# WWII QUARTERLY

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FALLSCHIRMJÄGERS'

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**COVER: A soldier from the 1st SS Panzer Grenadier Division poses in front of destroyed American vehicles during the Battle of the Bulge. See story page 38.**

**Photo: National Archives**


*WWII Quarterly* (ISSN 2151-3678) is published four times yearly by Sovereign Media, 6731 Whittier Avenue, Suite A-100, McLean, VA 22101-4554. (703) 964-0361. *WWII Quarterly,* Volume 4, Number 2  ***Subscription services, back issues, and information:*** **(800) 219-1187** *or* write to *WWII Quarterly* **Circulation, WWII Quarterly, P.O. Box 1644, Williamsport, PA 17703.** Hardbound single copies: $19.99, plus $3 for postage. Yearly subscription in U.S.A.: $39.95; Canada and Overseas: $79.95 (U.S.). Editorial Office: Send editorial mail to *WWII Quarterly,* 6731 Whittier Avenue, Suite A-100, McLean, VA 22101-4554. *WWII Quarterly* welcomes editorial submissions but assumes no responsibility for the loss or damage of unsolicited material. Material to be returned should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. We suggest that you send a self-addressed, stamped envelope for a copy of our author's guidelines. **POSTMASTER: Send address changes to WWII Quarterly, P.O. Box 1644, Williamsport, PA 17703.**

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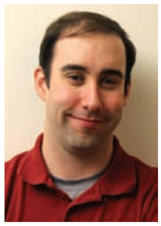
**STEPHEN L. WRIGHT** has a long-held interest in World War II that was inspired by family stories of his uncle, Staff Sergeant W. K. "Billy" Marfleet, who was a British glider pilot. Marfleet died when his glider crashed into the English Channel on the night of June 5-6, 1944, during the Normandy invasion. Wanting to know more about his uncle's experiences as a glider pilot, Wright started his research. This led to the publication of *One Night In June*, which tells the story of the operation in which his uncle was involved.

Wright's interest in airborne forces grew and his continued research led to reading about Operation Varsity. There wasn't a great deal of information on this pivotal event, and the only book on the whole operation was in German. So he continued his research, contacted archives and veterans, and this article, "The Last Drop," is the result. He is currently working on his next book.



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# The behind-the-scenes story of how a World War I hero helped to strengthen U.S.-British ties and forged the beginnings of today's CIA.

ON JULY 14, 1940, William Donovan stood on the pier fronting New York harbor and waited to board the Pan Am flying boat named the *Lisbon Clipper* for a flight that would take him to Portugal and then to London, his ultimate destination.

Donovan—a former college football star (Columbia, class of 1905), highly placed Republican lawyer, recipient of the Medal of Honor for his heroic service in World War I, a schoolmate of Franklin D. Roosevelt at Columbia University—called his wife Ruth and told her that he would be leaving that day for a trip to Europe. He did not tell her why he was going, only that it was on "private business" and that he wouldn't be gone long. Ruth Donovan knew not to question her husband too much on his business dealings; even if she asked, he probably wouldn't have told her anything. Among the passengers on board were two members of the French Purchasing Commission and Charles Goetz on a Portuguese arms mission.

ABOVE: Donovan tried to dissuade Prince Paul, the Regent of Yugoslavia (left), from joining the Axis powers, but without success. Afterward, Donovan convinced anti-Nazi elements to resist Hitler, which resulted in a German invasion in April 1941. LEFT: Portrait of Major General William "Wild Bill" Donovan. He died in 1976.

Both: Library of Congress

As the *Lisbon Clipper* took off from New York, no one on board, even Bill Donovan himself, knew the ramifications his trip would have in the outcome of World War II. During this mission and a subsequent one he would make later in the year, the stage would be set for the formal entry of the United States into World War II and the establishment of a permanent intelligence service on the part of the United States: the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of today's Central Intelligence Agency.

Just who was this most trusted man whom FDR sent on his secret mission? William Donovan was born in Buffalo, New York, on January 1, 1883. His grandparents came to the United States from Ireland and settled in Buffalo. William was the first of eight children, four of whom would die early deaths. William, his siblings, and parents lived with his grandparents in their brick home at 74 Michigan Street. He attended the Christian Brothers School and thought of joining the Dominican order but soon dropped the idea, choosing instead the law as his life's work.

He first attended Niagara University before switching to Columbia University in New York City. William Donovan and a young Franklin D. Roosevelt attended Columbia at the same time, but the two young men were not close. At Columbia, Donovan was on both the football and rowing teams. He graduated in 1905 and remained at Columbia to get his law degree, which he received in 1907.

After graduation, Donovan returned to Buffalo to begin his law career. He joined the local firm of Love and Keating and later formed a partnership with another lawyer named Bradley Goodyear. In 1914, he married Ruth Ramsey. They would have two children, a son named David and a daughter named Patricia who died at a young age in 1940 in a car accident.

In 1911, Donovan and a number of other young Buffalo men joined Troop 1 of the New York National Guard. In 1916, he left the Army and became a member of the Polish Commission whose duties under the

American War Relief Commission included the distribution of food and clothing to the needy people of Poland whose lives had been disrupted by the war.

Donovan's National Guard unit, one of several under the command of General John J. Pershing, also saw service at home in 1916 when it was given the job of pursuing the Mexican bandit leader José Doroteo Arango Arámbula, aka Pancho Villa, who was raiding American towns in the Southwest.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Donovan, then a major, organized and led the famed 1st Battalion of the 69th New York Volunteers (the original "Fighting Irish," and which, after the unit was federalized, was redesignated the 165th Regiment of the 42nd Division). He was soon promoted to lieutenant colonel, and his unit arrived in France in October 1917, ready for action.

Donovan, greatly admired by his men, was heroic in combat, wounded many times. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and his country's highest decoration for valor, the Medal of Honor. He was promoted to colonel and given command of the regiment. During his wartime service, he was given the nickname "Wild Bill," a moniker he would keep for the rest of his life.

Donovan used his copious political connections to break into intelligence work for the United States. In 1919, while honeymooning in Japan, Donovan detoured to Siberia on behalf of the United States government. His mission was to report the activities of the anti-Bolshevik White Russian forces under the command of Admiral Alexander Kolchak. Donovan spent two months in Siberia, often traveling with Maj. Gen. William Graves, commander of U.S. forces in Russia, who was sent by President Woodrow Wilson on a peacekeeping mission.

He spent the next six months traveling across Europe with his New York banking friend, Grayson Murphy. During his trip, Donovan kept a diary of the people and places he saw, compiling a 200-page dossier that he gave to U.S. authorities



Donovan was a true war hero, awarded the Medal of Honor. Here, as commander of the 1st Battalion, 69th New York Volunteers, in World War I, Major Donovan receives the Legion of Honor from a French general.

upon his return.

After completing his European sojourn, Donovan returned to Buffalo and resumed his law practice. His first job was as U.S. District Attorney for the Western District of New York. He was also active in Republican Party politics in Buffalo, running unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination for governor of New York in 1922. In 1924, Donovan moved to Washington, D.C., where he was appointed assistant attorney general by the new attorney general, Harlan Stone. He ran the criminal division from August 1924 to March 1925.

In 1929, Donovan moved to New York City and founded the law firm that would bear his name: Donovan, Leisure, Newton and Lumbard. Donovan became a wealthy man, had all the right clients, and made a name for himself on Wall Street. After his earlier unsuccessful entry into New York State politics, Donovan shifted his attention to foreign affairs.

Beginning in 1929 and ending in 1941, Donovan traveled frequently to Europe and other parts of the world as a private citizen (but with the encouragement of the U.S. government) to assess the political and military situation.

The year 1929 saw Donovan traveling

across Europe and the Middle East, meeting with Mussolini in Rome, making stops in Libya, Egypt, the Sudan, and Ethiopia, and talking with the various military and political leaders in each country. Upon his return to the United States, he reported to the War Department and briefed leaders on his adventures. The material he provided to the Army staff members was first rate, and they said his data was "replete with pertinent and valuable information which the department would have been unable to secure any other way."

Donovan also watched nervously as a German dictator named Adolf Hitler began rattling his saber at the weak nations of Europe.

In 1939, he went to Ethiopia to report on the Italian-Ethiopian war for the Roosevelt administration. He also made trips to observe the Spanish Civil War and to the Balkans and Italy. That same year found Donovan in Berlin, where he observed German military maneuvers, including tank and artillery exercises. He also made his way to the Low Countries, a possible target of Germany in the war that engulfed Poland and was threatening to spread, and met with military leaders in Belgium, Holland, and other countries.

Upon his return to the United States, Donovan engaged in a speaking campaign that alerted the American public to the war clouds gathering in Europe. Speaking to the American Legion in November 1939, he told his appreciative audience that he wouldn't be surprised if, at some point in the future, America would have to send its boys to war. "In an age of bullies, we cannot afford to be a sissy," he said.

Speaking about the rise of domestic spying in the United States, Donovan said that American citizens should not "be a bunch of vigilantes, but to leave the job, where it belonged—to the government."

On November 27, 1939, in what proved to be his most important foreign policy speech to date, Donovan discussed the role of the United States in the world in a speech titled "Is America Prepared for War?" Speaking before the Sons of Erin in New York, Donovan called on all citizens, including representatives from the military, for "the creation of a civilian body of representative citizens to make an exhaustive study of the problems, and to lay its findings and recommendations as soon as possible before the President, the Congress, and the people of the United States." One important listener to Donovan's speech was President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Donovan's most important champion in the Roosevelt administration was Republican Frank Knox, whom FDR appointed to be his Secretary of the Navy. As war approached, FDR wanted to staff his cabinet with a few trusted members of the Republican Party with whom he had an affiliation. Upon his appointment, Knox asked Donovan if he would be his assistant secretary, but for whatever reason Donovan turned him down.

On Knox's advice, FDR asked Donovan to come to the White House for a meeting of some importance. Donovan was surprised to find the Secretaries of War, State, and Navy ready to meet with him. He was more surprised to learn why he had been summoned to the White House that day. He was asked by the administration to make a trip to Britain "to learn about Britain's handling of the Fifth Column problem."

An incident in Washington, D.C., in the spring and summer of 1940 has a profound impact on Donovan's future relations with the British.

In the summer of 1940, William Stephenson, a Canadian businessman and, like Donovan, a decorated World War I veteran, arrived in the United States as the personal representative of newly appointed British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Stephenson's cover was that of the Passport Control Officer of the British government in the United States. He had, however, a secret directive from Churchill; he was to act as Britain's super-spy in the United States.

Stephenson took up residence in New York City in offices near Rockefeller Center, where he began his clandestine work on behalf of His Majesty's government. One of his directives from Churchill was to establish a clandestine intelligence arrangement between the British intelligence services and the American FBI, under the irascible J. Edgar Hoover.

In a series of hard-boiled talks with Hoover, who did not take kindly to his intelligence bailiwick being interfered with, the FBI director reluctantly agreed, upon President Roosevelt's orders, to cooperate with Stephenson and his newly created British Security Coordination organization. FDR kept this new intelligence-sharing agreement secret, only telling a few trusted advisers, and excluded Congress from all knowledge of the arrangement.

After returning home to report on the deal with the Americans, Stephenson contacted Donovan and brought him in on the new agreement. With Churchill doing everything in his power to persuade the United States to supply Britain with military equipment for his nation's desperate fight against Germany, Donovan arranged a meeting between Stephenson, Secretary Knox, and Secretary of War Henry Stimson.

It was decided that a person of unquestioned character was needed for the job of U.S.-Britain secret liaison. Other candidates were considered, including financier Bernard Baruch and New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, but it was Donovan who got the position.

As Donovan flew across the Atlantic on July 14, 1940, he now entered an entirely new world from that of Republican Party politics or a Justice Department official—the world of espionage that would consume the rest of his life.

Before departing Washington, the military brass, including Rear Admiral Walter S. Anderson, director of the Office of Naval Intelligence, and Brig. Gen. Sherman Miles, head of the Army's military intelligence under Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, sent instructions to their military attachés in England, Captain Alan Kirk and Brig. Gen. Raymond Lee, respectively, to give as much help to Donovan as they possibly could. They were told to especially facilitate any meetings with British intelligence officials with whom Donovan wanted to meet. Donovan was told that both Lee and Kirk would provide him with confidential assistance in arranging such secret meetings.

Donovan's trip to England was unprecedented for a civilian, especially one who was not officially affiliated with the U.S. government. However, Donovan arrived with letters of introduction from some of the most prominent Washingtonians, including Navy Secretary Knox, Navy Undersecretary James Forrestal, and Rear Admiral Anderson, among others. Before his departure, Donovan dined with Lord Lothian, the British Ambassador to the United States, who put in a good word for him with his peers back home.

William Stephenson, too, pulled considerable strings with his contacts in British intelligence, asking that the British secret services give as much time to Donovan as he needed.

Besides finding out about Fifth Columnists, Donovan's secondary purpose for the trip was to learn as much as possible about the current military situation in England. Upon his arrival, he inspected many British military installations and spoke with their commanders. He came home with a recommendation that the United States do as much as possible to aid England militarily.

His two weeks in England proved to be some of the most hectic times of Donovan's life. Donovan was wined and dined by the establishment in the British government. He met with all the important military/political leaders of the country, including Churchill, King George VI, and most importantly, Stewart Menzies, known as "C," head of British intelligence. The British had hundreds of years of experience in espionage, and Menzies was eager to take Donovan under his wing.

The other important British intelligence official Donovan met with was Rear Admiral John Godfrey, head of Naval Intelligence. Godfrey introduced Donovan to his naval aide, Commander Ian Fleming, who would later accompany Godfrey to the United States to help the United States design its own intelligence service. Fleming would later use his wartime experiences when he created his fictional spy, James Bond, Agent 007.

Donovan was so impressed with God-

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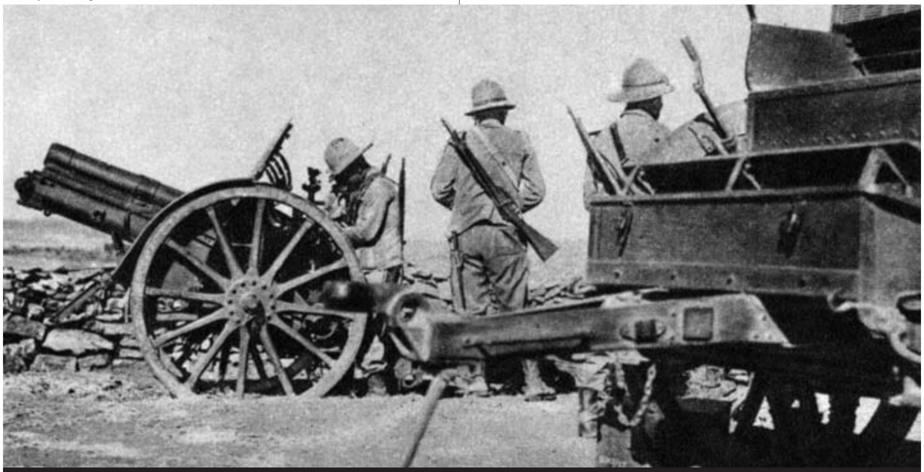


In 1939, at the request of President Roosevelt, Donovan traveled to Africa to report on the Italian-Ethiopian war that was then raging. Here an Italian artillery crew prepares to fire its 65MM gun at native troops.

frey that upon returning to Washington he urged the president to appoint a person who would travel back and forth between England and the United States in a liaison capacity. He also urged full cooperation in intelligence sharing.

During his overseas visit, Donovan listened as his British cousins asked for military help and assured Donovan that if America gave England the tools of war necessary to defend itself they would be able to stave off the Germans. Donovan was instrumental in arranging the "Destroyers for Bases" deal that sent 50 obsolescent American destroyers to England in return for the use of British bases, mostly in the Caribbean. In a report to the president that both Mowrer and Donovan would bring to FDR, they wrote, "Britain under Churchill would not surrender either to ruthless air raids or to an invasion."

Bill Donovan left England on August 3, 1940, aboard the BOAC flying boat *Clare.* There were only two other passengers aboard, and upon his return Donovan would say that the trip was "boring." Donovan arrived in New York the next evening and the following day had a meeting with Secretary Knox. Over the next few days, Donovan met with every important military and political representative of the president, including members of Congress who had been briefed on his clandestine trip.

Donovan traveled with President Roosevelt to Hyde Park, New York, and in the peaceful Hudson Valley surroundings reported on all he saw and did in Britain. He told the president that in his opinion the United States should give the British all the military help necessary to win the war. He said that the British had the will and the means to beat Hitler, but they could only do it with full American support. In time, FDR agreed to provide the British with the Norden bombsight, a top-secret device that enabled Royal Air Force planes (and American ones) to bomb targets with precision. Also, millions of rifles and tons of ammunition were on their way across the Atlantic.

As far as the official reason for the English sojourn—to study Fifth Column business—Donovan and Mowrer wrote a number of articles on the dangers of such activity that were published in the nation's press.

National Archives

**OSS candidates, slated to be dropped behind enemy lines, learn how to set up a clandestine radio antenna.**

Donovan's stature in Washington began to rise, and he was referred to by some writers as a person of "mystery" and a "secret agent." The newsmen were right in that regard, but when asked for a reaction Donovan would never respond.

What Donovan really wanted was to get back in the action in one way or another. General Marshall asked Donovan if he would be willing to inspect Army camps in the States and report on what he observed. He traveled to Fort Benning, Georgia, Fort Sam Houston, and Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and offered his insight.

By December 1940, a back-channel operation was going on to send Donovan on a second trip to England. There is still some debate as to who was primarily responsible for the genesis of the trip; the architect was either William Stephenson or Frank Knox. Either way, the president approved sending Donovan back across the Atlantic, and his presidential authorization was to "make a strategic appreciation from an economic, political, and military standpoint of the Mediterranean area." Stephenson accompanied Donovan at the outset of the trip, leaving Baltimore for Bermuda on December 6, 1940. The *New York Times* reported that Donovan was off on "another mysterious mission."

Due to bad weather in the Atlantic, the two men were forced to stay in Bermuda for eight days. This layover was really a boon to Donovan as far as learning how the British operated foreign intelligence. The island of Bermuda was a vital British listening post that intercepted messages from around the world (especially from Germany) coming to the Western Hemisphere. Mail arriving from Europe was intercepted and read, giving British intelligence an upper hand in tracking down Nazi sleeper rings in the Americas.

Upon his return to England, Donovan met with Churchill, who told him that he preferred to fight the Germans at their weakest points, the Balkans and the Mediterranean, in preparation for a full-scale assault against Germany proper. Donovan told the prime minister that he was asked by MI6, (the British secret intelligence organization) if he would like to take a tour of the Middle East. Churchill instantly agreed, and preparations were set in motion to send him on his way.

On New Year's Eve, 1940, Donovan departed London on what would become a $2\frac{1}{2}$-month trip through some of the hottest spots in the British Empire, accompanied on every leg of his trip by agents of the British secret service and other government officials who opened every door for their honored guest.

Donovan's travels took him to Gibraltar, Portugal, Bulgaria, Malta, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Palestine, Iraq, Libya, and Ireland on his way home. He met with the leaders of all the various nations and locales, with the exception of Francisco Franco of Spain who said he was too busy to see him, and French General Maxime Weygand, who was French commander in Algiers.

Donovan's trip attracted the attention of the German government, which kept a wary eye on his travels. At one point, the German press labeled his trip an "impudent" act and asked its spies to keep an eye on his progress.

An embarrassing moment for Donovan took place during his stop in Sofia, Bulgaria. German agents broke into his hotel room and stole a bag of documents that were in the open. Among the items taken from the bag were questions from the Navy to Donovan that they wanted answered. When the bag was retrieved by the police, the list of questions was missing.

The most important of Donovan's meetings during his European trip came on June 23, 1941, when he arrived in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, to meet with that nation's ruler, Prince Paul. This meeting took place during a time of intense military plotting on

*Continued on page 98*

# The British liner *Queen Mary*

NOT ALL THOSE who died in World War II died in combat. There were also illness, heart attacks, cancer, friendly fire ... and accidents.

One of the worst accidents occurred on October 2, 1942, when a British antiaircraft cruiser and the famous British liner *Queen Mary* collided. The mishap cost 236 British seamen their lives; only 99 were rescued.

During World War II many of the great Atlantic liners, such as the luxurious, 1,020-foot-long *Queen Mary* (which had a comfortable capacity of 1,174 passengers) and her sister ship *Queen Elizabeth* were converted into troop carriers, each capable of carrying more than 15,000 troops. The two ships were the largest and fastest troopships involved in the war and, because of their speed, often traveled out of convoy and without escort. By the end of the war, the two ships transported more than 800,000 troops.

*Queen Mary* had been launched in September 1934 and had served the Atlantic trade from 1936, when she set a speed record for the Atlantic crossing, until the outbreak of the war, when she was converted to troop-carrier duty.

