week of August 1944 and were assigned by Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery to the Canadian First Army and the afore mentioned II Corps, commanded by Canadian Lt. Gen. Guy Simonds.

As the first elements of the division landed on August 1, in Warsaw the Home Army rose up against the Nazi occupation. Then, as the division prepared to go into battle, on August 6 General Maczek issued his "order of the day," which said, in part, "Let the Germans pay heavily in blood for the privilege of fighting you."

As part of the Canadian First Army (Lt. Gen. H.D.G. Crerar commanding), the 1st Polish Armoured Division was assigned an integral part in Operation Totalize. Conceived by Simonds, Totalize was an attempt to push south through German defenses and cut off the German Seventh Army west of the Seine. The attack would happen in two phases, each on a two-division front.

In the first phase, two Canadian divisions would push down the Caen-Falaise Road. In the second phase, Maczek would take his division down the right side of the road with the goal of clearing several villages and eventually taking high ground to the south. The Poles were to advance down the Route Nationale against several fortified targets. From north to south these were the village of Estres la Campagne, Hill 140, and, to the east, the village of Cauvicourt while, further south, lay Hills 170 and 159.

In his official report, Maczek describes his task thusly: "To by-pass the 51 (Highland) Division. To attack and seize the area of Hills 170 and 159, N [north] of Falaise, and from there to carry out recce [reconnaissance] patrols in the arc made by the Falaise-Argentan (included) and the Mont-Boint (1446)-Condesur-Ifs (1952) rds (excluded).

Maczek noted several problems. First, Normandy was so crowded that just getting from the staging area around Caen to the front was difficult. Of Simonds' plan for Totalize, Maczek wrote, "The ops resembled the West Front fighting the war of 1918," though he did note that he would have air support and "more liberty of action." That is, Simonds sought to simply punch his way through German defenses and did not allow for mobility.

Dotted with small villages, farms and woods, the ground greatly favored the German defenders which, he noted "was very cunningly exploited by the enemy," adding, "With his perfect camouflage, it made a great difference to us."

Maczek began the attack with his 10th Armoured Brigade while the 3rd Infantry Brigade protected the east, or left, flank. At the same time, the recon regiment stood guard on the division's right flank and maintained liaison with the Canadians.

At 2:30 a.m., the division moved out of its encampment near Bayeux through roads congested with Canadian forces moving in both directions. The Black Devils rode past the detritus of battle, knocked-out tanks, smoke, and summer dust kicked up by troop movements.

As the 10th Armoured Brigade was getting into position, forward elements were accidently hit by flights of American B-17s, suffering 44 casualties as a result. Despite these

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ABOVE: Champing at the bit to pay back the Germans for what they had done to their country, Polish troops made a good account of themselves in battle. Here, a Polish Cromwell moves through St. Lambert, between Trun and Chambois, during the Falaise campaign. OPPOSITE: A heavily camouflaged motorized German column—either advancing or retreating—is photographed passing through a Norman village in August 1944.

Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-497-3520-32; Photo: Aumayer

setbacks, the Polish 10th Armoured deployed for attack. The brigade advanced on a two-regiment front, with the 2nd Tank Regiment on the left, advancing south-southeast, and the 24th Lancers on right, advancing due south. Mazcek held the 10th Recon Regiment in reserve.

The Poles were going up against elements of the elite 12th SS Panzer Division (Hitler Youth), in this case the ad-hoc panzer grenadiers of Kampfgruppe (Battle Group) Waldmüller reinforced with various artillery and anti-tank detachments. Overall commander of the 12th SS Panzer was Kurt Meyer, an excellent armored officer who had fought in France and Russia. They had already gone up against the Canadians and exacted a heavy toll in a series of defensive actions and counterattacks.

By this time in the war, however, Meyer was down to a few thousand effectives and only a few dozen vehicles. That said, subsequent actions in Totalize, and in the later Operation Tractable, showed that he was still a formidable enemy.

After the previous day's fighting against the Canadians, Kampfgruppen Waldmüller deployed in an L-shaped wood south of Cramesnil and east of Gaumesnil. Hans Waldmüller arrayed his armor, Tigers and Mark IV tanks, in the southern end of the wood and his deadly 88mm anti-tank guns in the wood's west end.

American B-17s attacked Waldmüller's position but were wholly ineffective. This was so on the previous day as well, when General Meyer noted that, "The final bomber waves flew over the vigorously attacking Kampfgruppe Waldmüller without dropping a single bomb on an armored vehicle."

The Poles advanced right into the teeth of the German defenses. On the right, the 2nd Polish Lancers came under heavy fire from Waldmüller's tanks, only finding relief when their own artillery fell on the German held wood. Wrote Meyer, "Attack after attack collapsed in front of us."

With the Lancers halted and exposed, Waldmüller sent tanks against their left flank. Maczek ordered the 10th Dragoon Regiment forward; these engaged and drove off the counterattacking Germans. Here the Poles' attack halted for the night and the wood was still in German hands.