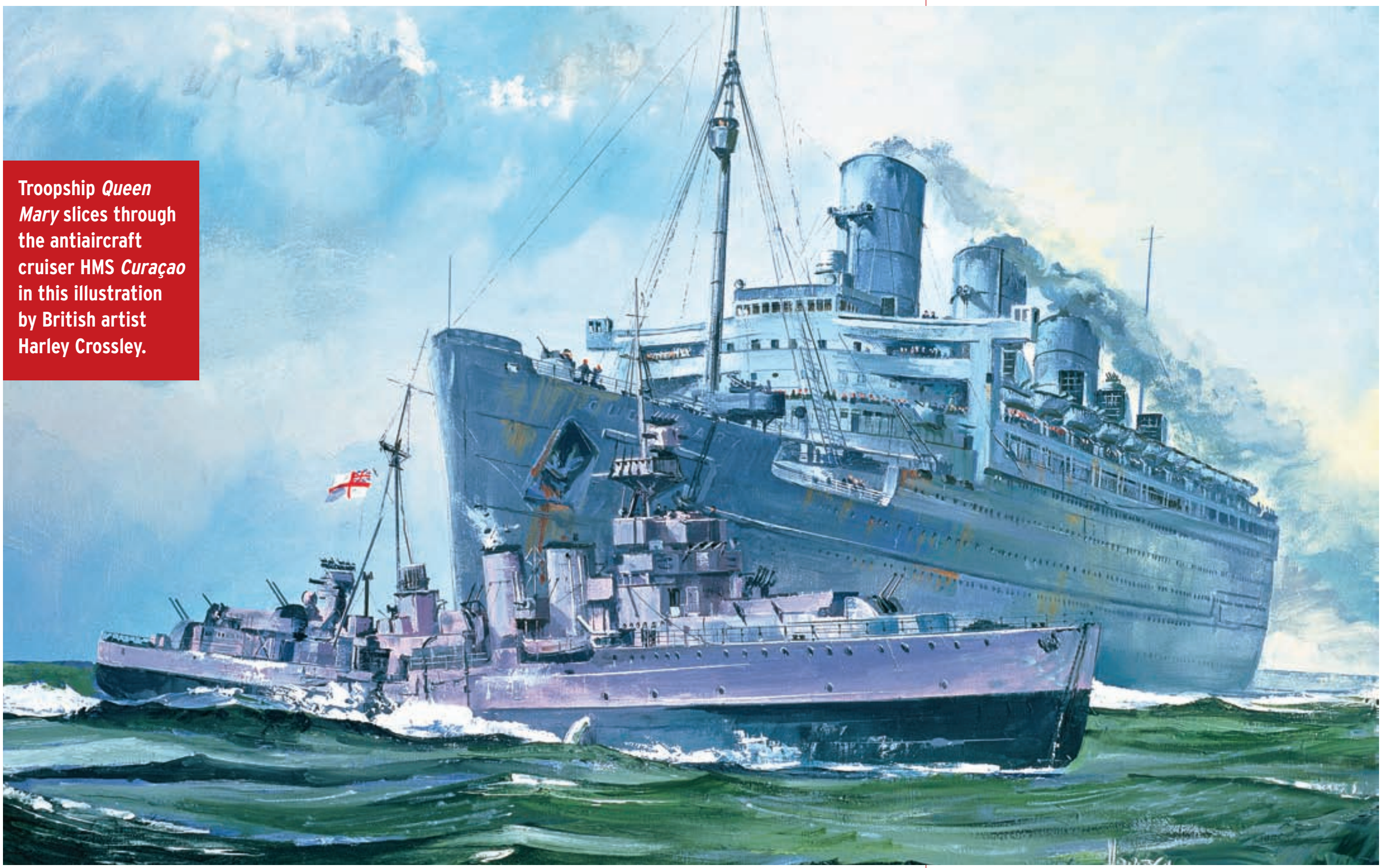
At that time, six miles of carpet, 220 cases of china, crystal, and silver service, tapestries and paintings were removed and stored in warehouses for the duration of the war.

She was fitted with tiered bunks for the men she would be transporting. Troops slept in shifts. The *Queen*'s swimming pool was drained, and she was painted gray, which, combined with her speed, gave birth to her wartime nickname of "Gray Ghost."

Likewise, the war led to a number of military ships also being converted to other uses. Originally launched as a light cruiser May 5, 1917, the *Curaçao* had seen brief service in the latter days of World War I. In 1939, a few months before the outbreak of World War II in Europe, she was selected for conversion to an antiaircraft cruiser and underwent a refit at Chatham Dockyard in Kent. She served during the Norwegian Campaign in 1940 but on April 24 of that year sustained heavy damage and 30 casualties from aerial bombing, forcing her to withdraw to Chatham for repairs. Manned with a crew of 338, she was returned to active duty in August, serving mainly as an escort for convoys.

As the war progressed, *Queen Mary*'s role as a troop transport became so significant to the Allied war effort that Adolf Hitler offered a $250,000 reward and military honors to any captain in the German navy who could sink the vessel.

On October 2, 1942, *Queen Mary* was rounding the north coast of Ireland on the last leg of her journey from New York to a Scottish port with the 29th Infantry Division aboard (the 29th was joining the buildup of Allied forces in Britain and



**Troopship *Queen Mary* slices through the antiaircraft cruiser HMS *Curaçao* in this illustration by British artist Harley Crossley.**

The Queen Mary, HMS Curacao Incident (oil on canvas), © by Harley Crossley / Private Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library would later take part in the Normandy invasion at Omaha Beach). Since she was now within range of German aircraft, she was joined by escorting vessels, including *Curaçao*. Both ships were sailing evasive zigzag courses about 37 miles north of the coast when the liner cut across the path of the cruiser, striking her amidships at a speed of 28 knots.

The collision tossed sailors on the upper deck of the cruiser "like falling autumn leaves," as one witness reported it, into the freezing waters of the Atlantic.

"The *Queen Mary* sliced the cruiser in two like a piece of butter," Alfred Johnson, a 22-year-old crewman on the *Queen*, later said.

The *Curaçao*'s stern sank quickly, taking many crew members trapped behind closed watertight doors to their deaths and leaving the few seamen who had survived clinging to bits of wreckage in the icy North Atlantic water for, some say, as much as four hours before being rescued.

The fore section of the ship soon followed. Crew and passengers on the converted liner watched in horror as *Curaçao* went under only 100 yards away.

Because of the threat of German U-boats, *Queen Mary* did not stop for rescue operations but instead steamed onward with a fractured stem, the forwardmost part of a ship's bow, being escorted by the Polish destroyer ORP *Blyskawica,* which had taken over from *Curaçao*.

"The *Queen Mary* just carried on going," Seaman Johnson said. "It was the policy not to stop and pick up survivors even if they were waving at you. It was too dangerous."

Hours later two escort ships returned and rescued only 99 survivors from *Curaçao*'s original crew of 338, including her captain, John W. Boutwood. Harry Grattidge, an officer on the *Queen,* has written, however, that the *Queen*'s captain ordered the accompanying destroyers to look for survivors within moments of *Curaçao*'s sinking.

"What a terrible sight it was," said Able Seaman Enoch Foster, who was aboard the destroyer HMS *Bramham* assisting in the rescue. "The sea was covered in oil, dirty

Imperial War Museum


**ABOVE: HMS *Curaçao* lost 239 of her 338 crewmen on October 2, 1942, one of World War II's costliest accidents. The *Queen Mary* could not stop to pick up survivors. BELOW: American troops aboard *Queen Mary* en route to England, May 1942. Because of the secrecy surrounding the collision, it is doubtful that any of the Yanks knew of it.**

National Archives

and black, with hundreds of heads with oily faces and panicky white eyes, mouths opening and closing like fish, some shouting for their mothers and help, others just choking with fuel oil in their lungs and dying."

Most of those killed, however, remained entombed in the shattered halves of *Curaçao*. Only 21 bodies washed ashore and were buried.

A recent book has suggested that a German submarine, *U-407,* had sighted the *Queen* shortly before the accident and further suggests the *Queen* was, in fact, zigzagging in an attempt to prevent *U-407*'s approach, but that claim remains unproven.

The October accident has been blamed on a number of factors besides the possible *U-407* sighting, including assumptions on the part of both captains that did not prove to be correct. For one, the captain of *Queen Mary,* Giles G. Illingworth, was believed to be operating on the assumption that her escorting cruiser would observe her course change and adjust accordingly.

At the same time, Captain Boutwood aboard *Curaçao* assumed the standard seafaring rule that an overtaking ship must yield the right of way would be observed. The resulting convergent courses of the two ships were also said to have been reported aboard both ships, and *Queen Mary*'s first officer is said to have issued a correction, but the reports and correction were apparently dismissed by the both ships' captains.

In addition, due to the speed of *Queen Mary,* communication between her and *Curaçao* was often delayed; at one point it took an hour to deliver a message from *Curaçao* to the *Queen.* It was further determined that *Queen Mary*'s compass was at the time off by two degrees, a fact unknown to her captain and crew but which could have contributed to what happened.

The sinking and loss of life were not reported until after the war for fear of the effect such an announcement would have on troop and civilian morale. After the war ended, however, and the *Curaçao* sinking had been made public, the Royal Navy pressed charges against *Queen Mary*'s owners, Cunard White Star Line (the owners of the doomed *Titanic*).

Originally, *Curaçao* was ruled to be responsible for the accident but, on appeal, the British High Court of Justice ruled that two-thirds of the blame for the accident lay with *Curaçao* and one-third with Cunard White Star Line, a ruling that proved significant in the flurry of lawsuits that followed.

*Queen Mary*, which was refitted and returned to commercial transatlantic service after the war, retired in 1967. The ship is permanently docked in Long Beach, California, where she serves as a museum, hotel, restaurant, and major tourist attraction.

She is also believed to be haunted.

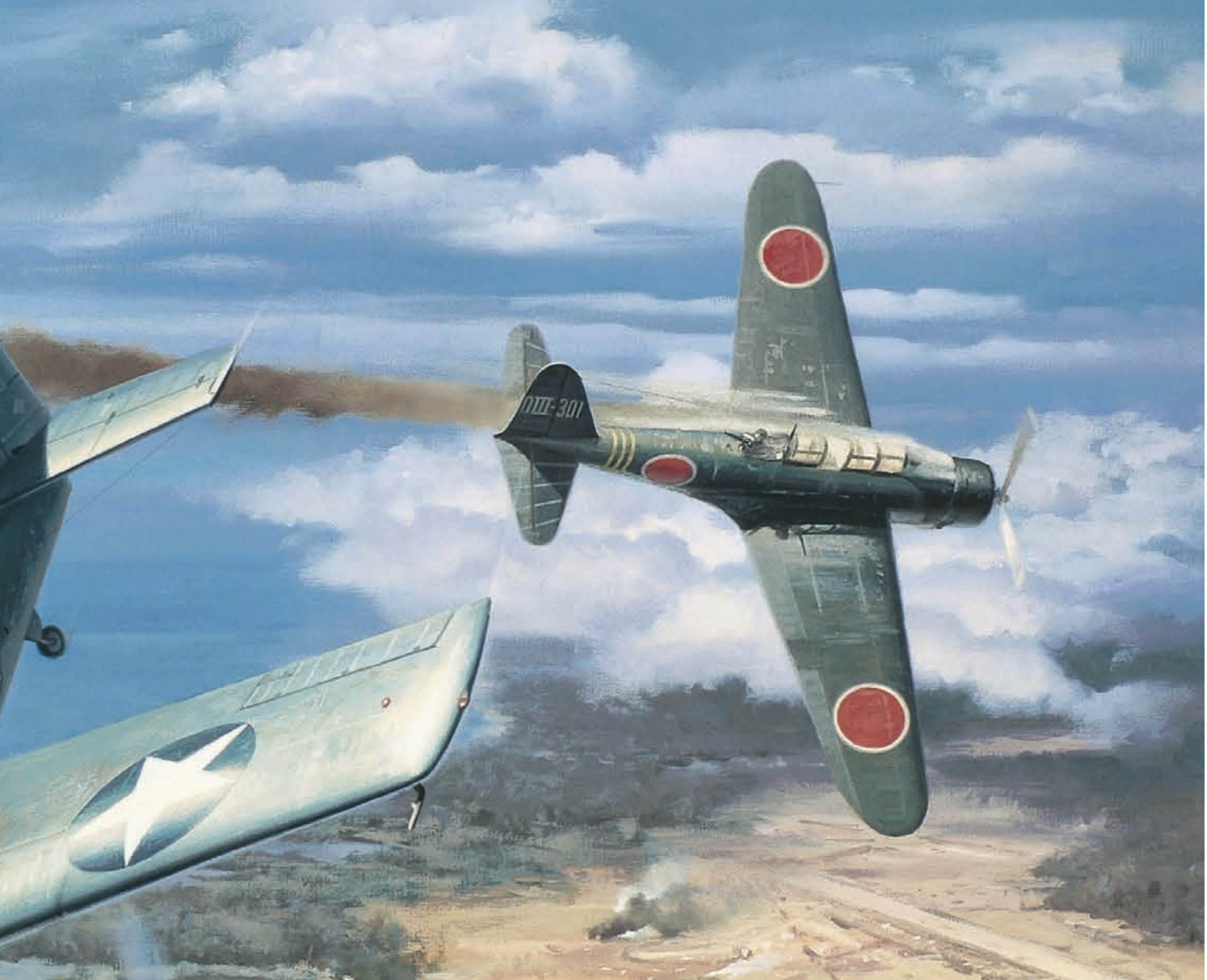
Among the numerous reports of paranormal phenomena aboard her are reports of men screaming and of metal crushing against metal.

Most of these reports place the source of these sounds below decks at the extreme front end of the ship—the site of the collision between the *Queen* and HMS *Curaçao* that fateful day in 1942.

Hitler's $250,000 reward for sinking *Queen Mary* was never collected, but an accident at sea almost accomplished what the German Navy could not. □

# SPEARHEAD OF VICTORY

Captain Marion E. Carl flew a F4F Wildcat with VMF-221 during the Battle of Midway, June 4, 1942, and is credited with shooting down a Zero. This Roy Grinnell painting depicts Carl battling a flight of Japanese planes over Guadalcanal, August 24, 1942. Carl went on to become the Marine Corps' first ace with 18 1/2 "kills."



Painting © Roy Grinnell

## Outnumbered and flying obsolete aircraft, U.S. Marine aviators at the outpost atoll of Midway sacrificed themselves to halt the Japanese juggernaut.

**BY COLONEL DICK CAMP (RET.)**

**PROLOGUE**: *At the start of World War II, Midway Atoll was a key U.S. base in the central Pacific. Only 1,200 miles from the Hawaiian Islands, it was the outer shield for the strategically important naval base at Pearl Harbor. In early May 1942, U.S. Navy codebreakers learned that the Japanese intended to invade Midway with a powerful armada under the command of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, mastermind of the Pearl Harbor attack.*

*Midway's airborne defenders, Marine Air Group 22 (MAG-22)—Marine Scout-Bombing Squadron 241 (VMSB 241) and Marine Fighting Squadron 221 (VMF 221)—hurriedly reinforced the atoll's defenses. MAG 22's Action Report noted that on May 26, "USS* Kitty Hawk *arrived with 22 officers and 35 men ... also 19 SBD-2 and 7 F4F-3 aircraft. Of the 21 new pilots, 17 were fresh out of flight school."*

MAG-22 was based on Eastern Island, two miles west of Sand Island, the site of the Naval Air Station and headquarters of the Sixth Marine Defense Battalion, the atoll's ground defense unit. On June 3, 1942, a PBY5A Catalina flying boat from VP-44 was on the outboard leg of its search pattern when the pilot, Ensign Jack Reid, spotted specks on the horizon. "I think we hit the jackpot," he exclaimed.

He immediately radioed Pearl Harbor: "Sighted main body," followed by, "Bearing 262, distance 700 miles." Midway went to full alert.

Early the next morning, the radio station at Sand Island sent out the message: "Many bogies heading Midway, bearing 320 degrees, distance 150 miles, angels 11." The heartpounding wail of the island's air raid siren sent the Marine pilots scrambling to man their aircraft—no one wanted to be caught on the ground in a bombing raid. Second Lt. J.C. Musselman, VMF-221 duty officer, jumped in the squadron truck and raced along the line of aircraft revetments gesturing wildly. "Get airborne," he yelled. Within minutes, the taxiway was crowded with an assortment of aircraft urgently scrambling to get into the air. Major Floyd B. Parks led off with a five-plane division of Brewster F2A-3 Buffalo fighters.

Parks was closely followed by three other F2A-3 divisions and one three-plane division of Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat fighters led by Captain John F. Carey. Altogether, VMF-221 put 26 aircraft into the air. One aircraft flown by 2nd Lt. Charles S. Hughes developed engine trouble and turned back. Major Lofton R. Henderson's VMSB-241

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Douglas SBD-2 Dauntless and Vought SB2U-3 Vindicator dive bombers joined the stampede. Within minutes MAG-22's two squadrons were airborne, leaving an empty field and a strange quietness after the frenzied roar of departing aircraft.

Once aloft, Captain Carey peered intently through the windshield of his Wildcat fighter. Scattered white cumulous clouds cut visibility, making it difficult to see the reported "many bogies heading Midway." Carey's three-plane division was at 14,000 feet searching for inbound Japanese raiders; 2nd Lt. C.M. Canfield was echeloned right and slightly to the rear, while Captain Marion E. Carl was several hundred yards behind. Canfield slid behind his leader as Carey "made a wide 270 degree turn, then a 90 degree diving turn." Canfield's radio suddenly came alive with Carey's electrifying, "Tallyho! Hawks at angels 12"... a slight pause ... "accompanied by fighters."

Two thousand feet below, 72 Japanese Nakajima B5N2 Kate torpedo planes and Aichi D3A1 Val dive bombers arrayed in five "V" formations roared toward Midway. An escort of 36 Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero fighters flew just above and behind them. The Zeros were out of position, allowing the Americans one free pass on the rest of the flight.

> **"MOST OF THE SURVIVING PILOTS WERE STUNNED BY THEIR EXPERIENCE ... VMF-221 WAS A SHATTERED COMMAND."**
>
> **– MARION CARL**

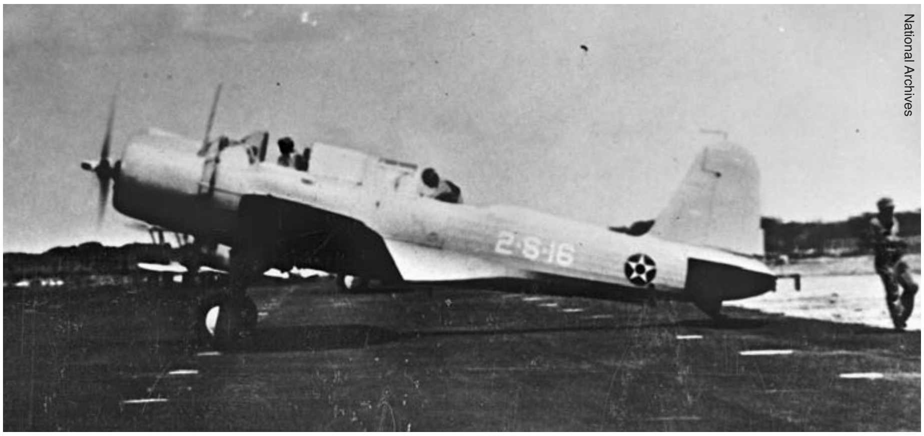
Carey started his run "high side from the right" on the leader of the first "V." He waited until the enemy plane filled his gun sight and then mashed the firing button. Four .50-caliber machine guns shredded the bomber, setting it on fire, but not before its gunner put a round through Carey's windshield. Milliseconds later, the Kate blew up, filling the air with debris.

Canfield followed Carey through the enemy formation and "fired at the number three plane in the number three section until it exploded and went down in flames." In the middle of the run, the thoroughly aroused Zero escort dove on the three Americans, cannons and machine guns blazing. Carl "made a high side pass on one of the fighters some 2,000 feet below. My fire passed through my target and I pulled away and up. I was surprised to see several Zeros already swinging into position on my tail." The fight was on.

By the summer of 1942, the Japanese juggernaut appeared to be unstoppable. After the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, American bases at Guam, Bataan, Corregidor, and Wake Island fell, sending thousands of American servicemen into captivity. Many in the United States thought that Hawaii would be next, a belief strengthened by the ineffectual bombing of Oahu by a single Japanese seaplane on the night of March 4, 1942.

About this time, U.S. Navy cryptologists at Station Hypo in Hawaii had achieved some success in breaking the Japanese fleet code, JN-25B. However, the code was so complicated that only partial decrypts—every six or seven words, 10 to 15 percent—were produced, leaving the analysts with a difficult puzzle to solve. Several of these partially decrypted messages indicated that a major Japanese operation was going to be conducted against "AF" in late May or early June 1942.