Maczek noted that his men destroyed six German tanks and knocked out several guns in exchange for an appalling 57 tanks knocked out of action. The next day, Maczek moved the 3rd Infantry Brigade forward, leaving the 10th Armoured Brigade to fall back and lick its wounds.

Meyer was unimpressed with the Poles: "Our opponents did not launch a single concentrated attack against us," he said. Maczek was highly critical of Allied air support and artillery: "The enemy was not sufficiently neutralized by our own Air Force and artillery, so that the brigade could attack without heavy losses."

Several objectives remained. These were the village of St. Sylvain, followed by Soignolles, bracketed on the east by la Bu sur Rouvres and on the southeast by Estrees la Campagne. The 3rd Infantry brigade spent the next day maneuvering against German forces in St. Sylvain. The brigade advanced on a two-battalion front and was pinned down by enemy fire coming from St. Sylvain.

Polish forces gradually worked their way around St. Sylvain's flanks and entered the town that night. The next day, Maczek pushed the 3rd Infantry Brigade forward

against German positions in the villages of Soignolles and Estrees la Campagne. True to form, a company of 10-15 Tiger tanks counterattacked.

Learning from the bloodbath before Cramesmil, Maczek advanced an anti-tank battery forward with the 3rd Brigade and Polish anti-tank guns threw the Tigers back. One battalion each established itself just east the village. Here, too, the Germans counterattacked but, stiffened by the anti-tank guns, the Poles repelled these as well. On the night of August 11, the 3rd Canadian Division relieved the Poles.

In operations around St. Sylvain, the Poles destroyed seven German tanks and took 80 prisoners. Altogether, during Operation Totalize, the division suffered 656 casualties and lost 57 tanks. Of these, nine were lost before St. Sylvain.

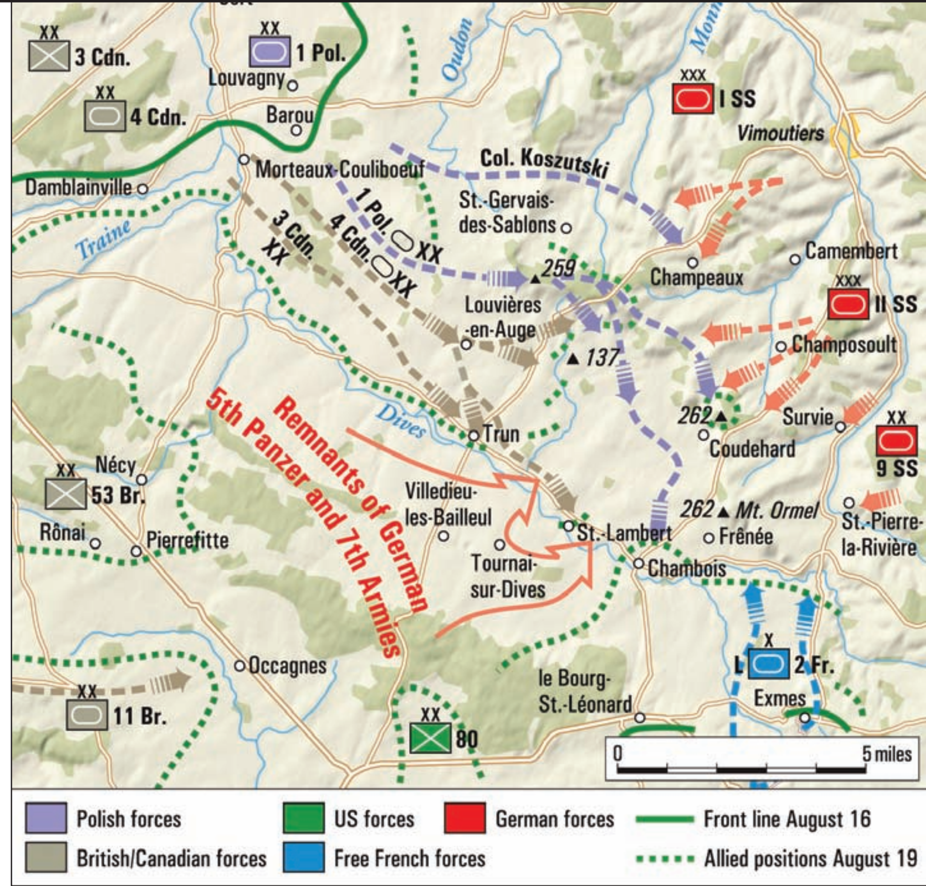
Before Totalize, Maczek insisted that morale was "good." With better performance around St. Sylvain, Maczek wrote, "I must stress that the morale of the units, as well as other services, is even better than good." So, while the first phase of the battle was a disaster for the Poles, the second saw success. Most importantly, morale was high.