The attack was to be led by Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the architect of the Pearl Harbor attack, and was to comprise four of the six aircraft carriers—*Akagi, Kaga, Hiryu,* and *Soryu*—that devastated the American battle line at Pearl Harbor on December 7.

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**ABOVE LEFT: Major Floyd B. Parks led Brewster Buffalos in the Midway battle; CENTER: Major Lofton R. Henderson, CO of VMSB-241; RIGHT: Captain Marion E. Carl, the USMC's first ace. TOP: Another Vought SB2U-3 in prewar markings photographed at Ewa Marine Corps Air Station near Pearl Harbor in 1941. OPPOSITE: A Vought SB2U-3 takes off from Midway on a training flight a few days before the Battle of Midway. This particular Vindicator was flown on June 4 by 2nd Lt. James H. Marmande and disappeared about 10 miles from Midway.**

Navy codebreakers argued over whether "AF" stood for Midway, an island located approximately 1,200 miles northwest of Oahu, or some other location, including Hawaii or even the U.S. West Coast. A ruse was developed to resolve the argument; Midway was advised to broadcast in the clear that the island was experiencing a water shortage. Within days, a Japanese message was intercepted advising of a "water shortage at AF," and thus ending the controversy. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC), rushed reinforcements to Midway.

Major Parks led his division's obsolete Buffalos against the Japanese dive bombers and was immediately jumped by the faster, more agile Zeros. One pilot described the uneven dogfight: "[It] looked like they were tied to a string while the Zeros made passes at them."

Parks, one of the first victims, bailed out of his burning aircraft. His parachute opened and, as he dangled from the shroud lines, one of the Japanese strafed the helpless pilot all the way down—and continued to fire even as the body landed on a reef. Parks may have had a premonition the night before his death. Normally an extrovert, he was moody and distracted. Captain Kirk Armistead tried to cheer him up. "By this time tomorrow it'll all be over."

"Yeah," Parks replied, "for those of you who get through it." All the pilots in Parks's division were shot down.

Armistead's seven-plane division (six F2A-3s and one F4F) attacked in column, starting their firing run at 17,000 feet. His target consisted of "five divisions of from 5 to 9 planes each, flying in division 'Vs.'" He made a high speed, head-on approach. "I saw my incendiary bullets travel from a point in front of the leader, up through his plane and back through the planes on the left wing of the V." Armistead looked back as he continued his dive and saw three Japanese planes falling in flames.

Captain William C. Humberd rolled in behind Armistead. He shot down one bomber in a high-side approach and attacked again from the other side. "I was halfway through another run when I heard a loud noise and, turning around, saw a large hole in the hood of my plane ... and two Jap Zeros on me about 200 yards astern."

Humberd pushed over in a steep dive to escape, but an enemy plane was glued to his tail. "I stayed at water level with full throttle," he reported, "until I gained enough distance to turn into him. We met head on. I gave him a long burst at 300 yards and he went down on fire."

Armistead pulled out of his dive and zoomed back to 14,000 feet for another run. "I looked back over my shoulder and about 2,000 feet below and behind me I saw three fighters in column, climbing toward me, which I assumed to be planes of my division. When the nearest plane was about 500 feet below and behind me, I realized that it was a Japanese Zero fighter. I kicked over in a violent split 'S' and received three 20mm shells, one in the right wing gun, one in the right wing tank, and one in the top left side of the engine cowling. I also received about 20 7.7mm rounds in the left aileron ... which sawed off a portion of the aileron."

He went into a power dive, barely in control as his aircraft corkscrewed toward the ocean. The Japanese fighters pulled off, assuming that the American was done for. However, Armistead gained control, pulling out at 500 feet before shakily landing on Eastern Island. Humberd landed shortly afterward with his battle-damaged aircraft. "My hydraulic fluid was gone, and my flaps and landing gear would not lower, so I used my emergency system to lower my wheels." He landed safely, although his plane had a number of holes—three or four in the left gasoline tanks and two 20mm holes in the fuselage.

Second Lieutenant William B. Sandoval

was not so fortunate. One of his wingmates thought that he was drawn flat on his firing run and got "nailed" by a rear gunner. He failed to return and was listed as killed in action along with 2nd Lts. Martin E. Mahannah and Walter W. Swansberger.

Captain Philip R. White was the only pilot in the second division to survive. "After the first pass, I lost my wing man and the rest of the division," he reported; Captains Daniel J. Hennessey and Herbert T. Merrill, and 2nd Lts. Ellwood Q. Lindsay, Thomas W. Benson, and John D. Lucas were all shot down.

After a series of violent maneuvers, White was able to outmaneuver the enemy's Zeros while shooting down one and possibly two Val dive bombers. In an after-action report, he stated, "The F2A-3 is not a combat aircraft. It is inferior to the planes we were fighting in every respect."

As the aerial battle continued, Captain Carey pulled out of his dive and started to make a high wing over attack when his Wildcat was raked by a burst of fire that tore through his right knee and left leg. In excruciating pain and in danger of losing consciousness, he "dove at about a 40 degree angle and headed for a large cloud about five miles away."

At the same time Canfield's Wildcat was "hit on the right elevator, left wing and flap and just ahead of the tail wheel by a 20mm cannon shell. There was also a .30-caliber hole through the tail wheel and one that entered the hood on the right side about six inches up, passing just over the left rudder pedal and damaging the landing gear." He wisely followed Carey to safety.

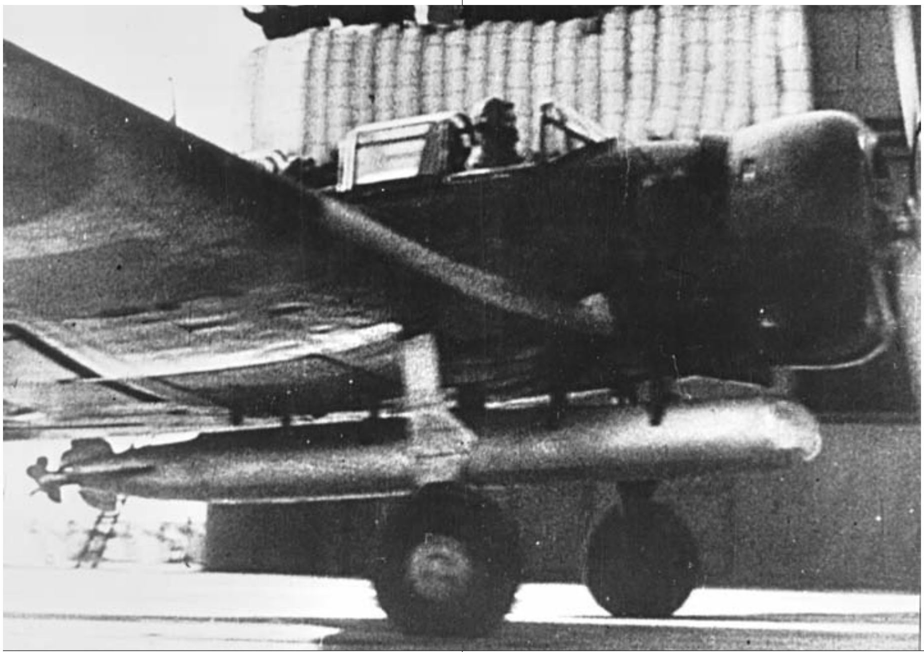
"I went around the cloud in the opposite direction," he reported, "and joined up with him again. Carey headed in the general direction of the island on an unsteady course and kept dropping and falling behind. I kept throttling back so he could keep up. His wounds kept him from working the rudders and his plane was 'all over the sky.'"

The two pilots reached the field, which was under attack, and prepared to land. Canfield discovered that he did not have any flaps to slow him down. "When the wheels touched the ground, the landing gear collapsed and the plane slid along the runway. When it stopped, I jumped out and ran for a trench just as a Japanese plane strafed my abandoned plane."

Marion Carl was also lucky. He "headed straight down at full throttle" and managed to shake his pursuers. He pulled out of the dive, climbed to 20,000 feet, leveled off, and looked for another target. Below him, three Zeros were circling, intent on finding another victim. They didn't see Carl "drop astern and to the inside of the circle made by one of the fighters. I gave him a long burst, until he fell off on one wing ... out of control, headed straight down with smoke streaming from the plane."

**RIGHT: Another still taken from a Japanese newsreel showing a Mitsubishi/Nakajima A6M Zero taking off from an unidentified aircraft carrier. BELOW: A frame taken from a captured Japanese newsreel showing a Nakajima B5N Kate torpedo plane taking off from an unidentified aircraft carrier. The padding visible on the carrier's "island" behind the plane are the sailors' bedrolls.**

Both: National Archives



Despite being shot up, Carl was able to limp back to safety. Carl went on to become the Marine Corps' seventh-ranking fighter ace with 18½ victories. He retired in 1973 as a major general with 14,000 flight hours.

The squadron had been all but wiped out as a fighting unit. Of the 25 aircraft from VMF-221 that rose to challenge the Japanese, 15 were shot down and only two of the remainder were flyable after the brief but deadly encounter. The Air Group listed 15 pilots missing in action, later changed to killed in action, and four wounded in action. Carl wrote, "Most of the surviving pilots were stunned by their experience ... the CO and exec both were missing; nobody seemed to know if any of the others might have bailed out ... VMF-221 was a shattered command."

The surviving pilots could take some solace in downing six confirmed Japanese planes and damaging 34 others, thus saving the island from an even heavier bombing. One observer noted that the first and second wave of Japanese dive bombers left the carriers with 72 planes; only 38 reached the island. But there was more drama to come. Radio-Gunner Corporal Eugene T. Card of Marine Scout-Bombing Squadron 241

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ABOVE: A formation of Marine Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat fighters photographed in 1941. RIGHT: Already obsolescent at the outbreak of war, this Marine Brewster F2A-3 Buffalo is shown during refueling at Ewa Field, Oahu, just weeks before the Battle of Midway.

(VMBS-241) anxiously gripped the stick of his Douglas SBD-2 Dauntless dive bomber, trying to keep it straight and level, while his pilot, Captain Richard E. Fleming, feverishly worked out the location of the Japanese aircraft carriers on his chart board. The order they had been given—"Attack enemy carriers bearing 325 degrees, distance 180 miles, on course 130 degrees at a speed of 25 knots"—seemed simple enough, but trying to locate the Japanese ships in the huge expanse of ocean was akin to finding the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Suddenly, Card noticed 1st Lt. Daniel Iverson's SBD-2 closing up fast. As he came alongside, Iverson and his gunner, Corporal Wallace J. Reid, gestured frantically downward to the left. Card craned his neck, but all he could see was blue sea through the scattered cloud cover. His attention was diverted by Fleming's voice over the intercom, "We've made contact. There's a ship at 10 o'clock, do you see it?"

Card looked again and there it was—a slender, black shape trailing a long white wake as the ship sped toward Midway. Fleming retook control of the aircraft while Card secured his control stick and manned the single .30-caliber machine gun in the rear cockpit. Within minutes, more and more Japanese ships could be seen, including the unmistakable shapes of two aircraft carriers.

Card watched utterly fascinated as the carriers turned into the wind and started launching aircraft. His reverie was abruptly broken by the squadron commander's voice: "Attack two enemy carriers on port bow." The SBD-2 fell away, losing altitude for a low-level glide-bombing attack. All at once, two streaks of smoke flew past the starboard wing and Fleming's excited voice called out, "Here they come!"

A Japanese Zero flashed by, climbing almost straight up. Card turned his .30-caliber machine gun on the fighter but it was already out of range. Another slashed through the formation. Out of the corner of his eye, Card saw a burning aircraft plummeting toward the ocean; a white parachute blossomed, but he could not make out whose it was. His SBD continued to bore in toward the target amid a tangle of diving aircraft.

Major Lofton R. Henderson, CO of VMSB-241, cringed at the thought of taking his inexperienced pilots—"the 'greenest' group ever assembled for combat—into battle. Ten of 28 pilots had joined the squadron in the last week and only three had any time in SBDs. However, there was nothing else to be done. Yamamoto's immense naval task force was approaching Midway. Lt. Col. Ira L. Kimes, CO of MAG-22, remarked, "It [Japanese task force] appears to have everything but Hirohito with an outboard motor on his bathtub."

An accidental explosion in the fuel dump caused a shortage of gasoline (300,000 gallons were lost), which limited pilot training to "two or three hops with practice bombs," and left Henderson with little choice but to devise an attack plan that would give his untrained pilots the best chance for success. He divided them into two striking units—one led by himself (18 SBD-2s with the more-experienced pilots) and the other led by Major Benjamin W. Norris with 12 of the older SB2U-3s; the SBD-2's performance was far superior to that of the other aircraft.

Henderson planned on a shallow glide-bombing approach because it required less skill than a diving attack. In a series of briefings and chalk talks, he instructed the pilots that he would lead them in a fast power glide to 4,000 feet and then turn them loose to hit the carriers at a very low altitude—500 feet or less. He cautioned the youngsters to get out fast by hugging the water and using the cloud cover to escape. Everyone knew their SBDs were sadly outclassed by the Japanese Zero, but there was nothing to be done about it.

U.S. Navy

Lastly, Henderson instructed them that, upon notice of an incoming raid, they were to get off the ground as quickly as possible and assemble at Point Affirm—20 miles east of Midway.

Corporal Card heard a "Wuf!"... and another and another. Black puffballs appeared near his plane, and he realized the sound was from Japanese antiaircraft fire. He was too busy fighting off the Zeros to pay much more attention until "somebody threw a bucket of bolts in the prop," and small holes appeared all over the cockpit. He told Walter Lord, the well-known author, that he "felt a thousand needles prick his right ankle ... and something hard kick his left leg to one side." Blood streamed down his legs but he had no time to stop the bleeding, as the Zeros kept boring in and he had to keep them at bay.

Henderson was ahead of Card's plane, leading the attack, and Dan Iverson was just behind. "The first [enemy fighter] attacks were directed at the squadron leader in an attempt to put him out of action," Iverson recalled. "After about two passes, one of the enemy put several shots through his plane and the left wing started to burn ... it was apparent that he was hit and out of action."

Henderson's wingman, 2nd Lt. Albert W. Tweedy, followed him faithfully until he, too, was shot down. Captain Armond H. DeLalio, leader of the third section, watched horrified as 2nd Lt. Thomas J. Gratzek's plane burst into flames and plunged toward the sea. Three other SBDs quickly followed—2nd Lts. Maurice A. Ward, Bruno P. Hagedorn, and Bruce H. Ek, along with their radio-gunners, Pfcs. Harry M. Radford, Joseph T. Piraneo, and Raymond R. Brown.

The survivors, led by Captain Elmer G. "Iron Man" Glidden, pressed the attack through a protecting layer of clouds. "On emerging from the cloudbank, the enemy carrier was directly below," Glidden recalled, "and all planes made their runs." They were assailed on all sides by fighter planes and heavy antiaircraft fire, but the radio-gunners fought back valiantly.

Card had the satisfaction of seeing a Zero burst into flames. Pfc. Reed T. Ramsey got a hit at point-blank range, however, Private Charles W. Huber's gun jammed; all he could do was point it, hoping to fool the pursuing Japanese. In the heat of battle, Pfc. Gordon R. McFeely got so carried away that he riddled the tail of his own aircraft.

Glidden picked out a carrier that had "a huge Rising Sun amidships of the flight deck ... [which] itself was a gleaming light yellow, making it a tempting target." The rest of the squadron followed, dropping three 500-pound bombs that neatly bracketed the warship. "Looking back," Glidden reported, "I saw two hits and one miss that were right alongside the bow. The carrier was starting to smoke."

Dan Iverson bored in on another ship, "a carrier that had two Rising Suns on the

ABOVE: Smoke rises from burning buildings after Japanese air forces attacked the U.S. Navy base at Midway Atoll during the Battle of Midway. BELOW: Surviving VMF-221 pilots photographed at Ewa Field, Oahu, about three weeks after the battle.

Both: National Archives

flight deck ... two enemy fighters followed me in the dive. I released my bomb at 300 feet before pulling out. It hit just astern of the deck, a very close miss ... [but] may have damaged the screws and steering gear."

Having expended their ordnance, the SBDs beat a hasty retreat. "The fighters pursued us," Iverson related, "making overhead runs for 20 or 30 miles. My plane was hit several times." This was an understatement, as over 250 holes were counted in his aircraft. His throat mike was severed by a bullet, the hydraulic system was shot away, and only one landing gear would lock down.

Second Lieutenant Richard L. Blain and his crewman, McFeely, found themselves in the water. "The ship stayed afloat for two or three minutes," Blain reported, giving them a chance to get in their life raft. After two days on the ocean, they were picked up by a passing patrol plane. Second Lt. Harold G. Schlendering and Pfc. Edward O. Smith had to hit the silk. The pilot survived but the gunner did not.

As the battered remnants of Henderson's division cleared the scene, Norris's slow and clumsy Vindicators arrived. "The clouds became our haven," remembered 2nd Lt. Allen H. Ringblom. "Major Norris led us without loss to the target ... radioing instructions

to dive straight ahead on the target."

Second Lieutenant George T. Lumpkin observed, "Major Norris started his dive immediately from 13,500 feet through the cloud cover ... and came out on the port side of a large battleship." Lumpkin followed, running a gauntlet of fire that was so heavy it was "practically impossible to hold the ship in a true dive." During his dive, Ringblom "received identical holes, about 6 inches in diameter, in each aileron." The Japanese battleship zigzagged frantically, trying to throw off their aim.

The Marines released their bombs and "saw the battleship practically ringed with near misses, also one direct hit on the bow," according to 2nd Lt. George E. Koutelas. Second Lt. Sumner H. Whitten came out of his dive and found himself between two lines of enemy ships that were firing furiously trying to knock him down.

Sergeant Frank E. Zelnis, Whitten's gunner, thought it was taking forever to get away and he called out impatiently, "You dropped your bomb; let's get the hell out of here before we get hit!" Whitten recalled, "I made a sharp right turn and started home at 100 feet."

As they pulled out of their dives and attempted to escape, the Zeros swooped down. Second Lt. Daniel L. Cummings lost his gunner, Private Henry I. Sparks, almost immediately. He related that Sparks "had never before fired a machine gun in the air and could not be expected to be an effective shot much less protect himself."

Cummings counted five enemy planes on his tail. "In the hit and run, and dog fighting, which was my initiation to real war, my old, obsolete SB2U-3 was almost shot out from under me. About five miles from Midway, my gasoline gave out and I made a crash landing in the water."

Ringblom had "a Zero pass right behind me as I whipped into a tight turn, only luck making harmless the numerous passes made by the Zeros." Like Cummings, Ringblom also ditched. "I chose to land right in front of a PT boat and all went so well that I even forgot to inflate my life jacket."

After many perilous encounters, the rest of the squadron made it back to the island. Ringblom arrived dripping wet. A buddy greeted him, saying, "Well, I never expected to see you again." A very much relieved Ringblom blurted out, "Hell, neither did I!"

Fleming executed a perfect three-point landing despite a shot-out tire. As Marines rushed up to take Card away, Fleming announced, "Boys, there is one ride I am glad is over," and shook his wounded gunner's hand.

Second Lieutenant Thomas F. Moore remembered calling to his buddy, 2nd Lt. Jesse D. Rollow, Jr., "How many got back?"

**"THEY STRUCK THE FIRST BLOW AT THE ENEMY CARRIERS. THEY WERE THE SPEARHEAD OF OUR GREAT VICTORY."**

**—ADMIRAL CHESTER W. NIMITZ**

"Eight out of 16," Rollow replied, shaking his head sadly.

Of the 16 SBD-2s and 11 SB2U-3s that scrambled aloft to attack the Japanese fleet on that fateful June morning, 12 were shot down (eight SBDs and four SB2Us), seven severely damaged beyond repair, and four slightly damaged. The Marine claims of the number of enemy aircraft destroyed and ships hit proved to be wrong. Subsequent research of Japanese records showed that little actual damage was done—no enemy ships were struck by VMSB-241's bombs and only six aircraft failed to return to the carriers. Many can argue that the sacrifice of so many Marine pilots and crewmen was in vain. However, Admiral Nimitz was not one of them.

"Please accept my sympathy for the losses sustained by your gallant aviation personnel based at Midway," he wrote. "Their sacrifice was not in vain. When the great emergency came, they were ready. They met unflinchingly the attack of vastly superior numbers and made the attack ineffective. They struck the first blow at the enemy carriers. They were the spearhead of our great victory. They have written a new and shining page in the annals of the Marine Corps." □


This Douglas SBD-2 Dauntless dive bomber, flown by Lieutenant Daniel Iverson with his gunner Private Wallace Reid, was one of only eight from VMSB-241 to return from the attack against the Japanese fleet on June 4. The plane had 219 holes from enemy fire.