Meanwhile, General Walter Model's Seventh Army was in danger of being enveloped and destroyed by the British encroaching from the north and the Americans from the south. Desperate, Model ordered Seventh Army to retreat east through the rapidly closing Falaise Gap.

Appreciating that an opportunity presented itself to cut off and destroy a German army, on August 12, Montgomery ordered the Canadian First Army to make another push south against Falaise with the goal of closing the gap. As the Canadians rolled south from Caen, the Americans would drive north from Argentan, link up with the Canadians, and trap the German Seventh Army in what would become known as the "Falaise Pocket."

Operation Tractable, as conceived by Simonds, was similar to Totalize, with II Crops advancing on a two-division front. Simonds deployed the Canadian 3rd Division on the right and Polish 1st Armoured

Map © 2023 Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis, MN



Division on the left.

Maczek's overall objectives, as assigned by Simonds, were the crossing of the Dives River and the seizure of the town of Trun, along with Hills 159 and 259. Maczek described the ground as "flat and cut up with many small plantations and bushes."

This was excellent ground for the Germans. This area was occupied by the 1st SS Panzer Corps, which was trying to hold the Falaise Gap open for the retreating German Seventh Army. The Black Devils would again be going up against the German 85th Infantry Division and the elite-but-depleted 12th SS Panzer Division, which Kurt Meyer described as "a poor remnant."

Indeed, Meyer had only his two Kampfgruppen to deploy against the Poles; these amounted to 300 men, 20 tanks, and assorted anti-tank batteries. Meyer based his defense on Hill 159, overlooking the Dives.

With German forces trickling through the Falaise gap, on August 17, Maczek sent the 3rd Rifle Brigade forward in two regimental columns, with the 10th Rifle Regiment ahead of both, skirmishing and reconnoitering German positions.

The first obstacle was the river Dives and the villages of Jort and Vendeuavre, where the Poles encountered ferocious German resistance at the river but seized the right crossing at Vendeuavre.

The 10th Mounted Rifles attacked Jort and took the town in especially heavy night fighting in which one squadron held the right flank against German panzer counterattacks while the other cleared the village. The Poles knocked out a half-dozen guns and three tanks, taking 120 prisoners.

With the crossings in Polish hands, Maczek ordered the 3rd Rifle Brigade to hold and consolidate the crossing points. Meyer wrote, "From this point on, the Polish 1st Armoured Division did not have a cohesive combat formation in front of it." The road to Trun and Chambois was open for the Allies, but German strongholds in Barou and

Morteaux would have to be dealt with first. The Falaise Pocket could be closed.

Maczek understood the opportunity before him as well as Meyer and acted quickly. Having already seen the carnage brought about by Simonds' massed armor tactics, Maczek did the opposite. He formed his four regiments into battlegroups, each supported by a battalion and, if available, an anti-tank battery. Each battlegroup Maczek hoped would pack enough firepower to deal with German armor, and at the same time be nimble enough for opportunities to maneuver. He was rejecting Simonds' long, lumbering, mechanized columns in favor of smaller, maneuverable armored battle groups.

Maczek pushed the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade southeast toward the village of Barou, advancing in two columns, with the 24th Lancers and 10th Dragoons on the right and the 2nd Tank Regiment with the 8th Rifle Battalion on the left.

The left column drove on and took Barou by 9 p.m., but their follow-up advance was held up German by fire out of the village of Morteaux. The brigade hunkered down in around and Barou and made ready for the further operations.

Maczek made the 10th Cavalry Brigade's objectives for the next day Hills 159 and 259, directly to the south. At the same time, he sent the 10th Mounted Rifle Regiment on a reconnaissance east-southeast toward Trun. These reported German units moving east toward the town. The 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade attacked on a wide front, seizing both hills and Noury en Auge along the main road. The stage was now set for a dash against Trun.

The first task was to take Chambois to the southeast. Doing so would isolate Trun and facilitate a link-up with the Americans working their way north. Maczek assigned the task to the 2nd Tank Regiment under Lt. Col. Stanisław Koszutski; the regiment set off on August 18.

General chaos struck a blow against the 2nd Tank Regiment when the Poles made a serious a map-reading error due to the similar sounding French names. Rather than advance southeast toward Chambois, Koszutski went east toward Champeaux. For several hours the regiment was lost and out of contact with the rest of the division and actually behind enemy lines.

After moving 18 kilometers east, Koszutski realized his error and that night worked his regiment south. In a hilarious incident, the regiment was waved through a German roadblock by a traffic controller who halted two approaching German columns to facilitate the Poles' movement.

At his headquarters, Maczek actually feared that Koszutski's "lost" regiment had been destroyed by the Germans, so he dispatched the 1st Rifle Battalion to locate and assist Koszutski, but the relief battalion could not find Koszutski and the 2nd Tank Regiment.

When Maczek finally reestablished contact with Koszutski's battlegroup, the Colonel reported that he was running low on supplies as his own logistics could not find him and, in fact, lost several trucks to Allied bombers which, owing to the fact they were out of their assigned area, mistook them for Germans. Maczek was furious with Koszutksi and went out of his way to mention the bedraggled colonel several times in his report on this phase of the battle.

In the meantime, Maczek pushed the 10th Mounted Rifle Regiment toward Chambois. One kilometer north of the village they encountered German infantry supported by anti-tank guns. Under heavy fire, the regiment's commander sensibly

Imperial War Museum

Once out of hedgerow country, Sherman tanks of the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade roll in support of the 2nd Canadian Division during Operation Tractable. OPPOSITE: The Poles were one of several armies that converged on the Germans trying to escape through the Falaise Gap.

pulled back.

Maczek then sent the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade against Chambois, where it joined the battle. With the 2nd Tank Regiment momentarily "lost," and the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade engaged before Chambois, Simonds ordered Maczek to make a dash east for Hill 262. The Poles dubbed it "the Maczuga," their word for mace, due to the hill's resemblance.

Maczek assigned the mission to the 10th Dragoons and 24th Lancers under a Major Zgorzelski. They had several obstacles to overcome before even reaching Hill 262—Hill 137 and the villages of Coudehard and Frênée. The 24th Lancers led the attack on Hill 137 and reported it taken by mid-afternoon. In conjunction with this effort, the 10th Dragoons attacked Coudehard at the base of Hill 262. Here, they engaged a force of German Panther tanks before taking the town.

Back at Hill 137, the Lancers passed off control of the hill to the 10th Dragoons and pushed on to the south in the direction of Frênée. Maczek sent the 10th Mounted Rifle Regiment to reinforce the former. The 10th Dragoons then pushed south toward Chambois. They fought their way into Chambois proper and, after several hours of house-to-house combat, pushed the Germans out of the village.

This stroke gave the Poles control of the road leading north to the town of Ormel and Hill 262. At the end of the day. the 10th Dragoons linked up with the American 90th Division coming up for the south.

Most of the German Seventh Army was now sealed inside the pocket. The 2nd SS Panzer Corps had managed to escape entrapment, but the 1st SS Panzer Corps was surrounded in the pocket.

Panic ensued at Seventh Army headquarters. General Model ordered the 2nd SS Panzer Corps to halt and attack southwest to reopen the gap. Maczek was well aware that among the units in the 2nd SS Panzer Corps was the 2nd (Das Reich) Division, which he had battled in Poland in 1939.

Maczek said, "In these extremely hard conditions began the crisis of the battle." That is, the struggle to keep the gap closed against repeated German assaults. Maczek reorganized his division for defense against German counterattacks in a line running from Hill 262 in the north to Chambois in the southeast.

The division was exposed, as it had outstripped the Canadian 3rd Division on the north; but the Black Devils' success had left the division vulnerable, with its elements deployed by Maczek in four separate groups. The 1st Tank Regiment, 8th Rifle battalion and an anti-tank battery remained on Hill 262. In the center lay the 24th Lancers. And in the south, based at Chambois, were the 10th Mounted Rifle Regiment and the 10th Dragoons.

The north positon on Hill 262 and the south position on Chambois was strong, but in the center the 10th Dragoons and 24th Lancers were on flat ground and dangerously exposed. And a torrent of German steel was coming. Wrote Maczek, "The whole burden of the battle this day…was borne by the 1st Polish Armoured Division."

The Germans attacked that night, with the main blow being delivered by the German LXXXIV Army Corps, under General Otto Eifeldt, and including the 9th and 21st SS Panzer Divisions. They hit the 10th Mounted Rifle Regiment around Chambois. The Poles stopped the first effort, with the 3rd Squadron mounting an armored counterattack that drove the Germans away from Chambois.

Throughout the night the Germans probed the 10th Mountain Rifle Regiment's positions but did not break through. At dawn, Eifeldt launched a desperate frontal assault on Chambois. In the daylight, the Poles made mincemeat of the German armor. Caught out in the open, German infantry surrendered en mas, including the 84th Corps' commander, General Eifeldt.

The Poles held the Germans advancing north against Chambois. The battle now shifted to Hill 262 where the 2nd SS Panzer Corps tried to rescue their trapped comrades. The Polish battle group commander on the north side of Hill 262 wisely held his fire, allowing German columns to advance past the waiting guns of his Sherman tanks.

On Hill 262, dozens of Shermans from the 1st Tank Regiment then poured fire into

Imperial War Museum

ABOVE: Vehicles of the 24th Polish Lancer Regiment move into position during the battle to cut off the German retreat at Falaise. OPPOSITE: Their camouflage turned into a flammable covering, German vehicles burn after being hit by Polish weapons and Allied warplanes while trying to flee the Falaise killing zone.

Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-301-1960-20; Photo: Genzler

the Germans as they tried to escape along the main road. In his account of the Poles in Normandy, a historian described a scene of destruction: "The German columns came to a standstill under the persistent Polish fire. In panic men abandoned their equipment, setting fire to whatever would burn, cars, tanks, and other vehicles. Then they took to their legs to save themselves. The bodies of men and horses strewed the road."

Canadian Colonel Pierre Sévigny was with a company of Sherman tanks on Hill 262 when the fighting began and saw the main crossroads come under fire as the Germans were attempting to pass to the north. "I gave the order: 'Fire!'" he said "Sixteen guns opened up simultaneously: 20 salvos were fired. Their 100 lb. shells fell on the heaving mass. What a massacre! The gun-layers did their work beautifully! I saw numerous vehicles burst into flames, terrified horses trapped in their harnesses, men trying to flee…."

It was at this point that the German 2nd Panzer Corps entered the fight from the north. Two divisions—the 2nd and 9th SS Panzer—attacked the Poles, driving their patrols south. After the initial onslaught, the Poles retreated up the slopes of Hill 262 and, in Sévigny's words, turned it into "a fortified castle."

To the west, the 9th SS Panzer actually broke into the 10th Armoured Brigade's headquarters, which had to pull back to the west. In the south, a German hammer blow fell on Chambois, but this was stopped by the 10th Dragoons and 24th Lancers, who then counterattacked in the morning.

The battle continued throughout the day of the 20th, with the Poles fighting on three widely separated groups surrounded by swarming German troops desperate to break through to the north. By the end of the 20th, the Poles on Hill 262 were exhausted and low on ammunition. Only the late arrival of the Canadian 4th Armoured Division prevented Hill 262 from falling into German hands.

Throughout August 21, the Germans kept the pressure on the Polish 1st Armoured Division. Maczek wrote, "The enemy still tried to break through in different directions, but it was obvious the crisis had passed. There were no organized actions, but only isolated efforts by separate groups."

With the Germans broken, and liaison established with the Canadian 4th Armoured Division, with a supporting artillery brigade available, Maczek judged the Black Devils to be in a strong position. On the evening of the 22nd, a message arrived from General Crerar ordering Maczek to withdraw to the northwest.

Overall, the Poles suffered 1,441 men killed, wounded, and missing during the Battle of the Falaise Gap. They took considerable booty, including more than 3,500 prisoners and 55 German tanks destroyed or captured. The Black Devils left behind a macabre battlefield, where one could walk on bodies without touching the ground.

Remarked the Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower: "Forty-eight hours after the closing of the gap, I was conducted through it on foot, to encounter scenes that could be described only by Dante."

Much fighting remained. Maczek would lead his division across Belgium and the Netherlands, where they would liberate the city of Breda. Here the Dutch regard the Black Devils as liberators and Maczek a national hero.

In 1994, after 50 years of exile at the hands of the Polish communist government, Maczek was buried in Breda's Polish military cemetery—which was now free of both Nazi and communist domination. ■

Tarawa

Continued from page 39

for his actions on D+2. His citation reads, in part, "Acting on his own initiative when assault troops were pinned down at the far end of Betio Pier by the overwhelming fire of Japanese shore batteries, 1st Lt. Bonnyman repeatedly defied the blasting fury of the enemy bombardment to organize and lead the besieged men over the long, open pier to the beach and then, voluntarily obtaining flamethrowers and demolitions, organized his pioneer shore party into assault demolitionists and directed the blowing of several hostile installations."

Bonnyman then led his demolition party to neutralize a giant blockhouse near the end of the pier that was pinning the Marines down. His troops managed to set their charges, killing about 150 enemy soldiers inside and cutting down another 100 who tried to escape.

John Wukovits wrote, "As he braved fire from the defenders, Bonnyman waved his engineers toward the top, where some quickly eliminated the machine guns posted on the crest while others ran over to the air vents.... Bonnyman kept encouraging men, despite the bullets that whizzed through the air and smacked into the sand.

"Finally, Bonnyman's luck ran out. As he rose on one elbow to tell someone to bring more charges, a bullet instantly killed the lieutenant."

Like so many other Marines, Bonnyman's remains were buried a mass grave along with hundreds of others, then later removed to the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii to a grave marked "Unknown."

In truth, many more Medals of Honor could have been handed at Tarawa.

That night, a banzai charge by the few remaining defenders was nothing more than mass suicide. Dawn the next day revealed mounds of Japanese soldiers intertwined in death.

By sheer attrition, the tenacious Japanese who refused to surrender were ground down until, at last, there were no more of them left to resist the Marines. The Seabees (Construction Battalions) came ashore with their heavy equipment to fill craters in the airstrip, take out pockets of resistance, destroy stout bunkers, and bury some enemy positions under tons of sand and rock. They also later scooped out mass graves into which dead Marines and the Japanese were buried—separately.

Correspondent Jim Lucas wrote, "The stench of death hung over Betio. We had slaughtered more than 4,000 Japanese. Their grotesquely burned, blackened corpses littered every foot of the atoll, many of them dead for three days. They were bloated and swollen. For weeks we were to taste and smell corruption."