National Archives

DESPITE SUFFERING HEAVY CASUALTIES, THE MEN OF FALLSCHIRMJÄGER REGIMENT 6 CONTINUED TO DEFEND GERMAN POSITIONS IN NORMANDY UNTIL VERY NEARLY THE END OF THE WAR.

# PARATROOPS VS PARATROOPS IN NORMANDY

PART 3

BY VOLKER GRIESSER

BACKGROUND: *In this, the third and final installment of a three-part series excerpted from* The Lions of Carentan, *the 2011 book by a respected German military historian, Fallschirmjäger Regiment 6 (FJR 6) has been pushed out of Ste.-Mère-Église, St.-Côme-du-Mont, and the key city of Carentan by American paratroopers of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, and is now fighting for its life against Allied fighter-bombers and an overwhelming force of U.S. soldiers who have come ashore at Utah Beach.*

The Americans planned to advance from Périers toward Coutances, while the city of St. Lô would be taken from the north, in order to then drive toward St. Malo and form a cordon reaching to the ocean. But Fallschirmjäger Regiment 6 stood in the way of this plan, because they still held the key blocking positions.

St.-Germain-sur-Sèves was secured to the north by the River Sèves, and to the other sides by flooded areas. Because the village lay on a small hill, the Americans called it 'Sèves Island.' In the preliminary stages of what was called Operation Cobra, the U.S. 90th Infantry Division received the assignment to take this location. For this task, they were given all available artillery weapons and command of the mortar divisions of the neighboring units, and were also promised strong air support.

At 6:00 AM on July 22, bombardment began on the positions of 2nd Battalion/FJR 6, which was defending the area north of St.-Germain-sur-Sèves. Two battalions of the 358th Infantry Regiment, 90th Division, advanced on the road over


Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-586-2225-16; Photo: Slickers

German paratroopers assemble on a road in northern France as they prepare to meet the advancing American army, July 1944. In addition to his binoculars and holstered pistol, the soldier at right carries ammunition pouches for an MP40 machine pistol. Their decreasing numbers and the increasing American strength in Normandy meant the days for units such as Fallschirmjäger Regiment 6 were numbered.

the river, supported by combat engineers and tanks. The Americans managed to push back the forward-deployed members of the 11th Company, and build a bridgehead at the crossing. In the open swamp terrain, the enemy had little cover, so that due to the defensive fire from 6th Fallschirmjäger Regiment's companies to the left and right, their losses soon amounted to 200 men.

Major Friedrich August Freiherr von der Heydte, commanding officer of FJR 6, realized that the American advance had to be stopped. Because of FJR 6's high losses in the past weeks, the only part of the regiment that was available for this responsibility was the 16th Company under the leadership of Oberfeldwebel [Platoon Sergeant] Alexander Uhlig. Because they were designated for special deployments, they stood at the ready near to the regimental command post.

Uhlig himself remembers: "Operation Sèves Island began for me on the morning of 22 July, with a conversation that the regimental commander had called me in for. He shared with me that in the previous night or early morning hours, the enemy had broken through our main line of resistance in 3rd Battalion/FJR 6's sector. They needed to be pushed back immediately. There was no answer at the time to my question about the strength of the enemy.

The commander hoped, however, that we were dealing with just one combat patrol that I could push back with 16th Company/FJR 6, strength 5:27 [5 officers and 27 men].

"I received complete freedom of action, the right to subordinate soldiers from other companies, and the assignment to push back the Americans over the Sèves, so that the former main line of resistance could be restored. Whenever possible, I was supposed to take two or three captives on the way so that we could learn about the details of the regiment, their units and their strength.

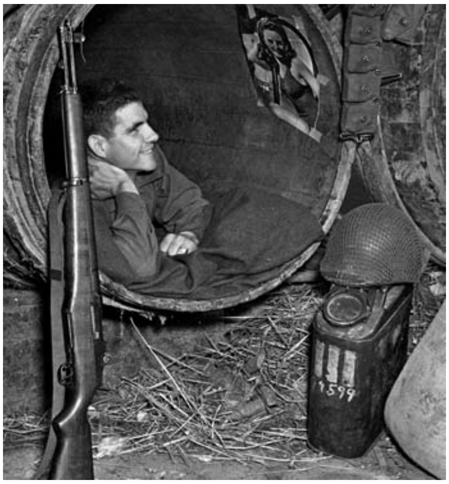
"I returned to the company, and let them know about the deployment. We marched off on foot towards the area of our mission. We only carried light weapons with us (rifles, pistols, submachine guns, hand grenades and rifle grenades), and thus we were well equipped for the close combat we were expecting. Because of the enemy's ground-attack aircraft, which had control of the air space, we made slow progress.

"Around 1:00 PM, the company was bombarded with mortars in a sunken road northeast of Remeurge; three men and one Oberjäger were injured. Two men brought them back to the nearest first aid station. I had the unit spread out to go into full cover, and scouted the terrain in front of us with Gefreiter Ahlbrecht, the company messenger.

Uhlig continued: "The terrain north of the Sèves–St Germain road was occupied by the enemy to a breadth of about 800 meters. To the east of Closet I encountered a blocking position of 9th Company/FJR 6. Between the two positions our whole main line of resistance was in American hands. Unfortunately we weren't just dealing with a single combat patrol, but with a whole unit of more than 300 men. With my few people, a frontal attack against this enemy ... did not seem promising. Therefore I decided to attack the enemy's flank in the wing where his numbers were spread the thinnest, i.e. his right flank near Sèves.

"The company crouched and crawled behind hedges and earthwork towards Sèves, along the whole length of the American breach without being noticed. When we got there, I took some of 6th Company/FJR 6 and began the flank attack around 6:00 PM; it surprised the enemy, who certainly must have been counting on a different direction of attack. Within the next three hours, the enemy was pushed back around 350 meters in close combat, and so they lost about half of their ground. During this battle we lost none of 16th Company/FJR 6. The medic could easily deal with light scratches immediately, and lightly wounded men voluntarily stayed in battle.

"After returning the two litter bearers, the company had at this time a strength of 4:24. On the American side several soldiers had fallen. We had been unable to take prisoners at this time. When darkness fell, the fighting ceased.



Both: National Archives

**LEFT: Photographed in a barn near St.-Germain-sur-Séves, this GI from the 90th Infantry Division prepares to get some sleep in an empty wine cask, July 23, 1944. BELOW: Smiling and looking confident, an unidentified American infantry unit advances through a village in Normandy.**

"Afterwards we heard the enemy digging entrenchments. He was probably preparing a defense for the next morning against a German attack from the same direction as earlier. That gave me the idea of surprising him again; so instead of attacking the position he was currently reinforcing, we would attack his newly formed flank. For that I would need good reinforcements.

"First I spoke with a tank commander from an SS-Panzer regiment that had been sent to Sèves to support us. He promised to support my attack with three tanks from his unit the following morning. I also went to the commander of 2nd Battalion/FJR 6, Hauptmann Mager, but he could promise me no support.

"Afterwards I searched out the command post of 3rd Battalion/FJR 6 and spoke with Hauptmann Trebes. He gave me command of a group with the strength of 1:15, which was equipped with two heavy machine guns; this group had been placed under his command as a reserve.

Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-583-2130-11A; Photo: Reich

Men of a Fallschirmjäger unit under the cover of a tree in Normandy take time to rest, have a smoke, read a newspaper, and write a letter home before their next encounter with the Yanks.

Because these men had little experience on the front, I didn't want to send them into an attack the next morning, but I still could use them.

"Because the Sèves lowlands absolutely had to be blocked according to my plan, and heavy machine guns with a firing speed of 1,300 rounds per minute would be excellent for this task, I sent the group northeast of the Sèves to take up position in a sunken road. From this position, they could see the whole Sèves lowland and had a completely free field of fire.

"Thus it was possible to block any retreating enemies or enemies trying to move behind us. My assignment to the group was to build up and camouflage the machine gun position in the remaining hours of the night. They did not have permission to fire during my morning attack ... they were free to fire only on retreating or advancing enemies.

Uhlig added, "On 23 July at 7:30 AM, it was absolutely still. Low-lying cloud cover had appeared that prevented enemy ground-attack planes from engaging. Three panzers waited on the street towards St. Germain at the Sèves town exit. The 16th Company stood ready to march from their old position across from the Americans. An Oberjäger assigned a group of six men to every tank. The attack was supposed to start at exactly 8:00 AM by firing all weapons from the road running northwest. After that the panzers were supposed to drive forward, with the groups assigned to them following.

"Surprisingly, the tank commanders rejected this plan. For this kind of attack, the complicated terrain left them too open to enemy tank-killing units. I changed the plan and ordered the three groups to attack in front of the Panzers. Shortly before 8:00 the tanks advanced, the men of the 16th Company/FJR 6 jumped out of their positions to the tanks.

"The firefight began and suddenly, almost to the exact minute, the American artillery unleashed a heavy barrage on the area behind us. The fire gradually shifted back to our initial position and came closer and closer to us. We were forced to attack, so to speak. During the pandemonium, our opponents disappeared into their foxholes. Because of this we could storm forward and so escape the artillery fire. Unfortunately the panzer on the left stopped early in the operation because of mechanical failure; the panzer on the right had become immobilized under a collapsing roof in a farm in Closet. Nevertheless, we made progress.

"Certainly the enemy had not realized how inferior our numbers were, because the first U.S. soldiers surrendered themselves; others tried to withdraw through the Sèves lowlands. At this moment, the concealed machine guns opened their fire and thus cut off the Americans' return path. In a sunken road on the southeastern edge of the Sèves lowlands, we drove the opponents together and began to take prisoners.

"The captives had to put down their weapons and were marched to the regimental command post in groups of 20-25, with one of my men to lead each group. Once I only had a few men left it became clear to me that we must have taken more than 200 prisoners. Around 11:00 AM the battle was successfully concluded. I occupied the recently retaken main line of resistance with the heavy machine-gun group assigned to me and with some men from other units who had been scattered. Afterwards I returned to the regimental command post with the remains of 16th Company/FJR 6. Here I reported my successfully completed assignment to the commander. He commended me.

"In the large hall of the farmhouse, 11 American officers were collected. They were being handed tea when the commander introduced me to them as the leader of the whole offensive operation.

"The last successful battle of a unit of the German 7th Army in Normandy was over. As a result of it, we had brought in not only the two to three prisoners that the commander had requested, but exactly 234. On the morning of 24 July, I learned confidentially from Heinz Gabbey, the Hauptfeldwebel of the regimental staff, that the commander had submitted my name for a Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. I received it on 29 October 1944."

Around 2:30 PM, the forward-deployed outposts of FJR 6 reported enemy activities in the Sèves lowlands. The Fallschirmjäger opened fire on three Americans, but realized shortly afterwards that they were dealing with army chaplains who had slipped into the combat zone unarmed and unnoticed. A Protestant pastor, a Catholic priest and a preacher from the Salvation Army were searching for wounded survivors among the corpses strewn throughout the river meadow, which was open to constant fire from both heavy machine guns.

Disregarding the fact that what was occurring was an act of humanity, American fighter-bombers attacked in a low-level flight, covering the field with fire. When the airplanes turned away, some American medics arrived to help the army chaplains and Major von der Heydte ordered that his Fallschirmjäger should help them recover their wounded; he offered the Americans a three-hour ceasefire. In return, the Americans sent over wounded Fallschirmjäger from the 11th Company who had been taken into captivity the day before during the advance of the 358th Infantry Regiment. During the ceasefire both sides recovered their wounded and fallen without danger.

Major von der Heydte issued the following report to the 2nd Fallschirmjäger Division on July 23, 1944 at 11:45 PM:

"The enemy—U.S. 90th Division—attacked the middle and left wing of the regiment yesterday with the whole 358th Infantry Regiment, supported by the 344th Artillery Regiment and probably also the Artillery Corps. The attack was fought back. Oberfeldwebel Uhlig led the operation to repair this breach. With a combat team of only 30 men and support of one Panzer, they predominantly destroyed an American battalion (1st of the 358th). 234 unwounded prisoners were taken, including the battalion commander and 11 officers. According to the captured papers available to the regiment, the 358th Regiment, that had stood ready south of Gonfreville before the attack, was supposed to break through the German main line of resistance east of Sèves and then swing east and take the area around St. Germain."

On July 25, FJR 6 observed from its positions as 2,000 Allied planes blanket-bombed the area towards St. Lô. FJR 14, the Panzer-Lehr Division, and some other neighboring units felt the effects of this attack. At this time, the enemy formed up west of St. Lô with strong tank forces. They were able to break through and destroy the German defensive positions and, with a quick advance, take St. Lô.

FJR 6 received the order to relocate to St.-Sauveur-Lendelin and build up a defensive line there along the railway line Combernon–Belval–Ouville, because an attack by the 3rd US Armored Division had broken through in the Périers–St. Lô sector and was now approaching the Périers–Coutances road. The 2nd SS-Panzer Division "Das Reich" offered 10 tanks for this operation. The goal was to make it possible for the German forces escaping from the north to withdraw.

National Archives

Two Americans, one carrying an M1 Garand rifle and the other wearing a tanker's jacket and carrying an M1 carbine equipped with an M-8 grenade launcher, advance across a French field in pursuit of German paratroopers near St.-Germain-sur-Séves, July 1944.

Despite heavy attacks by American armored units, FJR 6 managed to hold the position on the railway at the north edge of St.-Sauveur-Lendelin and to build up a point of main effort on the Périers–Coutances road. The already weakened regiment suffered fresh losses—150 men.

On the next day, the commander of the 2nd SS-Panzer Division sought out the command post of FJR 6 and oriented Major von der Heydte to the situation east of his own positions, where his units had been surrounded again by Americans and where he faced the threat of being completely encircled. He wanted to try to withdraw his beleaguered division with the Fallschirmjäger covering his retreat, and then they would follow. He closed his report to Major von der Heydte with the words, "I am an old tank man. This breakthrough is decisive, the war in France is lost."

Major von der Heydte could not meet the SS officer's wish right away. This was due to the fact that the reinforced 16th Company/FJR 6 was in the area of Sèves at the time, in order to feign continuing occupation of this region by German troops. In addition, the danger of fighter-bomber attacks was still great for a daytime march. Major von der Heydte drove ahead, however, to investigate the new positions near Coutances.

In the gray dawn, FJR 6 began reconnaissance patrols because they were unsure of the enemy's status and positions and needed further information. As expected, the results were sobering. Admittedly, the Americans were moving from Périers slowly, but American tanks from St. Lô had advanced to the south and threatened to attack along the road toward Coutances. FJR 6 had barely swung to the east to face the Americans when the regiment received enemy contact and engaged in a skirmish. During this clash, the 11th Company was surrounded by American troops and completely destroyed.

Major von der Heydte gave the order for the 16th Company under Oberfeldwebel Uhlig to hold the Sèves position one more day, and then to regroup with the regiment in Coutances. Because of their inferior numbers, the 16th Company could not resist the broad breakthrough by the 90th U.S. Infantry Division and swerved in a delaying action towards Périers.

The Fallschirmjäger succeeded in drawing off some of the 90th Division and slowing down their general advance. For a total of three days, Oberfeldwebel Uhlig and his troop waged a small war against the Americans and tied up enemy forces in this manner, forces that otherwise would have been deployed to go after the relocating main German units. Finally, near St. Michel, south of Périers, the ring around the rest of the 16th Company became ever tighter until escape from this encirclement was impossible. The 16th Company pressed the enemy hard for days. On July 30, Oberfeldwebel Uhlig and the rest of his men were taken prisoner.

In the encircled area around St. Lô, serious disagreements arose between the Waffen-SS and the Fallschirmjäger. While the SS reported that a battalion commander of FJR 6 had suffered a nervous breakdown in combat, and that the Fallschirmjäger were no longer holding their positions, Major von der Heydte's men countered, with irony, that the Waffen-SS would hold their positions until the last Fallschirmjäger. Morale sank further when the commander of the 2nd SS-Panzer Division [Obersturmbannführer Christian Tychsen] died of wounds and his second-in-command [Oberführer Otto Baum] took over.

Under the protection of darkness, FJR 6 broke away from the enemy and moved several kilometers, according to orders. (Under such strong pressure from his opponents, von der Heydte barely noticed his promotion to Oberstleutnant [lieutenant colonel].) On the following day the regiment received the order to break through to Percy via St.-Martin-de-Centilly with the rest of the 2nd SS-Panzer Division, but it was not until dawn the next day that the German forces were able to depart. The Fallschirmjäger initially rode on the panzers during the operation. At first, fog supported their operation and offered cover against air attacks, but by 8:00 AM the fog had dispersed and fierce fighter-bomber attacks began.

Near La Corbière the leading tank came under enemy attack and the Fallschirmjäger had to dismount and regroup in trenches to the right and left of the road. They also determined that 3rd Battalion/FJR 6, which had been in the back of the column, had gone missing along with its accompanying tanks. The SS had probably become lost.

Because the SS commander on location refused to follow von der Heydte's advice, von der Heydte decided to seize the initiative. A recon troop reported that the enemy ahead was too strong. At the same time, a part of the column believed to be missing had returned and reported that a path over St.-Denys-le-Gast was free from enemy troops.

Part of 2nd Battalion/FJR 6 managed to disengage from the enemy quickly and mount the tanks, while the rest of the battalion under the direction of Oberstleutnant von der Heydte tried to fight its way through on foot.

The Fallschirmjäger who had found the way out near St.-Denys-le-Gast were able to use the gap in the Allied cordon to get through without enemy contact. However, the Fallschirmjäger mounted on the fleeing SS vehicles came under a large-scale air attack south of St. Denys and suffered bitter losses. Hauptmann Trebes, commander of the 3rd Battalion, was amongst the fallen; during the air attack he sought cover under a tank that was then targeted by the American fighter-bombers.

The survivors still managed to meet up with their comrades who were traveling on foot; having traveled via St. Denys in a march of 60 kilometers, they met up at La Mancelliere, southwest of Percy. Here they discovered that some of the 2nd Battalion under Hauptmann Mager were still missing, but contact was reestablished one day later. Von der Heydte recalled later how the defensive position near Percy was only a cordon of single outposts, without any strength to resist a major assault.

Because American tanks were on the Hambye–Villedieu road, and because FJR 6 had no tank-destroying weapons left, von der Heydte decided to march more than 50 kilometers to avoid Villedieu towards St.-Martin-de-Bouillant. The 353rd Grenadier Division could be found there, and the Oberstleutnant would put his troops under their command. When American tanks moved into St.-Martin-de-Bouillant that afternoon, FJR 6 was divided into two battlegroups, one group that had roughly the strength of a company. The other group headed through to Alençon, according to orders.

**Seemingly unconcerned about the dead American in their midst, members of FJR 6 man a well-concealed defensive position in a Normandy hedgerow.**

Author's Collection / Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-586-2215-25A, Photo: Reich

Many of the men of FJR 6 have powerful memories of this chaotic period. Hermann Wübbold, at the time an Obergefreiter in the WuG Troop, reports:

"On the evening of 25 July, our boss, von der Heydte, called Wern to him. Waffenoberinspektor [Chief Weapons Inspector Heinrich Wern, leader of the WuG Troop.] He also called me to him, stating that four ears hear better than two. He explained that the enemy would march forward without any more resistance and that our troops could no longer offer effective counter-fire due to our heavy losses. He gave the order for us to move during the night toward Villedieu via Gavray. On 27 July, we were supposed to blow up the large ammunition storage dump left behind at our deserted position in St.-Michel-la-Pierée, near St.-Sauveur-Lendelin. During the morning, we—Waffenoberinspektor Wern, Oberfeldwebel Günter Friebe and I—set out toward Coutances. We made it there despite the air attacks. We rode farther on the National Highway towards St. Lô. Meanwhile, it had grown cloudy so the fighter planes could no longer attack.

"Günter Friebe was from Großgiesmansdorf in Upper Silesia. Three weeks before this fateful trip he had said to me: 'Listen to me, and pay attention to what I have to say. I'm not going to come back from this war. I will fall here. My wife Maria recently gave me a daughter. Her name is Katharina. I just got this message the day before yesterday. You have to promise me that you will inform her about my fate.'"

"In the weeks that followed he repeated this plea to me over and over; the last time he did so, on the evening of 26 July, one day before his death, he said it so urgently. Until this day I've been unable to forget that. Before the last trip, Wern said to me: 'Sit in the back. I'll drive, otherwise you'll fall asleep.' I hadn't slept for two days and nights. Without thinking much about it I put on my steel helmet, for the first time. Günter Friebe sat in front of me in the passenger seat. I bent forward and tried to sleep. After seven kilometers we left the street and headed north. Suddenly I looked ahead and cried out 'Turn around! There are Sherman tanks and American soldiers ahead!'

"Wern turned the car around and headed to the right. In the curve, a shell struck directly above Günter Friebe. The car ran towards the right into a roadside ditch next to an apartment building. After a short period of unconsciousness, I came to, and was quickly aware of my situation. Friebe was no longer there. On the seat in front of me there was only unrecognizable flesh and blood to be seen. Wern had lost his right arm and been hit heavily by shell splinters. My hands, face, and legs were bleeding. The wounds were not serious; I at least was able to leave the car and crawl into a pipe under the street.