William Manchester, the author and World War II Marine, wrote in *Goodbye, Darkness*, "At the time it was impolitic to pay the slightest tribute to the enemy, and Nip determination, their refusal to say die, was commonly attributed to 'fanaticism.' In retrospect it is indistinguishable from heroism. To call it anything less cheapens the victory, for American valor was necessary to defeat it."

The island was steeped in carnage. "Betio would be more habitable if the Marines could leave for a few days and send a million buzzards in," Sherrod wrote later.

Although the Marines would suffer more casualties in early 1945 at Iwo Jima, Colonel Edson said the assault force "paid the stiffest price in human life per square yard" at Tarawa than any other battle in Marine Corps history.

Maj. Gen. Julian Smith toured the battlefield November 24 and was both appalled and heartened by the scenes of carnage. "I saw Marine dead in rows along the beach," he said, "and couldn't help noticing that every man had fallen face forward, some within a few feet of the Jap guns they were trying to take."

On that same day, what was left of the battered 2nd Marine Division departed Tarawa for a period of rest and recuperation in Hawaii—and to prepare for their next assignment: Operation Forager, the invasion of the Mariana Islands. After their departure, the Seabees began work to improve the island's airstrip—which was named Hawkins Field in honor of 1st Lt. William Deane Hawkins—and turn the island into an American military base.

"In all, an enemy force of about 4,500 defenders was wiped out, including about 3,500 Imperial Marines and 1,000 [Korean] laborers," Bushemi wrote in *Yank*. "Fewer than 200 of the defenders surrendered, most of them laborers. Tarawa was taken by less than a division of U.S. Marines. We suffered the loss of 1,026 men killed and 2,557 wounded. The 2nd Marine Division took this island because its men were willing to die."

Bushemi, 25, died covering the fighting on Eniwetok Atoll in the Marshall Islands on February 19, 1944.

Maj. Gen. Holland Smith noted after the war, "These Japanese were masters of defensive construction. The Germans never built anything like this in France [on the Atlantic Wall]. No wonder these bastards were sitting back here laughing at us! They never dreamed the Marines could take this island, and they were laughing at what would happen to us when we tried."

Not everyone was pleased with the costly victory. General Douglas MacArthur, furious that the 2nd Marine Division had been taken from his Southwest Pacific Command, complained to the Secretary of War: "These frontal attacks by the Navy, as at Tarawa, are a tragic and unnecessary massacre of American lives."

Although eclipsed by other battles (such as Iwo Jima), the battle for Tarawa has been called "the toughest battle in Marine Corps history." Admiral Nimitz added, "The capture of Tarawa knocked down the front door to the Japanese defenses in the Central Pacific." He launched the campaign to take the Marshalls just 10 weeks after the capture of Tarawa.

Time-Life correspondent Robert Sherrod perhaps summed it up best: "It was inconceivable to most Marines that they should let one another down, or that they could be responsible for diminishing the bright reputation of the corps.... The Marines simply assumed they were the world's best fighting men."

Tarawa proved it. ■

Operation Husky

Continued from page 65

man and Italian agencies, including one run by the German infantry. He reorganized them, added more routes outside of the immediate area around Messina, and increased the number of vessels in service.

The most effective additions were flat-bottomed barges with a front ramp and Siebel ferries—a pair of heavy bridge pontoons with a deck built over them and engines mounted in the rear. The daily cargo flow increased by a factor of 10.

The defenses of the Messina Strait and the transport system up to and away from the strait was another mess. German commander Albert Kesselring appointed a German colonel to organize the air-defense assets in the area and the movement of troops and supplies toward and away from the strait.

Allied air attacks stayed at high altitudes to avoid anti-aircraft fire and did not do enough damage to prevent the Axis troops from getting away. Moreover, the Italians had considerable artillery capable of damaging or sinking Allied warships and the Germans added more. No Allied surface interdiction was attempted.

The Axis units that crossed the strait after inflicting heavy damage to the Seventh and Eighth Armies were rehabilitated and gave Germany further good service. So the Allied victory is rightly regarded as flawed.

Clearly, the Allies conducted the battle badly. One can only speculate about what the outcome would have been if, on the 13th, Alexander had ordered the Seventh Army to move aggressively in a northeastward direction. That would have put leading elements on the north coast and heading east by about July 19. The 29th PzG began arriving on the island on the 22nd and encountered the 45th Division two days later. The conquest of the island might have ended with a substantial prisoner haul if the encounter took place further east—and before the Germans had time to dig in.

Even though flawed, the battle was still part of a momentous change in the fortunes of the antagonists. It succeeded in reducing pressure on the USSR as Hitler called off Operation Citadel on July 12. The Germans never mounted another successful offensive.

The fall of Sicily also spelled the end of Mussolini, who was ousted by the Fascist Grand Council; Italy declared itself neutral. Italy's defection meant that Germany had to supply troops to replace the Italian troops guarding France's Mediterranean coast and garrisoning the Balkans, as well as using an entire army to garrison Italy itself.

Germany committed most of four divisions to the Sicily battle, three of them first-rate, well-trained and equipped units. The commitment of the HGPz, without adequate training, was a harbinger of things to come; it would become increasingly common during the rest of the war.

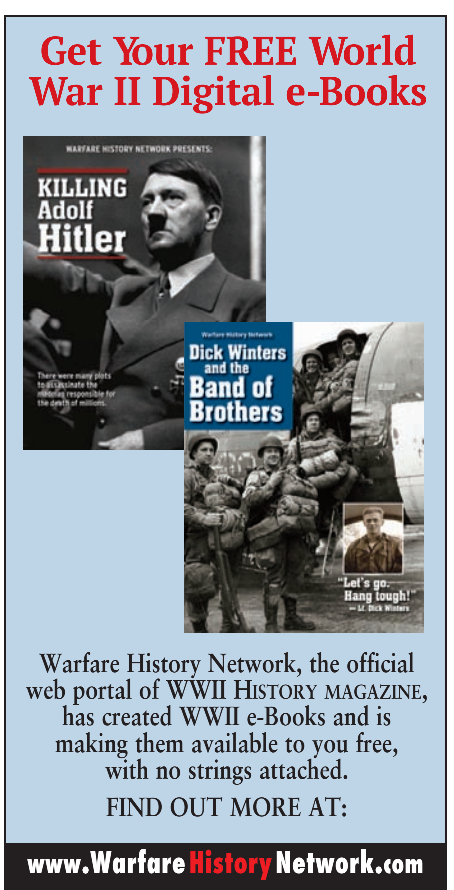
By the time of the Allied landings in France, Germany still had a considerable number of well-trained and equipped divisions, mostly panzer and panzer grenadier units. But many of the remainder were ill-equipped, poorly trained, and manned by men with uncertain loyalties.

Sicily made it clear that American failures during the early part of the North Africa campaign were primarily caused by inadequate training. After Sicily, the U.S. could be confident that, with rare exceptions, the units that had completed the prescribed army training program would give a good account of themselves.

Ike, too, had "improved dramatically" during his service in the Mediterranean. He acquired the tactical and strategic experience to clearly see what authority the Supreme Commander needed. In France he demanded, and got, "direct command of the whole vast enterprise."

At his insistence, before the Normandy landings, the tactical air forces were employed to damage the French transportation system to seriously slow the movement and build up of enemy reinforcements. This was an important factor in the Allies' success in Normandy.

After Sicily, there was still heavy fighting ahead in Italy, but the balance of forces had moved decisively in favor of the Allies. ■



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Ronald Speirs

Continued from page 27

this transgression lightly.

Naturally, questions of soldierly bearing did not always translate in the harsh realities of the battle zone. The near murder of Dielsi further aggravated his platoon mates. In this ravaged environment, trophy hunting could take a macabre turn. "The airborne were always looking for something valuable," explained DiMarzio. Watches and jewelry stripped from enemy dead and prisoners were especially desired. "At one time I had 21 wedding bands on my collar chain," the private boasted.

One humid day in Normandy, the heat got the best of the Ohioan and a scavenging buddy. "This one dead German was laying on the ground," DiMarzio continued. When the fellow GI could not salvage a wallet from the blouse of the bloated remains, he grew livid and cut into the German's uniform with his trench knife.

When the blade punctured the rotting flesh, a noxious gas sprayed into the air. DiMarzio's chum became further incensed and started kicking the corpse. "You stinkin' bastard!" he screamed with each blow.

Not to be outdone by a dead man, the paratrooper then unbuttoned his fly and urinated in the open mouth of the deceased German. There was nothing clean or heroic to be found in this style of warfare. After combat, men could descend to a level of savagery previously thought unimaginable.

Such ugliness was cast aside on June 20 when over 1,000 paratroopers of the 101st Airborne, and an equal number of civilians, convened in the town square of Carentan. D-Day already seemed like a months-old memory. Hurling bouquets of flowers, the townsfolk were overjoyed by the presence of their American liberators.

"Vive L'Amerique!" they shouted. Flags flapped from the community's World War I monument as 11 Americans were bestowed the Silver Star. Standing erect atop a platform bedecked with the Tricolour, General Maxwell Taylor exclaimed, "You are here because soldiers of this division are willing to sacrifice their lives. The honor which is given to these men before me not only recognizes their heroic actions but honors every man in the division. We are tonight honoring our living. Later on we will honor our dead."

Four days later, Speirs was promoted to 1st lieutenant. His coolness under fire, coupled with his unwavering fortitude, more than warranted such recognition.