It was around 2:00 PM when claustrophobia forced me to leave the pipe, cross to the other side of the street, and run into a sunken road. After going around 50 meters, I spotted a Sherman tank about 30 meters off, headed straight for me. Through the bushes, I hadn't been able to see it early enough. GIs marched behind it. On the right side there was an entrance to a field; I fled there and let myself collapse. After a while I crawled towards a rampart that was overgrown with shrubbery. I was still wearing my steel helmet. It looked very similar to the American ones; the American soldiers probably thought that I was one of them. At the forward edge of the frontline, the Americans weren't taking any German prisoners. They exterminated them instead. If they had recognized me, my life would have ended right there.

"The worst part of it was the thirst. I finally fell asleep from exhaustion and when I woke up it was almost dark. First I took off my steel helmet and noticed that shrapnel had pierced it. The splinter was still sticking in the inner padding. Led by nothing more than a feeling, I headed toward my comrades. To do so I had to cross the American lines. I met up with the last rearguard of our troops along some railroad tracks. I was allowed to ride on a Kübelwagen for part of the way.

"When day began to break, American fighter-bombers unceasingly directed heavy attacks at the fleeing masses of soldiers and vehicles in the sunken roads. They did not spare the many medical vehicles carrying wounded soldiers. Even a single soldier was enough to warrant the fighter-bombers' target. Around 6:00 AM, I reached my comrades from the WuG Troop. They had spent the night celebrating and drinking. When

**The loader on an FJR 6 machine-gun team helps the gunner adjust the MG42 on his shoulder prior to moving out to engage the 90th Infantry Division near Séves Island. The men wear camouflage string netting over their jump helmets to disguise the outline of their helmets.**

Author's Collection / Bundesarchive Bild 101I-582-2101-25, Photo: Czirnich

National Archives

The Germans put up a stubborn defense in Normandy. Here an American Dodge 3/4-ton weapons carrier burns after being hit by enemy artillery near St. Lô, July 20, 1944.

they saw me, they instantly sobered up. From the last discussions with the commander, I knew that the Americans would expand their encirclement. My urgent advice was to relocate to the south as quickly as possible; they followed my advice and so we were spared being taken prisoner by just a few hours."

At 2:00 AM on July 29, the regiment received the order to attach themselves to the SS-Panzer regiment and head along the route Ouville–La Penetière–Maupertuis–Percy. Albert Sturm remembers the move:

"At some point the Americans had broken through the front on a broad scale and we were—we heard with surprise—to be loaded onto trucks and transported to this open gap in the front. When we arrived there, the 1st Platoon of the 7th Company, at the time 10 men strong, received the order to push forward into open territory and seek out contact with the enemy. The other platoons received similar orders and the rest sequestered themselves around various street intersections.

"Our recon troop set out. Everyone who has been on the front knows the feeling of pushing forward into the unknown when you aren't exactly sure where the enemy is located. We set up security in all directions, jumped from hedge to hedge, slipped through sunken roads and occasionally took short cigarette breaks. At least two hours passed and we still hadn't seen anything of the enemy. An uncanny calm settled around us; because we had been consistently under fire for eight weeks, the silence gave us a bit of the creeps. Nonetheless, our attentiveness waned a bit in the afternoon sun. We became careless and ran into a trap set by the Americans!

"While we were climbing over a hedge, we made the mistake of not sending out a man to scout ahead until the next hedge; instead, we all climbed after each other in a single file. The first few were already over when I saw our three comrades standing with hands lifted and their belts unstrapped. American soldiers had surrounded them in a half-circle and were pointing their fire-ready weapons at them. I threw myself back behind the hedge; my comrades sprinted off right away. We dashed to a hedge that ran parallel and went into position. I reported to them what I had seen, and we made plans to get the three out. But how?

"After a brief deliberation we circled around the hedged area and hoped to intercept the American troops. But we didn't have any luck. The Americans had slipped off; perhaps they believed that we were getting reinforcements. We searched as long as we could. Then we received the order that we were to go back to our meeting point at the street intersection; we arrived around 5:00 PM. A whole army camp had been deployed; for the first time in a while I saw German tanks again, and not just Panzer IVs, but many, many tanks. As I had heard, these were the combat elements of the 2nd SS-Panzer Division 'Das Reich.' The rest of our regiment was gathered, plus men from Organization Todt (OT; a Nazi engineering and works organization) and many who had been scattered from all types of combat divisions.

"Surprised by the large collection of men, we asked our way through to the 7th Company; our platoon leader reported to the company commander, Feldwebel Otto Netzel, who was happy that our reappearance increased the size of the company to about 30 men again. At that time that was quite an accomplishment to have a company with the strength of a platoon.

"We were informed about the situation. The Americans were trying to close us in.

The only question was if we would be able, with the other troops that had joined us, to break through a gap in the encirclement or if we would have to fight our way out. Now and again I saw our commander drive by in a Kübelwagen alongside some high-ranking official from the SS.

"I was pleased that two comrades whom I had known since basic training, Klaus Klapprat and Günther Koch, had found each other. They had their canteens full of cider; we all partook heartily and then lay down to sleep against a hedge. Our rest did not last long because the 7th Company received the order to mount the tanks. We learned the following: the tanks would drive as the advanced guard, while FJR 6, the SS, and the other foot troops would follow along both sides of the road in single file. Dispatch riders as well as the commanders of the various units would maintain communications between the Panzers and the infantry.

"It was already dark when the tanks drove off. About ten Panzers drove close together along the road; they could not deviate from the road because to the right and left there were hedgerows. The 7th Company sat on the first three tanks, Klaus and I on the third, the command tank. Klaus, Günther, and I had always tried to stay close together, but on this evening, Günther sat on the first tank.

National Archives

An officer with a carbine and his radioman with a .45-caliber pistol cautiously move past two German corpses during the Allied advance on St. Lô.

"It is a strange feeling to ride through the night on a jolting metal monster. Now and again a dispatch rider would come up to our command tank and give the commander a report, whereupon we would slow down or ride faster. The distance between the marching troop and us could not be too great because if we really were to break through, then the troop would need our tank support. The whole night passed like this."

Near La Penetière in the morning, strong American forces attacked the battlegroup, and an intense battle ensued in which the Fallschirmjäger maintained the upper hand but were separated from most of the SS-Panzer units and continued the march west alone. Albert Sturm continues:

"Around 3:30 AM, the tank commander said to us, after having received a report, 'Boys, it looks like we've made it, we've just come out of the encircled area!' Many of us had been dozing and we were jolted awake by this news. We were thrilled just once to have escaped. Ten minutes later we drove by a lonely farmhouse; the maids who had just got up to milk the cows waved happily at us, and day began to break. The morning fog lay over the fields; the low mooing of the cows being milked reached us. The street curved away ahead of us. As soon as the first panzer disappeared around the curve and the second one followed it, the peaceful daybreak was over.

"The American antitank weapon gave a short, dry roar. We saw that the tank standing in the curve had been hit and that the force of the explosion had sent the comrades who had been riding on the tank flying away. We jumped down from the tank right away. Klaus and I ran forward to see what had happened to the first tank, the one that Günther had been sitting on. The comrades on the second panzer were more or less unharmed, except for a few bruises.

"Meanwhile, all hell broke loose; cracking and popping could be heard from every corner and the air was rife with iron. Under cover of a hedge, Klaus and I crawled around the street bend and what we saw when we lifted our heads out of cover was anything but encouraging. The first tank was burning up, and around it lay a few lifeless Fallschirmjäger. We tried to make out if Günther was among them, but we couldn't recognize him and so we hoped that he had got away. Klaus and I lay exactly between the opposing positions and the anti-tank artillery; armour-piercing rifle grenades and curtains of fire from machine guns on both sides swept over us. It was time to pull back, and under cover of the hedge we managed to do this fairly easily.

"When we reported to our tank, our commander, Oberstleutnant von der Heydte, was also there giving orders from his Kübelwagen. We, the 7th Company, were supposed to take over the flank to the left of the road. Springing from hedge to hedge, we were to find the enemy line and remain in front of it until our combat forces closed up the lines.

So we left our tank and snuck along the side of the hedge. The farther we moved from the road, the cleaner the air became. Then we received the order to turn back in and the 7th Company was again darting forward from hedge to hedge. We communicated without many words; two comrades always moved forward over each hedge, running across to the next one, peering over it, leveling their weapons, and then giving us a sign. When we saw that to our left and right the same maneuver had been carried out, we darted forward and occupied the next hedge. After we had six such maneuvers behind us, we came under intense infantry fire.

"We lay behind our concealing hedge and awaited further orders. Now our other comrades arrived who had been on the move on foot all night, and filled out our line. Meanwhile, it was starting to get light and the Americans began to shoot at us with mortars. We looked up to the heavens—it was still a bit too hazy, but it wouldn't be long before it was light enough for the fighter-bombers, our worst enemies, to appear in the skies. Around 6:30 AM we received the order to set out. Klaus and I exchanged meaningful looks. Until then we had still hoped that Günther would somehow turn up again. We had spoken to every available comrade about it, but he was not to be found. From that morning, Günther Koch was counted as missing in action.

"We still had half an hour until we had to leave; so we lit cigarettes, drank the rest of the cider from our canteens, strapped our equipment together, and stuck hand grenades into our belts where we could easily grab them. So we sat around waiting for the zero hour. Klaus didn't have long to wait, because a mortar landed directly next to him. It must have hit him hard; he jumped up, screaming like an animal and ran towards the back. I ran right after him, but before I could reach him, two medics grabbed him and laid him on a stretcher. When I breathlessly reached the stretcher, Klaus was already unconscious.

"The medics told me that he had received multiple splinters in the chest, and they marched off toward the first aid station with Klaus on the litter. By the time I reached my position again, I was pretty drained. It's not a nice feeling to lose two good comrades within two hours and then have to start an attack. A machine-gunner, who was lying to the left of me, called out: 'Don't get worried, Albert, we'll do it!' His expression under his combat helmet was reckless as he looked over at me.

"And then it was time. We jumped up and stormed the enemy. From the street we heard the humming of tank motors; everything was exploding on all sides. We roared and rushed forward. The Americans didn't engage in close combat, instead they just retreated while firing madly. To the left of me the machine-gunner dashed forward, shooting from the hip with his MG42, chasing after the Americans with spurts of fire.

"In this way we moved through one hedge after another, and then abruptly the attack lost momentum. The machine-gunner next to me suffered a mental breakdown in the middle of his all-out attack. His assistant grabbed the machine gun and jumped into cover. We all threw ourselves to the ground and also searched for cover. In front of us stood—presented as though for an exercise—a Sherman tank, firing with all its guns. With our small arms we could do nothing against it; we were nailed to the spot by the tank.

"Crawling or running we got to safety behind a hedge and called for a tank-killer unit. The boys still schlepped their Ofenrohr ['stove pipe,' the nickname for the Panzerschreck anti-tank weapon] around with them, but they unfortunately had no ammunition left for it. At any rate, we were still able to take out a few of the Shermans with our panzerfausts, but in the long run, that didn't help us. There was no way through.

"We stayed down under cover and learned that the whole attempt to break through had failed. On the street, our tanks had ground to a halt and were fighting for mere survival. Meanwhile, the fighter-bombers joined in the attack, so that there really was no more chance of accomplishing anything. Then the order came to disengage from the enemy. The 7th Company was supposed to cover the withdrawal. Ha, what 7th Company? How many of us were left?

"But an order is an order. A few of us tried to hold off the enemy for our retreating comrades. We had been given the good advice to hold east of Coutances after we had ourselves pulled back. There was a chance that there would be a hole there through which we could get out. We were lucky that the Americans made no serious attempts to go after us.

"On the street, however, the fight raged with increasing intensity; the Americans wanted to break through with their tanks, but a Panther held out bravely. Even though there were constant attacks, eventually the street became calm. Now there was an uncanny stillness. We received a signal from the 7th Company. We made our way across the field through the bushes. After a short time we came across the farm that had stood there so peacefully in the gray of morning. Now it was shot up and burned out. We hurried on because all

**Members of FJR 6 advance along the wall of a French farm building while Allied aircraft pass overhead. The men, part of a tank-killer team, are equipped with a Raketenpanzerbüchse, nicknamed the Ofenrohr (stove pipe).**

Author's Collection / Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-584-2160-12, Photo: Reich

Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-582-2105-15A; Photo: Czirnich

With worried looks, German paratroops try to plan a way to halt, or at least slow down, the American advance near St. Lô. The soldier at right carries a Rheinmetall Fallschirmgewehr Model 1942 (FG42), issued exclusively to paratroops.

of a sudden American soldiers were swarming all over the place. Although there were only a few of us, we split up completely—it was every man for himself.

"Today I could no longer tell you where I crept around and how long it was until I had a solid street under my feet again. It was easier to march on the roads than to fight my way through the exposed open land that felt like a death trap. After I marched along for a while, completely alone, I heard the sounds of tanks behind me. I jumped over the nearest hedge into the ditch on the side of the road and looked apprehensively towards the direction where I heard the rattling of chains. How happy I was to see the national identification cross on the iron monster!

Immediately, I came out from my cover, stood at the edge of the street and waved towards the panzer coming quickly towards me. The turret hatch opened, the tank throttled back its speed and a commander dressed in black gave me a sign to jump up. I set off at a trot and jumped up onto the vehicle from behind, whereupon the panzer set off at full speed again. The commander did not ask me that much; he just let me know that I had to take care of myself. In response to my question where we were headed, he said dryly, 'We'll find a gap, and we'll break through.' Then he secured the hatch tightly and a hellish ride began.

"The panzer had additional armor around the turret made out of metal plating, and behind it I made myself as comfortable as I could and watched the skies. At high speed the tank made quite a lot of noise, but I still could hear significant sounds of combat up ahead. At first I wanted to jump down from this monster, but somehow I had the feeling that everything would be all right with the tank under me and the steel plating around me.

"Then we were right in the thick of it, driving towards a mid-sized village with quite a large church. The Americans were sending fire across the main street with their artillery. It was hilly terrain and I watched the American infantry storming down the hill. None of this bothered my tank; it thundered through the small city and shoved aside everything that stood in its way.

"German mounted units came rushing out of the surrounding farm buildings, carriage drivers beating wildly at the carthorses. Loaded trucks were trying with all their power to break through; infantrymen of all types were running around, with American shells falling between them everywhere. If I were to ask myself today how long the chaos lasted, I would no longer be able to say, but at some point we had moved through it. I stayed on the tank until we arrived at a rear position late in the afternoon. The panzer was sent to the front again, and I said my goodbyes to my tank comrades who had brought us through so well."

The regiment proceeded to St.-Denys-le-Gast via Roncey, and learned there that American tank units were moving on every major road; the tanks had to be avoided. The Fallschirmjäger literally fought their way through the rural terrain, often using gaps in the American marching columns to cross roads unnoticed. Sometimes the Fallschirmjäger were creeping through ditches alongside roads on which American tanks were rolling directly next to them. They were able to cross the River Seine at two points, using damaged bridges.

Eugen Griesser [the author's grandfather and a member of FJR 6] said, "Every battalion assigned a few platoons to secure the flanks and a rearguard for the retreat out of the encircled area. The commander had ordered that the assembly area for soldiers with minor wounds near Alençon also be used as a gathering point for soldiers who had lost contact with the regiment. There he also wanted to leave information about the location of the regimental command post, so that everyone would be able to find his company again.

"Events played out as they had to. Our platoon ran aground in a sunken road against a company of American Sherman tanks with accompanying infantry in half-tracks. We managed to take out the first two tanks with limpet mines and explosives before the column could respond, and before the half-tracks had enough time to fan out and discharge their infantry. (The sunken roads and narrow streets in Normandy were not well suited for these kinds of moves.) The Americans had to maneuver quite a lot to get their destroyed tanks out of the way. One of us, unfortunately I can no longer remember who, threw a hand grenade into the foremost half-track and we took advantage of the confusion to work our way into the bushes and split up. Because there were at least two companies of American tank engineers on the street, a firefight in this situation would have been pure idiocy. Strangely, the Americans did not pursue us; perhaps they thought our numbers were greater than they were.

"We marched through the night, and the next morning we came upon the baggage train of some army unit. A German military police motorcycle and sidecar stood at the gate of a farmyard; a policeman guarded the motorcycle while two others checked the baggage train. Military policemen liked to act self-important, and these three were particularly harsh. The Feldwebel demanded our papers and our marching orders. 'What do you mean you're headed to the assembly area for minor casualties? You all look perfectly healthy!' 'Where's your unit?' and so on.

"The policeman refused to understand that we had been separated from our unit and therefore had no written marching orders, although we were already on our way back to our regiment. He began to ramble on about desertion, so a couple of us offered to polish his face for him. Then he wished us a good day and waved us through. During the return trip out of the cordon, our biggest threat was the fighter-bombers, so we were always happy to have foul weather and fog, because only then could we march safe from such aircraft.

"After a few narrow escapes, we decided to avoid regular tactical groups and to march alone, so that we formed small, separate targets. During the next flyover by the fighter-bombers, we waved our hands and even our helmets—the fighter-bombers rushed down on us but waved with their wings because they believed we were Allied soldiers. As long as we moved separately, this tactic worked very well, but as soon as we were marching with other troops, we had to jump into the ditches in the road when the aircraft passed by.

"In Tincebray we ran into the battalion. Hauptmann Mager was happy to have us there again because the Normandy battle had annihilated the regiment and we had been reported missing. He sent us to the commander right away. He greeted us joyfully, but took us down a notch right away because of what had happened with the military police. They had reported our interaction with them to their superior right away and he had informed the whole regiment. It's strange how well the bureaucracy functioned while all around us whole divisions were being annihilated."

On August 10, FJR 6 received the order to relocate to the 1st Fallschirmjäger Army in Nancy. Due to high losses of men, the regiment was relieved from frontline duty. FJR 6 had been in action since the beginning of the invasion; almost all of its men were sick or wounded at this point. When the order arrived, Oberstleutnant von der Heydte's command was only 40 men strong; little is known to this day about the fate of the other men. Only eight weeks earlier, the regiment had been 4,600 men. 'At least I no longer had to worry about securing transportation,' Oberstleutnant von der Heydte remarked, not without sarcasm.

**Members of a Fallschirmjäger military police unit (denoted by the metal gorgets around their necks) guard their position in Normandy.**

Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-585-2184-21; Photo: Zimmerman

On August 14, FJR 6 decamped from Tincebray. On the way to Paris, the staff work that had been laid in place earlier paid off. More and more wounded Fallschirmjäger found their way to their regiment because Oberstleutnant von der Heydte actually managed to keep the assembly area in Alençon constantly informed about the location of FJR 6; the men were literally running after their regiment. Von der Heydte incorporated new men into his unit again, as well as members of other units who crossed paths with our regiment. By the time they arrived in Dreux, 1,007 men were reported as ready for service. From Paris, the regiment relocated to Nancy by motor march.

On the way to Nancy, the Fallschirmjäger learned, in an unnamed town, about the joys of rear-area service. Oberstleutnant von der Heydte described the situation as following: "We arrived in a small town and passed by an inn with the sign 'German Officers' Home;' loud, jarring music was coming from the inn. We weren't really in the mood for loud music; we were just hungry and thirsty. I ordered that we stop in front of the 'German Officers' Home' and went in.

"I found a few drunk officers from the rear area, who were with some not-so-sober French prostitutes. That got on my last nerve. The German officers, who at first didn't recognize my rank (I always kept my rank insignia in my trousers pocket), wanted to refuse me entrance to their 'officers' mess.' It didn't do them any good. I called a few of my soldiers into the pub and ordered them to arrest the officers present, to strip them of their shoulder straps and to determine what court-martial would be applied to them. I'll never forget the dumbstruck faces of these 'gentlemen' when they saw my rank, which I had pinned on in the meantime, and when they heard that we were Fallschirmjäger."

In Nancy, FJR 6 received the order to relocate to Güstrow, a city in the Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania region of northeastern Germany, where the reorganization of the regiment would take place. For the Fallschirmjäger this meant, above all, that they could have a rest period and could recover for the future battles that would inevitably come.

While the regiment began to settle down in Güstrow, there were still some scattered soldiers in France. A platoon of the 11th Company under the leadership of Oberjäger Heinrich Fugmann, which had been detached to secure the baggage trains, arrived late in Paris.

Fugmann recounts, "With 25 to 30 men, traveling mostly on foot and hitching rides, we arrived near Paris. On a country road we were stopped by a technical officer who was travelling in a Kübelwagen; he asked us how the situation on the front was. He took us to a soldier's home, where we got something to eat and had the opportunity to bathe after months of being deployed. From a clothing warehouse that was about to be blown up, he got us new uniforms and, most importantly, fresh underwear, because ours was completely dirty and lice-ridden.

"On the following day we got lucky one more time. A communication unit, which was primarily made up of female personnel, was supposed to be transported to Nancy with omnibuses and we were allowed to ride along. The communications officer who was responsible for the transport explained that he was happy to share the buses with Fallschirmjäger because he had to drive through some areas where partisans were operating. Several times on the trip, we were forced to abandon the buses because of low-level air attacks, and these caused several more losses.

"Some of the women sought cover in the nearby road ditches and canal pipes, and after the attacks they crawled out of hiding shaking and screaming, completely wet and covered in mud from head to toe. It was a hellish trip and we were truly delighted to reach Nancy. From there we traveled with the train to Güstrow, where more fighter-bombers attacked us during the trip. Some comrades reached our destination, but no longer alive."

The reorganization took place in an air base that was in the process of being built; the "Emil Unit" also undertook the rebuilding of the 1st Battalion there. Most of the buildings had not yet been finished, so the Fallschirmjäger and the new arrivals had to be quartered for the most part in tents. The reorganization was a positive experience for the veterans; with only a few exceptions, all men and NCOs received eight days of leave.

The whole reorganization had more of a cosmetic feel because despite intensive efforts, the Luftwaffe was not able to offer enough replacements for the regiment's losses suffered in the Normandy campaign. In addition to the young 17-year-old recruits, volunteers for FJR 6 were found from amongst office and ground personnel, and from pilot school.

Franz Hüttich commented on the quality of the new recruits: "To get the required replacements, a lot of Heldenklau [thievery] took place. Young boys were attracted with great promises: short, quick deployment, better provisions, higher pay. Flying personnel, older members of the Luftwaffe, who didn't have any planes, and who could be spared in the logistics offices and admin offices, came to us. But we all knew that it wouldn't amount to anything."

As Oberstleutnant von der Heydte later described the situation: "The unit hadn't meshed yet. The young replacements constituted 75 percent of the regiment and they were barely trained or not at all. (Hundreds of members of the regiment had never held a weapon in their hands until they fired the first shot of their life in their first battle!) The officer corps for the most part was not in a position where they could fill the positions needed for officers.

"Nevertheless, the young volunteers fitted in quite quickly, taking the old hands as their role models. At first there were some problems with the new officers because most of them were former pilots and had difficulties adjusting to their new roles. The switch from being a hero in the skies to a Fallschirmjäger officer was so difficult for some that Oberstleutnant von der Heydte had to operate according to the following principle: whoever couldn't obey was kicked out. Also, the promotions in the former core group were not enough to meet the needs for officers and NCOs, and many of the new recruits, despite their rank, did not have the necessary combat experience to lead groups and platoons in battle."

Von der Heydte was supposed to build up a powerful unit in only six weeks, an objective that, in view of the facts, was set to fail from the beginning. Nonetheless, the trainers set to their task with enthusiasm, using tried and trusted methods. Providing the men with uniforms also proved difficult; for the most part they were unable to furnish them with gear especially designed for Fallschirmjäger and instead had to use regular army kit.

Albert Sturm noted that "Many of the boys were 17 years old, not even really grown up. Therefore they had received an extra ration of milk during jump school. The doctors also ordered that they receive additional milk in order to make them stronger while they were with us. No one had any idea, however, how we were supposed to keep that up during deployment."

Based on the experiences of the Normandy campaign, von der Heydte restructured the regiment. Along with the planned three battalions, he put together an additional fourth battalion. For this battalion he took personnel from the first three battalions, and also brought in additional heavy artillery; thus the regiment's ability to fight off tanks was notably strengthened. Hauptmann von Dobbeler took over command of the 4th Battalion. The newly reformed 1st Battalion was led by Hauptmann Peiser, the reliable Hauptmann Mager retained command of the 2nd Battalion, and Oberleutnant Ulmer

Author's Collection / Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-586-2215-11A, Photo: Reich

**Men of 16th Company, FJR 6, gather around their commander, Oberfeldwebel Alexander Uhlig (right of center, wearing his pilot blouse decorated with medals attached), summer 1944. It was standard practice for German soldiers to wear their medals in combat.**

took over the 3rd Battalion.

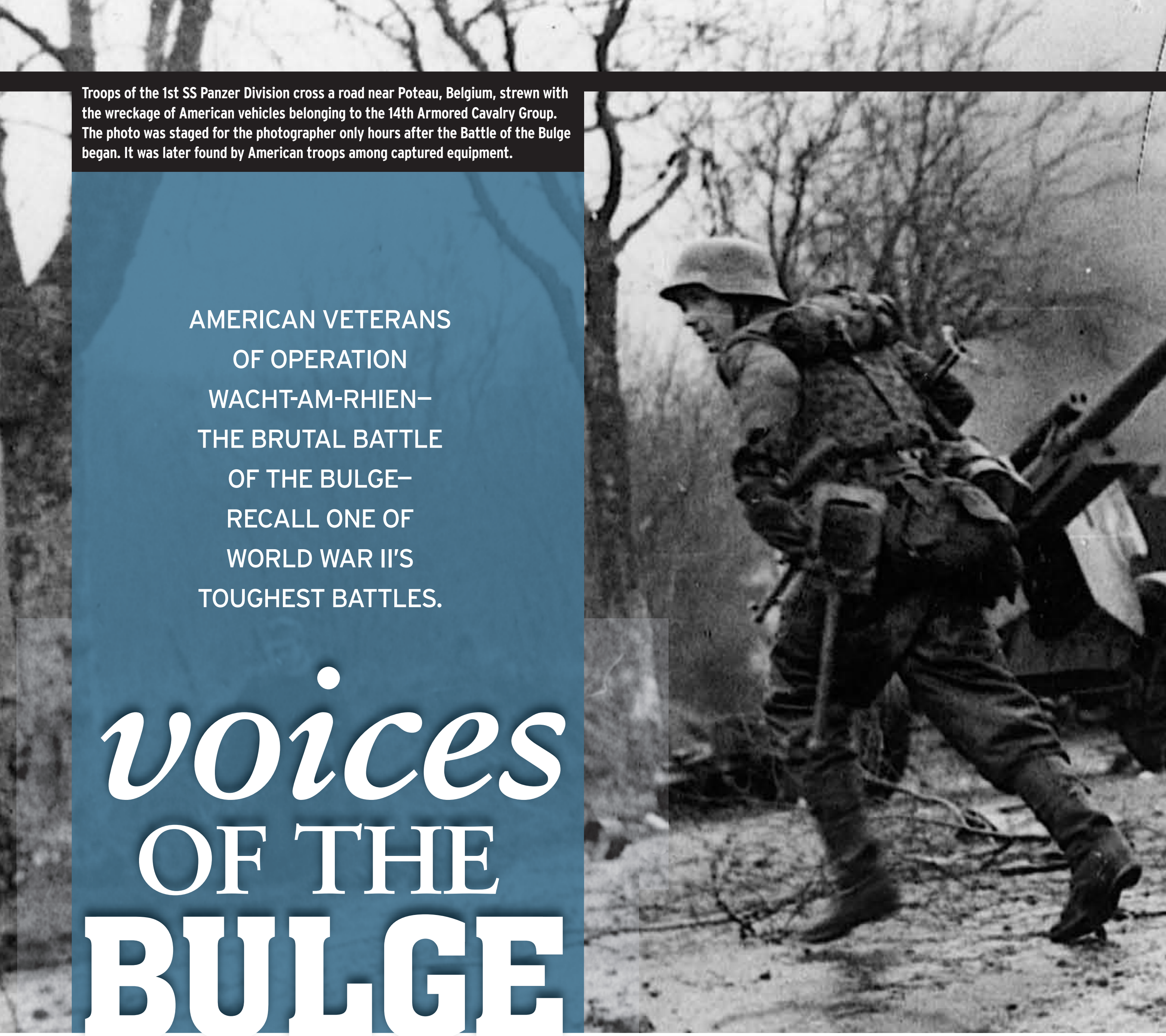
Because the time for training was short, formalities like drills were dropped. The program consisted of combat exercises day and night. If anyone complained about the harsh pace, the old hands just told him, "Sweat saves blood!" Von der Heydte spent a lot of time with the training units and for the most part carried out the tactical training of the officers himself. Some in the ranks of experienced personnel were put through sniper training during this time—until then FJR 6 had not had its own sniper troops.

*EPILOGUE: In early August 1944, FJR 6 was partly reconstituted with new troops and transported to Güstrow for further reorganization. Hardly had the unit settled in than it received new orders to head immediately to Holland in order to bolster German defenses against the British. After engaging the British around Gheel, FJR 6 found itself caught in the middle of Operation Market-Garden—the attempt by the Allies to outflank the Germans with a massive airborne/glider drop followed by ground attacks.*

*In late October, after weeks of hard fighting in which FJR 6, despite its reduced numbers, proved to be the equal of the British, Canadian, and Polish forces sent against it, von der Heydte was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross and assigned to command the Parachute Army Weapons School. His regiment received the Nahkampfspange (Close-Combat Clasp) in silver for its outstanding service in Normandy and in subsequent actions. FJR 6 was the only German parachute unit in its entirety to receive such recognition.*

*In November, FJR 6 was redeployed to the Eifel-Ardennes Region on the German-Belgian border, where it soon learned it would be part of the coming Wacht-am-Rhein mission—what has become known as the Battle of the Bulge. Von der Heydte was given the mission of leading a Fallschirmjäger battlegroup, part of which was made up of his old FJR 6. It was planned that the battlegroup would be dropped by air on December 16/17 into Belgium (Operation Stösser); it would be the final German parachute operation of the war.*

*The battlegroup's mission came to an end when rations failed to be air-dropped to it. Surrounded and half-starving, the Germans engaged in numerous firefights with the Americans as they fought their way back to Germany. Wounded and exhausted, von der Heydte was forced to surrender to American troops. FJR 6 continued fighting on German soil for the next several weeks at Schmidt near Aachen, but resistance was hopeless. In the middle of April the remnants of the proud FJR 6 laid down their arms and went into captivity, beaten but unbowed.* □



Troops of the 1st SS Panzer Division cross a road near Poteau, Belgium, strewn with the wreckage of American vehicles belonging to the 14th Armored Cavalry Group. The photo was staged for the photographer only hours after the Battle of the Bulge began. It was later found by American troops among captured equipment.

AMERICAN VETERANS OF OPERATION WACHT-AM-RHIEN—THE BRUTAL BATTLE OF THE BULGE—RECALL ONE OF WORLD WAR II'S TOUGHEST BATTLES.

# voices OF THE BULGE

## PART 1

*BACKSTORY: Unternehmen Wacht-am-Rhein (Operation Watch on the Rhine), better known in the West as the Battle of the Bulge, had its beginnings following the failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler's life by Colonel Count Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg and a group of other high-level plotters who felt that their Führer was not only leading Germany to defeat but also its doom, and thus had to be eliminated.*

*After the assassination plot failed, Hitler became even more paranoid and unpredictable. The problem was complex; so were Hitler's mental processes. Hitler was a leader who never found himself distracted or restrained by the facts and who, by nature, clung to an almost mystic confidence in his own strategic ability. He thought that defeat could be postponed and perhaps even avoided by some decisive stroke. To these circumstances must be added Hitler's implicit faith that the course of conflict might be reversed by his military genius.*

*Hitler made the first announcement of the projected counteroffensive in the Ardennes—a hilly, wooded area on the German-Belgian border—during a meeting with his senior commanders on September 16, 1944. Why did Hitler choose the Ardennes as the location for the proposed counteroffensive?*

*To answer this question simply, the Ardennes would be the scene of a great winter battle because the Führer had placed his finger on a map and made a pronouncement. There was also a historical precedent to this decision, since the German army had used this route before, in 1870 at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War, in 1914 as part of the von Schlieffen plan, and again in 1940.*

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*Hitler believed that the alliance between Great Britain and the United States was shaky and that by inflicting heavy casualties on his enemies in the West he would force them to sue for peace; he could then marshal all his resources against the Soviets approaching from the east. Perhaps, so went Hitler's reasoning, the British and Americans might even finally see the light and regard the Soviet Union as an enemy that they and Germany should be fighting together.*

**BY MICHAEL COLLINS & MARTIN KING**

*Strategically, Hitler decided to strike a blow along the dividing line between the British and American armies that would penetrate all the way from Germany's western border near Aachen to the Belgian port of Antwerp, which the Allies were using to bring new supplies and reinforcements into the continent.*

*By the middle of December 1944, Hitler had assembled the forces he would need for his surprise assault in the West—forces that Allied intelligence had failed to detect. The stage was set for Nazi Germany's last-gasp counteroffensive.*

*This article is adapted from Michael Collins and Martin King's book,* Voices from the Bulge *(Zenith Press, 2011).*

One of the critical problems facing General Dwight D. Eisenhower on the eve of the Battle of the Bulge was a severe shortage of infantrymen. By December 15, 1944, Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley, head of 12th U.S. Army Group, reported that his command lacked 17,000 riflemen because of casualties caused by prolonged combat and almost constant exposure to one of the severest winters Europe had ever known.

Although Eisenhower ordered the reclassification as infantrymen of as many support personnel as possible, the shortfall continued to grow.

But neither Ike nor Bradley nor 21st Army Group head Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery was aware of the tremendous buildup of German forces (290,000 men, 2,617 artillery pieces and rocket launchers, 1,038 tanks and self-propelled guns) taking place in the towns and villages and forests along the German-Belgian-Luxembourg border. To the west, four U.S. divisions and one cavalry group stood nervously on guard.

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**ABOVE: Men of the 106th Infantry Division on patrol in Belgian woods near the German border before the onslaught. The troops had not yet seen battle and much of the main thrust of the German counteroffensive fell squarely on their lines. OPPOSITE: An American engineer unit digs up a roadway to plant antitank mines near St. Vith, Belgium. Both St. Vith and Bastogne were key German objectives.**

One of the American divisions on the front line at that time, the 106th "Golden Lion" Infantry Division, under Maj. Gen. Alan W. Jones, had only arrived in Europe on December 6 and had yet to see combat. After a three-day road march from Limesy, France, to St. Vith, Belgium, in rain, cold, and snow, the division was assigned to Maj. Gen. Troy Middleton's VIII Corps and took up positions in a slightly bulging arc along a forest-crowned ridge of the Schnee Eifel approximately 12 miles east of St. Vith.

The 14th Cavalry Group, attached to the 106th, held the northern flank. Next, in the easternmost part of the curve, the 106th's 422nd Infantry Regiment held the line. To the 422nd's right, swinging slightly to the southwest, was the 423rd, and almost directly south was the 424th. Beyond the 424th, on the division's southern flank, was Maj. Gen. Norman D. Cota's 28th Infantry Division.

The 106th had been assigned to a "quiet," 27-mile sector of the front where it would not be expected to see much action. The 28th Division, on the other hand, had seen its numbers seriously depleted weeks earlier by the badly organized and orchestrated Battle of the Hürtgen Forest in the Aachen-Düren-Monschau triangle a few miles north of St. Vith.

St. Vith was headquarters for the 106th, and the rear echelon was in Vielsalm, about 12 miles due west. St. Vith had been a quiet, German-speaking market town at a crossroads in the "High Fens" area of Belgium adjacent to the German border. Until 1919, it had been geographically in Germany, but the Treaty of Versailles put an end to that.

The little road center of St. Vith had seen war before. It was through St. Vith that the Nazi Panzers had rolled to Sedan in 1940; German infantry had marched through it 26 years earlier, in 1914. But it had never been a battleground before that fateful day of December 16, 1944, when it became the epicenter of the German attacks. Its only claim to fame before that was that it was the birthplace of Saint Vitus, later to become associated with a nervous condition called "Saint Vitus dance," and many frayed and shattered nerves would shake on that freezing December day.

During the night of December 15, frontline units of the 106th noticed increased activity across the border. The 28th Division farther south in Luxembourg also reported frenzied activity by the German Army along the east bank of the River Saar.

The main problem was that despite the many warnings about a build-up of German forces leaders at Allied headquarters remained dismissive. The intelligence was delivered but frequently dissipated and dismissed as it filtered up through the ranks. The men at the top just were not listening.

Why was there such a colossal failure to communicate this highly important intelligence to headquarters? During the Allies' reconquest of France, the extensive network of the French resistance had provided valuable intelligence about German dispositions. Now that Allied forces had reached the German border, this source had evaporated.

In France, orders had been relayed within the German Army using radio messages ciphered by the Enigma machine, and these could be picked up and decrypted by ULTRA. In Germany, such orders were typically transmitted using telephone and teleprinter. All commanders operated under a special radio silence order, which was vehemently imposed on all matters concerning the upcoming offensive.

The Enigma codebreakers at Bletchley Park in England forwarded information concerning this, but the intelligence had been either ignored or dismissed. Furthermore, German Army radio silence proved to be very effective; by December 15, three units of the German Army had managed to surreptitiously maneuver themselves into position on the Schnee Eifel almost under the noses of the Allies.

The failure of intelligence was about to prove costly. The eerie silence that pervaded those rolling hills out on the frozen Schnee Eifel (the portion of the Ardennes that extends into Germany) was broken at 5:30 AM on the morning of December 16, 1944. Nazi Nebelwerfers (multibarreled mortars nicknamed "Screaming Meemies"), artillery pieces, and tanks unleashed their hellish fury on the unsuspecting U.S. troops of the 106th Division strung out there.

Within minutes, the pastoral calm of the Schnee Eifel had been transformed into a raging inferno of apocalyptic proportions as flying metal pierced the arctic air accompanied by the menacing, deep, throaty rumble of advancing Nazi Tiger and Panther tanks,

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some of the latter equipped with the latest that German military technology had to offer, including "night vision."

The green troops of the 106th Division were about to discover what it was really like to be on the receiving end of a full-scale attack. As John Hillard Dunn, Company H, 423rd Regiment, 106th Division wrote: "The vortex of a tornado is a vacuum. And that is where we were—in the center of a storm of armor and artillery roaring into the Ardennes."

Before dawn on the morning of December 16, the enemy began to lay down a thunderous artillery barrage. At first the fire was directed mainly against the northern flank. Slowly, the barrage crept southward, smashing strongpoints along the whole division front. The morning darkness was illuminated by bursts from medium and heavy field pieces, plus railway artillery, which had been shoved secretly into position.

John R. Schaffner, a member of Battery B, Survey Team, 106th Division, recalls, "Early in the morning ... our position came under a barrage of German artillery fire. I was on guard at one of our outposts, and though I did not realize it at the time, I was probably better off there than with the rest of the battery. We had a .50-caliber machine gun in a dug-in position so, being somewhat protected, I got down in the lowest possible place and 'crawled into my helmet.'

"During the shelling, many rounds exploded real close and showered dirt and tree limbs about, but also there were quite a few duds that only smacked into the ground. Those were the 'good' ones as far as I was concerned. After about 30 minutes, the shelling ceased, and before any of the enemy came into sight, I was summoned to return to the battery position. Aspinwall [a buddy] states that from an inspection of the fragments, somebody determined that the enemy was using 88, 105, and 155mm guns."

As the artillery onslaught hit, GIs caught unaware burrowed frantically into their foxholes and fortifications to escape. Then they waited tensely for the German Army to attack.

Nelson Charron, Company D, 422nd Regiment, 106th Division, recalls, "We were awake during the opening morning [of the assault], and there were buzz bombs [V-1 rockets] going over our heads. We fired quite a lot, but we were just in big trouble because we had no big guns. Our artillery was knocked out, and machine guns against tanks were not going to cut it. There was no way we could have escaped; maybe right off the bat we could have, but we were too weak."

James L. Cooley, Company D, 423rd Infantry Regiment, 106th Division, was in a freezing foxhole outside St. Vith when the battle erupted. He says, "Where we were was supposed to be a quiet place. It was very wooded, and it was very hilly, and you would think that it was impassable.

"The battle started on December 16th at about 0530 in the morning. I mean all kinds of shells and everything else came down on us. It was earth shaking. On our battlefront we were holding 26 miles of front for one division ... we had up to half-mile gaps in our line. What we did was send patrols back and forth just to patrol it. We were on the hills and sent the patrols back and forth between the hills just to make sure there were no Germans there."

Cooley notes that Company D was the heavy-weapons company. "I was in 81mm mortars, which is a shell that you lob over that explodes when it hits the ground. First, I started firing toward our front, then to the left, then toward the right, then in the back of us. As young as we were, we

Both: Author's Collection

**ABOVE LEFT: James L. Cooley was wounded and taken prisoner when the 423rd Infantry was encircled and cut off from the remainder of the 106th Division near Schönberg, Belgium. ABOVE RIGHT: An American soldier examines a captured multi-barrel rocket launcher known as a Nebelwerfer. The weapon was used extensively against the 106th Division at the beginning of the battle. GIs referred to them as "Screaming Meemies," saying that the psychological effect of this weapon was almost as devastating as the physical effect.**

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division front. Enemy tanks and infantry in increasing numbers then hacked at the slowly widening gap in an effort to surround the 422nd.