Reporter William Stoneman marveled at the exploits of such intrepid airborne warriors. "It was a cowboy-and-Indian fight in a strange country," he described the brutal clashes. Yet, in the correspondent's mind, one fact was quite evident: "Not every man is a hero in an army but the paratroopers who hit the coast of Normandy came close to reaching that ideal." Troopers did not mind the accolades.

Speirs was known by many of his men as "Killer." They claimed he executed prisoners of war on D-Day and even one of his own belligerent sergeants. He was thought by some to be cold and calculative. The young officer frequently earned this reputation.

At the same time, his actions at Carentan demonstrated his ease under pressure and a sincere sense of stewardship over his men. Like many legendary figures of World War II, the lieutenant was an imperfect but daring leader.

Veterans of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment later shared mixed memories of the man's cruelty and compassion. But in reflecting on their many hardships and close calls, they realized there were few better soldiers to have at their side than Ronald Speirs. ■

Jared Frederick is a History professor at Penn State Altoona and Erik Dorr is the curator of the Gettysburg Museum of History. They are the co-authors of Hang Tough: The WWII Letters and Artifacts of Major Dick Winters. *This article has been adapted from their newest book,* Fierce Valor: The True Story of Ronald Speirs and His Band of Brothers, *now available in bookstores.*

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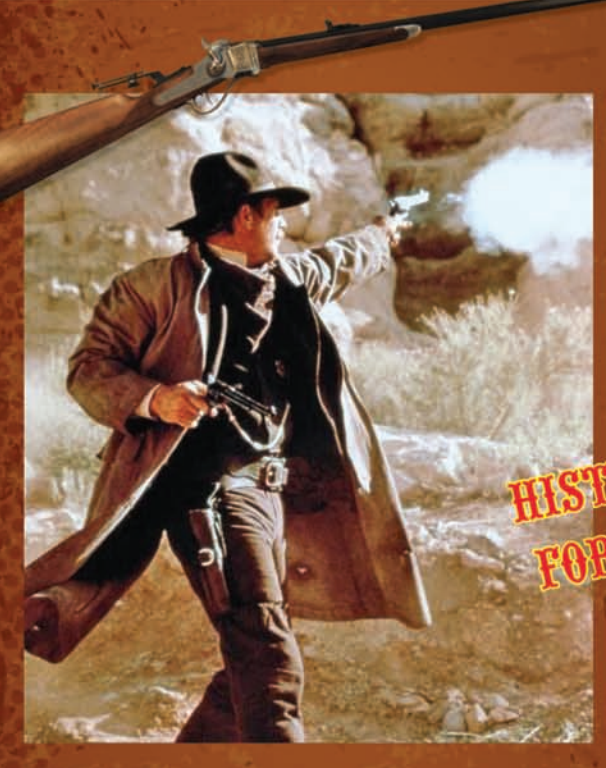

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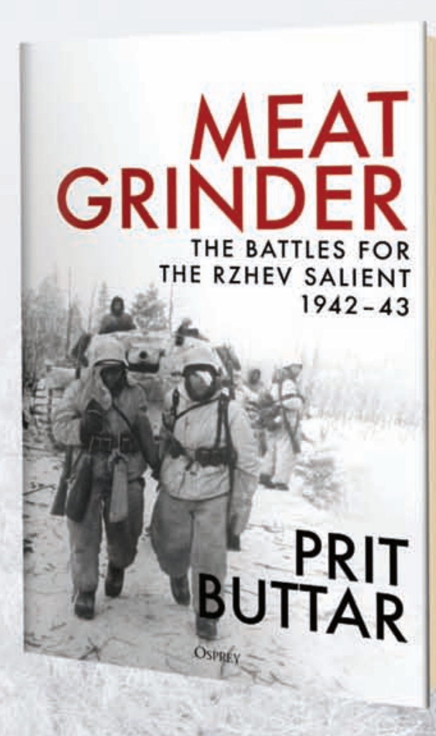

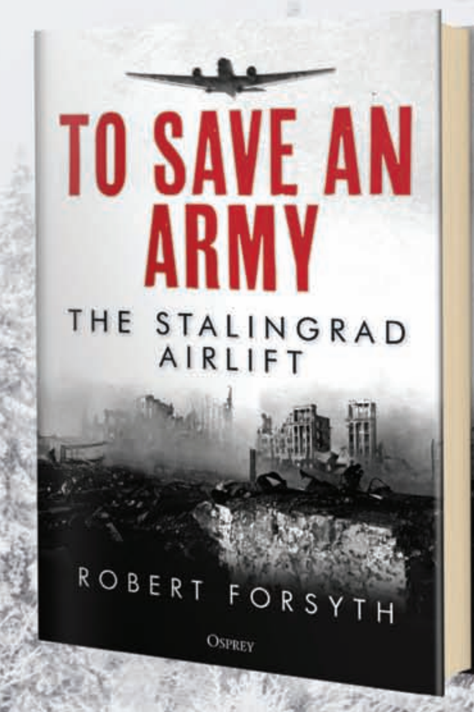

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