At St. Vith, the first objective of the German thrust, the 106th held on grimly at a time when every hour of resistance was vital to the Allied cause. Although scared and confused, the 106th fought with incredible tenacity against superior forces, with pulverizing artillery battering them from all sides; it was men against tanks, guts against steel. Their heroism gained precious time for other units to regroup and strike back.

A second tank-led assault, supported by infantry and other panzers, hammered relentlessly at the 106th. Early the next morning, a wedge was driven between the two regiments. This southern German column then swung north to join the one that had broken through in the 14th Cav's sector. Two regiments from the 106th—the 422nd and 423rd, along with the 589th and 590th Field Artillery Battalions—were surrounded. The third regiment, the 424th, managed to pull back to St. Vith.

finally figured out that we were surrounded, which we were."

At 7 AM the barrage lifted in the forward areas, although St. Vith remained under fire. Now came the inevitable ground attack. The Nazis were heading for St. Vith in force. Wave upon wave of Volksgrenadiers, spearheaded by panzer units, smashed against the U.S. Army's lines in a desperate attempt to force a decisive, early breakthrough. They were halted in their tracks as the beleaguered 106th Division tenaciously returned fire. A second attack was thrown against the division. Again, the 106th held. The Nazis threw in fresh troops to replace their losses, but there were no replacements for the 106th.

Throughout the day, the attacks increased in fury. Hundreds of well-prepared Germans rushed straight toward the American lines only to be mowed down or driven back. The deadly, vigilant fire of the stubborn defenders exacted a dreadful toll on the German Army.

Finally, under pressure of overwhelming numbers, the 14th Cavalry was forced to withdraw on the north flank, giving the Germans their first toehold in the

In the ranks of the defenders in the fields east of St. Vith there was frenzied activity as cooks and clerks, truck drivers and mechanics shouldered weapons and took to the foxholes. Hopelessly outnumbered and facing heavier firepower, they dug in for a last-ditch defense of this vital junction. Even though they were almost completely surrounded, the 422nd and 423rd fought on relentlessly. Ammunition and food ran low. Frantic appeals were radioed to headquarters to have supplies flown in, but the soupy fog that covered the frozen countryside made air transport impossible.

The 424th Regiment, the 106th Reconnaissance Troop, 331st Medical Battalion, and 81st Engineer Combat Battalion suffered heavy casualties at St. Vith. Despite the vulnerable 27-mile front that the division had to defend, and despite inadequate reserves, supplies, and air support, the valiant men of the Golden Lion Division inscribed their story in blood and courage. Their battle ranks with the Alamo, Château-Thierry, Pearl Harbor, and Bataan.

In one of the bloodiest battles of the war, the 106th showed the Germans and the world how American soldiers could fight—and die. When the terrific onslaught began, the 106th had only been on the continent for 10 days. In the five days they had been on the line, there had been little rest. The valiant stand of the two fighting regiments surrounded by the Germans proved to be a serious obstacle to Nazi plans. It forced the Germans to throw additional reserves into the drive to eliminate the cut-off Americans, enabled the remaining units and their reinforcements to prepare the heroic defense of St. Vith, delayed the attack schedule, and prevented the early stages of the Battle of the Bulge from exploding into a complete German victory.

Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery would later say of them, "The American soldiers of the ... 106th Infantry Division stuck it out and put up a fine performance. By jove, they stuck it out, those chaps." But on that first day of battle, it was impossible to know if any American unit would be able to "stick it out."

The first artillery volleys by the German Army were audible to Allied soldiers miles from the front, demonstrating how large the offensive really was.

Robert Kennedy was a member of Maj. Gen. Charles H. Corlett's XIX Corps, which was positioned in the northern area of the Bulge, just outside Aachen, Germany, the first major German city to be attacked by the American army. Kennedy was a German translator/interrogator.

He recalls, "I was there the first morning that we got the surprise attack. We got up and were near Aachen, just outside the town in a suburban area. The front was just down a little ways. We heard all this firing and wondered what it was…it was German firing. They were firing over our heads back at the replacement depots, and they had a lot of heavy artillery.

"Then we found out that the Germans had passed us over and made a turn and presented a front to the south. We were strung out east and west, and back behind us were the British, who were facing the German front…. It was a miserably cold morning, and the streets were terrible with ice. There was nothing much we could do because we did not know what was going on, and they did not advance toward us, just toward the frontlines."

Even though the soldiers of XIX Corps were just outside Aachen, and even though they did not have to deal with the first wave of the German attack, they were still part of the Bulge. With the British positioned behind them, the responsibility of the XIX Corps was to make sure the German Army did not try to swing northward to get to the Meuse River via Aachen.

A veteran of the terrible encounter near St. Vith, John Hillard Dunn, Company H, 423rd Regiment, 106th Division, recalls those first terrifying days and nights in the direct path of a massive German offensive.

"As I remember it," he says, "I was trying to sleep in the ruins of a German farmhouse. It was December, cold and snowing. Squirming about in my sleeping bag, I felt reassured by the three-foot thickness of the wall against which I rested my shivering spine. Sometime in the night, buzz bombs began their cement-mixer noise overhead. I thought that there were more than there had been the night before, and I felt sorry for the quartermaster corps back in Antwerp, which I imagined to be on the receiving end.

"Later I learned the bombs were dropping on our division headquarters in St. Vith, a matter of 18 miles to our rear. Those buzz bombs were the heralds of a German offensive—the last great Nazi push.

"Our division—the 106th—was newly arrived in the line. We had relieved the 2nd Division on December 12, moving into what a 2nd Division veteran told me with a perfectly straight face was a 'rest area.' Actually, it was a salient; a dagger plunged into the West Wall along the Belgium-Germany frontier near the Luxembourg corner.

"We were an odds-and-ends division as green as the pine forests that surrounded us; somebody in our 81mm mortar platoon wanted to know, 'Why the hell is it thundering in December?' Our laughter was hollow when somebody informed him that those were big guns, and German guns at that."

Dunn was assigned to be a military policeman shortly before the battle began. "I never did any fighting with my mortar squad; perhaps it was just as well, as I had never even seen a mortar fired before I went into combat. Not that I was unusual. Half of our platoon hadn't, including at least two corporals whose Form 20s said they were gunners.

"My first duty as a combat MP convinced me that this was no goldbrick job. I had a chance to scan the detailed maps and for the first time got an idea of our salient. Lafe, a Southern lad, took a long look and said, 'Damned if we ain't got Germans on both sides of us.'

"That remark was underlined for me when I was assigned to traffic duty at a road intersection. This was December 13. The 2nd Division man who had been there greeted me: 'Welcome to our Purple Heart Corner.' He then explained briefly, 'The Heinie artillery has this intersection zeroed in. It ain't under direct observation, but they drop 'em in here every once in a while.'

"He wasn't kidding. For two days I ducked artillery shells at the intersection. Then came the night of December 15 and the farmhouse with the thick walls. The increase in buzz bombs was not the only significant omen; if we had been veterans,

**BELOW: German Panther tanks advance along an icy Belgian road, attempting to maintain their timetable. By the end of January 1945, the counterattack had fizzled and surviving German units were in full retreat. LEFT: A GI trains his Thompson sub-machine gun on a burning German half-track near St. Vith early in the battle.**

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we might have realized that the Germans were getting very bold, that they had too many patrols running around. Already by that afternoon the enemy was playing all kinds of hell with our communications. By nightfall, even our regiment could sense his presence.

"I was shaken out of my sack and the shelter of thick walls around midnight to relieve Outpost No. 8. The man remarked, 'Somebody's getting trigger-happy around here.'

"Someone was. A bullet whistled through the dark night over the lonely shed in which I took my post. I could have sworn it came from Outpost No. 7, so I asked into our open-circuit phone, 'No. 7, what the hell are you shooting at?'

"'I ain't shooting at nuttin. It must be No. 6 on my left.'

'Blow it out your ass,' No. 6 barked.

'It's probably Headquarters Company huntin' pigs,' No. 9 butted in."

The real explanation came later from a captured German: "We were told that we had a green American division," he said. "We were sent in to disrupt communications and to confuse. So we fired at buildings or anything we could spot in the dark."

Dunn continues, "The cold and weird night, punctuated by small-arms fire, wore on. The dawn of Saturday the 16th came, and from my post I could hear a deep thunder. But the rain that followed was steel.

"Yet nobody realized on the morning of the 16th that the Germans had begun a monster offensive. Not that we didn't try to guess at what they were doing. In spite of the initial terror, the men around me argued as strongly about German tactics as they had recently debated the American League pennant race. We thought that Fritz was merely taking advantage of our inexperience to run a sortie and in a few hours would return to his comfortable pillboxes and dugouts that overlooked ours from the main ridge of the Schnee Eiffel.

"But then they told us we couldn't move our 50 prisoners back to division, and we wondered why. Already we were bypassed by the onrushing German tanks, and I for one certainly didn't know it, nor would I have believed it had anyone told me.

"Toward evening, wounded were reaching our area. I had a chance to talk to a man from Cannon Company. His was the story of a forlorn, desperate little action in the German town of Bleialf, southwest of regiment headquarters and to the rear of our right flank.

"'So you wanta know what the hell Cannon Company is doing–fighting in Bleialf," he said as he rubbed the bandage on his right leg. 'The goddamned Heinie infantry takes Bleialf in a surprise move. Our rifle companies are too damned busy to do anything about it. Besides, Cannon's run out of ammunition for the guns by now anyway.'"

He stopped to light a cigarette.

"'Understand, I ain't beefin', but hell, village fighting with carbines and damned few grenades ain't no picnic. What the hell, though, somebody's got to try to take the damned

*"Nobody realized on the morning of the 16th that the Germans had begun a monster offensive.... We thought that Fritz was merely taking advantage of our inexperience to run a sortie and in a few hours would return to his comfortable pillboxes and dugouts."*

ullstein bild / The Granger Collection, New York town back. Ain't no other way of getting to division at St. Vith.'

"That explained, I realized, why division headquarters couldn't take our prisoners. We were cut off.

"'We take her back,' the Cannon Company GI went on. 'Don't ask me how. They don't let us keep it long. They come back with artillery fire, and then mortars and then infantry. There's Cannon guys left back there, but they ain't movin'.'

"He lit another cigarette from his butt. 'That's how it is, Mac. But where the hell do we go from here?'

"I wondered too. As the white of the snowy hillsides turned to a dirty gray in the evening twilight and then into formless darkness, I ate my last American meal for four months." He would soon be taken prisoner.

Dunn says, "That night the crucial situation was reflected in the [50 German] prisoners. Cowed and obedient for two days, they were getting cocky and talkative. Huddled together in a cold barn, they would erupt into conversation against orders. And it wasn't until [my buddy] Angie fired a burst from his grease gun between the legs of a particularly obnoxious Nordic blond that they shut up."

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**ABOVE: Lieutenant Ivan Long, center, talks to bedraggled members of his Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon, 423rd Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division. Trapped by the sudden German assault on December 16, 1944, the platoon traveled over 18 miles back to American lines. OPPOSITE: German infantrymen advance through a wooded area during the Ardennes offensive. Hitler threw a force of over 290,000 men at the Americans.**

The numbers of Norman "Dutch" Cota's 28th Division had been terribly depleted in November during the bloody Battle of the Hürtgen Forest, but they still fought on, pushed to the absolute limits of endurance. In the forlorn hope of getting some well-earned R&R, they were moved south to Luxembourg. The rest they so richly deserved would still be a long way off because, when the Battle of the Bulge began, they unfortunately found themselves in the path of the overwhelming numbers of the German Fifth Army, commanded by Baron Hasso von Manteuffel. His left two panzer corps broke through the 28th and reached the outskirts of Houffalize and Bastogne, Belgium. The Pennsylvania "keystone" arm patch would once again earn its title of the "Bloody Bucket."

In total, nine enemy divisions were identified in the striking force that kept hammering the 28th troopers. Keystone men were outnumbered, overrun, cut off. Despite all the adversity with which they had to contend, they refused to panic. Under cool-headed Cota, the 28th fought, delayed, and fought.

Five German divisions—panzer, infantry, and Volksgrenadier—hurtled across the Our River the first day of the assault. The 28th Division was severely mauled yet again, but despite repeated Germans attacks it still managed to hold the line and fight back. As December 16 wore on, division lines eventually snapped under excessive pressure.

The 28th's 112th Infantry Regiment, isolated from its parent division by the German thrust toward Bastogne, plugged the line for two days before pulling north to join the one regiment left of the 106th Division (the 424th) as a combat team.

Allan P. Atwell, assigned to the 28th Division, recalls, "I was headed toward Bastogne as a rifleman replacement when asked if I would be interested in becoming a military policeman. I made a quick decision and became one on the spot. Our biggest concern as MPs was to look for Germans dressed up as American soldiers.

"If a jeep had black canvas covering the lights, that would give us cause for further investigation. Passwords at roadblocks were a big thing. As I remember, there would not be a particular password but they would ask for a word only an American would normally know. Like players on baseball teams, or what states certain cities were in, or possibly where a river might flow and in what direction. It was a little scary.

"I, myself, never confronted a German soldier under these conditions—that I was aware of, anyway. I saluted General Patton one day as he rode by in his sheepskin jacket and pearl-handled pistols."

Men weren't the only ones in the thick of the action. Dorothy Barre worked as an Army nurse in the surgical orthopedic wards. She recalls, "We were set up in Liège before the Bulge broke, and we were in tents that would hold 30 patients at a time. In the center of each tent was a pot-belly stove that kept us warm, and we had surgical carts we could use for dressings.

"When the Bulge broke, Liège was an ammunition dump, so [the Germans] were sending buzz bombs toward the city. We

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As a Tiger tank heads west, American prisoners captured early in the battle march toward POW camps in Germany.

were in that alley of buzz bombs, and when we heard them, a patient would run out and see what route they were on. There were three routes that they fired over us. Over that period, we were hit three times with the buzz bombs, not where the patients were. We did not have any casualties. We were 10 or 12 miles from the fighting.

"But one time one of the buzz bombs hit nearby, one of the houses, and we admitted Belgian patients. I had a mother and a daughter, and the daughter died. The doctor and I worked together to help them until they could get the mother to the Belgian hospital in Liège.

"Before the Bulge, we treated soldiers sometimes, but when the Bulge started, we got them from army trucks or stretchers. They might just be wrapped in blankets, the young fellas, and we got them washed up. Sometimes we would have four nurses to one guy, getting them washed up, pajamas on, their dressings checked. We would ask them if they had pain, and we carried codeine and aspirin in our pockets.

"I remember sitting on the cots and talking with the guys. They would always ask me where I came from, since I have a Boston accent. Sometimes they would stay with us for just eight or 10 hours. The patients would get a good meal and cleaned up and given penicillin, too. After they were well enough, they were flown to Paris or London. We had a few from the 101st paratroopers and engineers as well.

"I think we knew that the Germans had broken through and the Bulge was getting close to us. We didn't go into the city, about four miles away. We stayed in a chateau, a stone building. I was on the third floor, and there were seven to eight nurses to a room with a potbelly stove in the center. We had showers down in the cellar. Some nights, some of us would go down in the cellar because of those buzz bombs. They would start them about 11 o'clock at night and go until about two or three in the morning, and then they would start again at four in the morning."

Joseph "Joe" Ozimek, a member of Battery C, 109th Field Artillery Battalion, 28th Infantry Division, says, "At the end of November, they pulled us out of the Hürtgen Forest, and we were sent to Bocholz [about 40 kilometers south of St. Vith], Luxembourg. We went over there to get some rest and get new replacements. December 16 at 0530 we could hear guns going off over in Germany. Then we had one on the road about 100 yards from us. It tore up the road and cut our telephone wires.

"It was my turn to take care of the .50-caliber machine gun on a tripod. I had just checked the gun to make sure it was loaded when one of the regular .50-caliber guards came up to me and said, 'Joe, we're out of touch with headquarters. All lines are cut.' So off we went to our truck for some wire, and there were also three other wiremen we had to walk with to the road.

"The night was pitch black, and it was difficult to work under these circumstances. Suddenly, a shell exploded, and shortly thereafter we heard singing. The .50-caliber gun went off, and after some light flares were shot in the air, I was just standing in the middle of the road. Now, if a flare goes off and you don't move, they can't see you unless you move. It took me five minutes to get to the side of the road.

"Thank God the sun started to come out, and it seems our machine gun team took apart a German machine-gun group. We found about 12 bodies, all bloodied, and plenty of wounded to carry back. One German was killed trying to hide in the small church door. By 0930 we went back to patching the wires. This is when three Luxembourg freedom fighters showed up who wore 'FFI' armbands and carried Belgian .38-caliber guns; they looked like our .45-calibers. They pulled about four or five Germans off the road and shot each one in the head. Our captain stopped them and told them to stop with the shooting. It was still dark, and our troops might mistake the noise as coming from the Germans, so we might be hit.

"That day our captain was [later] shot in the leg…. He maintained his command and used a rifle as a support. He would only be evacuated to the medic station at 1700. He would be out for four months, and the gunner was also hit in the cheek. Five others were shot that day. I can't tell you how many Germans were shot, but they must have had plenty of wounded, judging by all the blood on the road.

"We held on to Bocholz until December 18th, when we heard over the radio in Wiltz: 'We are closing station now. Hope to see you in Bastogne.' "

John Kline, a soldier in M Company, 423rd Regiment, 106th Division, says, "Because we were high atop the Schnee Eifel and out of the mainstream of the German offensive, we were probably the last to know that it had been launched. I cannot remember any evidence or any sounds that would have indicated to us the size of the battle that was to take place.

"Our company commander set up his headquarters in one of the enormous Siegfried Line bunkers. The bunker was not completely demolished, as they usually were. The underground rooms were intact and accessible. He had taken a room several flights down. The command bunker was on the crest of a hill. The firing apertures faced west toward Belgium, the backside toward the present German lines. There were steep slopes on either side, with signs and white caution tape warning of mine fields. There was a pistol belt and canteen hanging in one of the trees on the slope. Apparently, some GI had wandered into the minefield."

News of the German offensive started to spread throughout Allied rest areas in France, but it was not at first clear if the rumors were true. It didn't take long for the rumors to turn into fact.

Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., commander of Third US Army, was given orders to suspend his attacks in the Metz area and send reinforcements to Belgium. It soon became obvious that the Germans had as one of their objectives the key road-junction town of Bastogne, Belgium. One of the units that was pulled out of the line and sent north was Maj. Gen. William Henry Harrison Morris, Jr.'s 10th Armored Division.

The sudden deployment of the 10th Armored was a surprise to many of the division's men.

"I was in a chateau in Sierck, France," says Clair Bennett, Company F, 90th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized), 10th Armored Division. "I was told by a runner to return to HQ. I did not pay attention to him, but the second time he told me I did. I had heard that tale before, but this time it was real. Then, as we were moving out, we found out that the Germans were attacking Belgium."

W.D. Crittenberger, 420th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, 10th Armored Division, says, "We were north of Metz when the Bulge began, in the small town of Launstraff, France, right on the German border, when we were ordered up to Bastogne. We heard about the Bulge because we always tuned our halftrack radios to

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U.S. Army Art

**ABOVE: After delaying the Fifth Panzer Army's attack along the Our River, frost-bitten and exhausted men of the 28th ("Keystone") Infantry Division retire to Bastogne. LEFT: Bastogne was an important road and rail hub in the Ardennes area—which is why the Germans desperately wanted to seize it and why Americans desperately wanted to hold it.**

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the BBC. They overlapped, and around 0200 we got a warning order from Division Headquarters saying they were getting ready to go north. Then around 0800 we got our orders to be part of CCB [Combat Command B] and go to Bastogne. On the 17th we drove about 60 miles up to Luxembourg and stayed overnight."

Don Olson of Troop C, 90th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, 10th Armored Division, recalls, "We were pulled back to Metz to resupply and re-arm, and we expected to spend Christmas there, and then we got the call to move. We had people in Paris on leave, and they had to round them up. We did not know where we were going; we were traveling at night. They did not allow headlights; we drove in the dark, and it was getting colder."

Helen Rusz was an Army nurse at the 59th Evacuation Hospital. She says her unit was "south of Metz, France, in the town of Épinal, when the Battle of the Bulge broke out. We moved towards Metz and stayed near there during the Bulge.

"We used to tend the wounded, and when they came into the emergency room, we made sure they had a tetanus shot. The only way we would know if they had had a tetanus shot or not—because half of them were wounded and didn't know what they were saying or doing—was if they had "TAT" on their forehead. They didn't have the nice markers like we have today; they would put it on with ink or lipstick. If they did not have "TAT" on their forehead, we would give them a tetanus shot right away, that was the first thing we did.

"We would then enter them into the ward, and there was a medical ward, a surgical ward, an intensive care ward, and a cardiac ward, just like a regular hospital. Our unit had about 40 doctors and about 80 nurses. The doctors in the emergency room would decide where they would go, and we would take care of them.

"We would be on duty for eight hours, and then someone else would take our place. Seven to three and three to 11 and 11 to seven were our hours. We would follow the troops, and we would send the boys away when they were as well as they could be. We mostly treated Americans, but we also treated Englishmen and prisoners of war, too. The younger Germans were very nice, but the staunch old German guys did not like it when the German prisoners would communicate with the American wounded.

"During the Bulge, there was one fellow who had a very bad eye wound. I really took care of him. I was practically his private nurse; I changed his dressing every day, and I put a solution in his eyes. I think his eye was saved after the doctor told him that it would be all right.

"Another fellow who was in intensive care when I was there, this kid, I do not think he was even 17, he was crying for his momma. It was so sad; he was absolutely out of his head. He was very confused, he didn't know where he was, he wanted to go home, and he kept crying for his mother. He had a very severe abdominal wound, and we didn't know if he was going to make it or not. We sent him to England, and I do not know what happened to him. I wish I did.

"The main thing was in the emergency room: they would come in so awful some of them, but you rarely would see them crying, they were so brave. They would say, 'Oh my God, this hurts,' and we would give them a shot for their pain, but we did not have any blood for a transfusion. They all needed blood, since they did lose a lot of it. We did have plasma. It wasn't as good as blood, but there was volume.

"As soon as they were better, we would have the GIs get up and walk, and I loved walking with the GIs. And once they were walking better, they were sent out to a general hospital.

Other units were alerted to respond to the crisis. Frank Towers of Company M, 120th Regiment, 30th "Old Hickory" Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Leland S. Hobbs), says, "When the Bulge broke out, I was at Herzogenrath, Germany [north of Aachen], and we were preparing to cross the Roer River. We did not know what had happened. We were alerted midday on the 16th, I believe, and told to be ready to move out at a moment's notice. We did not know where we were going until late that night, en route to the Bulge area, in the strictest of secrecy that I was ever aware of, when Axis Sally came on the air and said, 'The Old Hickory Division is on the way to Malmedy to save the ass of the First Army, most of which has already been captured!'

"That was the first we knew about where we were going. At the moment, we were a little bit skeptical of this, knowing the source, but by starlight calculations, we determined that we were moving due south. Next morning at Hauset, Belgium, it was revealed to us that the Germans had broken through, but we were not told how badly. We soon determined this as we met convoy after convoy heading north! It was the headquarters of the First Army, which had been in the vicinity of Spa, getting the hell out of there.

"They had left behind all kinds of maps, orders, etc., integral to the battle that was going on. All they wanted was to get out of there and save their asses! We continued on to Malmedy on the 17th and found out from the engineer troops, which were the only ones there, what the situation was. We started deploying from that point onward."

Albert Tarbell of Company H, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, remembers, "I was on chute patrol duty with the MPs in the city of Reims, France. The 82nd was staying in Camp Sissone near Sissone, France. Our job was to intervene on behalf of the troopers should they get too rowdy or drunk and get arrested by regular Army MPs. We were usually able to reason with them and bring them back to the truck pickup point and avoid more serious charges.

"We were to go to the shooting range on [December] 18th, but when I arrived back at camp late that evening or early morning, there was a lot of activity going on. There were replacements all over the place. I remember hearing one of the replacements telling Sergeant Kogul that he had never fired an M1 before, and the sergeant replied to him, 'That's okay, son, you will learn soon enough.'

"I still thought we were headed for the firing range. When I arrived back to my quarters, Sergeant Fuller was waiting up for me. I asked him if we were ready and packed for the firing range. He said we surely were ready for the range, and it was then that I first found out about a German counterattack somewhere in Belgium. We did not get much sleep the rest of that night."

John Kline, M Company, 423rd Regiment, 106th Division, remembers, "My division, the 106th, suffered over 416 killed in action, 1,246 wounded, and 7,001 men missing in action in the first days of the Battle of the Bulge. Most of these casualties occurred within the first three days of battle when two of the three regiments were forced to surrender. In all, there were 641 killed in action from our division through to the end of the fighting. In losses, the German Ardennes Offensive ... was the worst battle for the Americans in World War II."

By the end of December 16, Maj. Gen. Alan W. Jones, the 106th's commander, had committed all the reserves available to his division except a battalion of engineers at St. Vith. But reinforcements, hastily gathered by the VIII Corps, First Army, and 12th Army Group, were on the way. □

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**ABOVE: Men of the 106th Division take up positions in the snowy woods near St. Vith, December 1944. The "Golden Lion" Division suffered heavy casualties during the battle, losing over 6,600 men taken prisoner. OPPOSITE: Coated with ice and snow, a Panzer IV, belonging to one of seven German armored division committed to the battle along an 75-mile front, rolls through a wintry Ardennes landscape.**

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*In the next issue, the veterans continue their stories of heroism and heartbreak as their units try to recover from their shock and halt the German onslaught that threatens to overwhelm them.*

As Russian and German tanks exchanged fire, German Corporal Erwin Engler realized that if he was to get his wound treated, to even survive—if he was to ever see his family again back in what had been the Polish Corridor—he was going to have to make a dash across open ground to reach the safety of a wooded area. It was March 1944 in the Ukraine, and the Third Reich was in retreat.

Erwin Paul Engler, born on March 1, 1922, was an ethnic German living in pre-war Poland. From 1941 to 1948 he was transformed from a cabinetmaker's apprentice into a wounded and decorated veteran of the Wehrmacht and would be a prisoner for three years after the war's end. His family would face the loss of its home, forced labor, and finally, banishment from their homeland. His son Peter talks about his father's experiences.

Peter Engler Collection

# *Saga of a* VOLKSDEUTSCHER

**BY ALLYN VANNOY**

"Erwin Paul Engler, my father, was a caring man, and, over time, he shared some of his wartime experiences with my sister and me. We were then living in England. When I was six years old, our English mother deserted us and Dad, though residing in a foreign country, resolved that he would bring my sister, then age four, and me, up on his own—despite the difficulties he faced. I did not see my mum again for 20 years. Dad was nurturing, saw to our education, and provided us with our sense of values. Being without a mother actually had a far greater impact on me than being half German growing up in postwar Britain.

"As we got older, Dad would tell us his recollections of growing up in his hometown in Poland and his life as a German soldier and as a prisoner of war. He grieved over the death of his mother and aunt in a Polish camp in 1947.

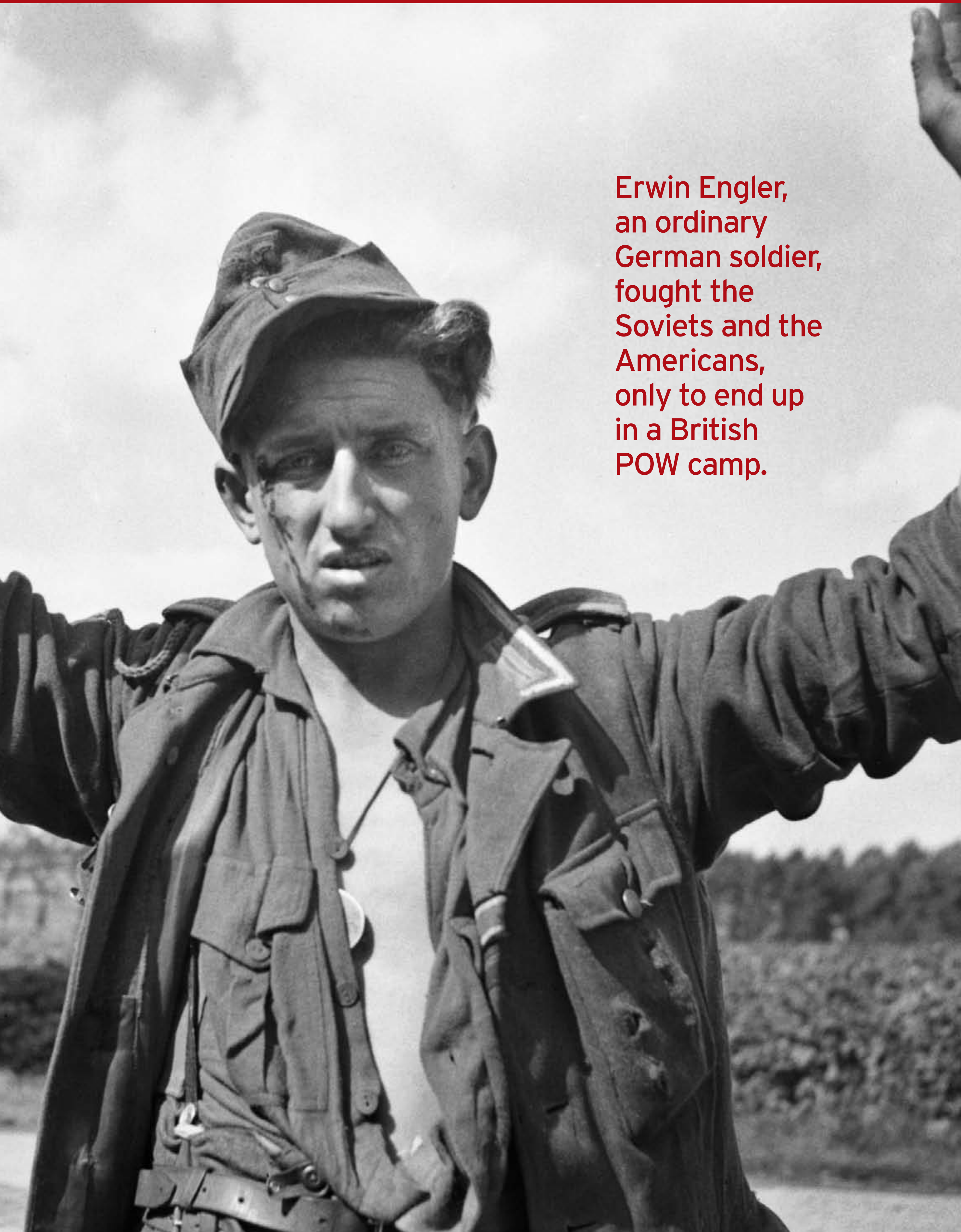
"In our small English town of 4,000, my father earned a reputation as a reliable and a skilled craftsman or wood joiner. Most people judged him by his deeds, not by his ethnicity.

"Dad told us of his family history. As I grew up I wanted to know more about my heritage and read up on German and, more specifically, Prussian history. I also read Polish history and reflected on how the two ethnic groups coexisted for so many centuries.

"It was while researching the family history and translating letters from my German relatives that had been interned in Poland after the war that I became aware of the Polish-German reconciliation efforts in Potulice, Poland, the site of my grandmother's death. A memorial to German victims was built near the memorial to Polish victims.

"I decided to travel to Potulice in memory of my grandmother and there I met the Polish members of the reconciliation movement. It was during the trip that I was able to

For him the war is over. A disheveled German soldier surrenders in Belgium, fall 1944. It is estimated that over four million German soldiers were taken prisoner by the Allies in World War II, although that figure may be conservative. On the whole, German POWs were treated far better by the U.S. and Britain than those captured by the Soviets. ABOVE LEFT: Studio portrait of Erwin Paul Engler, 1942.



Erwin Engler, an ordinary German soldier, fought the Soviets and the Americans, only to end up in a British POW camp.

Imperial War Museum

**Erwin Engler (third from left) enjoys a break with RAD (Reichsarbeitsdienst, or Reich Labor Service) comrades, summer 1941, before he entered the Army.**

Peter Engler Collection

put my father's ghosts to rest—he had died five years earlier. I believe that such a trip might have helped him to find closure to the postwar issues he struggled with.

"Knowing that my dad had fought on the Russian Front fed my own fascination with the subject. Eventually, I gained a greater understanding of the futility of the German war effort and Dad's comments about it being a 'meat grinder.' At the same time, Dad became more open about his experiences.

"On his last visit to my home in Australia, he dictated details that I had never heard before. He provided facsimiles of his decorations. This was so out of character from my earlier memories of him, but I was pleased to have them and the new information. Maybe he had sensed his end was nigh, or maybe the family research I had done showed him I really was interested. Whatever the reason, I was glad to have the memoirs, which I was able to build on later.

"I owe my personal success to him. Given our family hardships and economic difficulties in Britain in the decade after the war, my sister and I could easily have been put into an orphanage at a time when many children, not necessarily orphans, were being sent to be adopted by families in Canada or Australia. He could have insisted that we leave school at age 15 to make his life easier, but he wanted us to have the chance he never had. To him, education was all important.

"He was one of many good men on both sides who were engulfed by the war. The fact is that Dad was obliged to do his duty, and even though he was fighting for a vile regime, a soldier must fight to survive.

"Because he possessed character and a determination to do any job he set his mind to, I assume he was a good soldier as well. He also possessed a certain degree of luck, but he called upon his experience to get himself out of many sticky situations. He was part of a defeated army, but he never complained or considered the 'what ifs.' Letters from the time he was a prisoner reflected this acceptance.

"What hurt him most was that his family paid the ultimate price for the Nazi regime's excesses and history's ignoring the fate of both ethnic and national Germans in Eastern Europe."

Erwin Paul Engler was born in the town of Schöneck (the present-day Polish town of Skarszewy) in what was the Polish Corridor—between East Prussia and Germany proper—and 40 kilometers south of Danzig (present-day Gdansk), the capital of the former German province of West Prussia. The area had been ceded from Germany in 1919 as part of a reconstituted Poland, under the terms of the Versailles Treaty. As a result, Engler, though an ethnic German, was a Polish citizen—considered a "Volksdeutscher" by the German Fatherland.

*Volksdeutsche* was a term that the pre-World War II German government used to describe ethnic Germans living outside or, more precisely, born outside the Reich, in contrast to *Reichsdeutsche* (Imperial Germans) or Germans living inside Germany proper. Under the Nazis, *Volksdeutsche* was used to describe ethnic Germans living outside the country without German citizenship.

According to 1930s estimates, there were about 30 million Volksdeutsche and Auslandsdeutsche (German citizens living abroad) beyond the Reich. Other sources estimated the number of ethnic Germans in Central and Eastern Europe at 10 million. A significant proportion of these were in Russia, Poland, the Ukraine, the Baltic States, Romania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. Many of them could trace their family to ancestors who had migrated to Eastern Europe in the 18th century, invited by governments that wanted to repopulate areas decimated by disease and by the Ottoman Empire.

The Nazi goal of expansion to the East gave the Volksdeutsche a special role in German plans as well as propaganda—to give these people German citizenship and elevate them in status above the native populations. German nationalists used the existence of these large German minorities in Eastern Europe as a basis for territorial claims. Much of the propaganda of the Nazi regime against Czechoslovakia and Poland claimed that ethnic Germans in those countries were being persecuted.

As Nazi Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, Poland, and other European nations, members of the ethnic German minorities in those countries aided the invading forces and the subsequent Nazi occupation. These acts resulted in increased enmity against the Volksdeutsche.

Some of the Polish Volksdeutsche belonged to such groups as Deutscher Volksverband and Jungdeutscher Partei, groups opposing coexistence with the Polish state. Any ethnic Germans who did not act in the proper manner were branded as traitors by these organizations. An estimated 25 percent of the ethnic German population in Poland belonged to Nazi-sponsored organizations supporting the Nazi conquest of Poland. German nationalist organizations in Poland and Czechoslovakia were reputed to be carrying out acts of sabotage against the local population.

As the Nazis moved into Eastern Europe the Volksdeutsche were taken into the Wehrmacht or Waffen-SS, impacting feelings toward the ethnic Germans. In Yugoslavia, the Waffen-SS Prinz Eugen Division was formed from local Germans; it garnered an infamous reputation for its brutal operations carried out against partisans and suppression of the local population. About 300,000 Volksdeutsche from Nazi-conquered lands and satellite countries joined the Waffen-SS. In Hungary alone some 100,000 ethnic Germans volunteered for German military service.

After defeating the Poles, the Nazis annexed the former areas of the old German Empire into the Greater Reich. Volksdeutsche in these annexed areas numbered 2.7 million, with another 120,000 in the area of the General Government—the remainder of occupied Poland.

Following the occupation of western Poland, the Nazi authorities created the Deutsche Volksliste (German Peoples' List)—a bureau to register Polish citizens of German ethnicity as Volksdeutsche. The German authorities encouraged such registration, in many cases either forcing it upon the population or terrorizing Polish Germans if they refused to register.

**Engler served with an MG-34 machine-gun team like this one, shown in action near Orel, Russia, early 1942.**

Bundesarchiv Bild 183-B21964; Photo: Hans Lachmann

Polish citizens of German ancestry were confronted with a dilemma—register and be regarded as turncoats by their fellow Poles or not sign up and be treated by the Nazi occupation forces as traitors to the German race. Those who registered were given benefits such as better food and increased social status. In addition, there was large-scale looting of property and redistribution of goods to the Volksdeutsche—providing them with apartments, workshops, farms, furniture, and clothing confiscated from Jews and Poles. In turn, thousands of Volksdeutsche joined the German armed forces either voluntarily or through conscription.

Following completion of an apprenticeship as a cabinetmaker in early 1941, Erwin Engler was called upon to serve in the Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD, Reich Labor Service), an auxiliary organization that supported the Wehrmacht by carrying out construction and transport projects. From February to June 1941, his RAD unit served in Poland. After the invasion of the Soviet Union, it was sent to Russia from July through November 1941, building barracks and working on runways for the Luftwaffe near Minsk and Smolensk.

**Dressed in white camouflage, Erwin Engler poses for a photo during machine-gun training at Suwalken, East Prussia (today Suwalki, Poland), winter 1942. He would soon be fighting on the Eastern Front.**

Peter Engler Collection

In November 1941, the young Engler returned home and was conscripted into the Wehrmacht on December 6, 1941, receiving training at Suwalken, East Prussia (Suwalki, Poland) to operate a machine gun until early February 1942. An amused Engler recalled, "I held the record at training for firing off the least number of rounds."

After completing training, he was sent as a replacement to the Russian Front, reaching the 519th Infantry Regiment, 296th Infantry Division north of the city of Orel and southwest of Moscow later in February.

The division to which he was assigned had served in France in May 1940 but had seen no serious action there. From the summer of 1940 to the spring of 1941 it was stationed near Dunkirk before being transferred to Army Group Center for Operation Barbarrosa, Germany's surprise invasion of the Soviet Union. The 296th Division was heavily engaged in fighting near Moscow in late 1941 and early 1942. By the time Engler reached the division, the initial Russian winter counteroffensive in that area had ended, and fighting in the 296th's sector had settled into one of static warfare.

Engler quickly became savvy to the cruelty of the war that was being fought on the Russian Front. "I always saved one hand grenade in case a Russian tank was about to run over me," he related.

After four months of frontline duty, on July 7, 1942, a mortar round exploded in front of Engler, resulting in wounds to his stomach, to his right side (behind the liver), and in the right shoulder. Following six weeks in a field hospital in Orel, he was transferred to an army hospital at Vienna for 6 1/2 months of treatment and recovery. Engler recalled, "The shell splinters were never removed from my side or shoulder, troubling me in later life." For his wounds he was awarded the Schwarze Verwundeteabzeichen (Black Wound Badge).

After being discharged from the hospital, he was sent to an army camp at Budweis (Ceské Budejovice), Czechoslovakia. To rehabilitate his arm, he forced himself to peel potatoes and cut the bread for the entire camp. In May 1943, the Wehrmacht classified him as "KVI" or Kriegsversehrtestufe I (War Disabled Level 1)—a classification given to soldiers considered unfit for combat. Those classified as Level 2 were considered too disabled for further duty and were discharged from the army. He was also promoted to lance corporal.

In June 1943, Engler was transferred to a battalion guarding prisoners of war at Brüx (Most), Czechoslovakia. For four months he served as a guard for French prisoners.

Five months later, in November, due to manpower shortages the KVI classification for wounded soldiers was abolished and Engler was declared fit for frontline duty. He spent the next four weeks in a refresher program at a training facility at Bayreuth, Germany, north of Nuremberg.

**After being wounded near Orel, Russia, on July 7, 1942, Engler (far left, seated) was photographed with nurses and other convalescing soldiers at a Vienna military hospital.**

Peter Engler Collection

Peter Engler Collection

**While home on leave in May 1943, Erwin and the Engler family celebrated his father's birthday at Schöneck, the present-day Polish town of Skarszewy. Left to right: Paul Engler (Erwin's uncle), Hilli Falk (cousin), Erwin, Emil Engler (father), Traute Engler (sister), and two family friends.**

Engler was not the only member of his family in the army. His cousin was reported missing at Stalingrad and his brother was shot through the elbow at Leningrad and was invalided out of the army. But he believed that he had a guardian angel watching over him. "I was walking with two comrades and a Russian bomber attacked," he said. "I hit the ground and a bomb exploded in front of us. When I got up, my two comrades had vanished." In addition, he recalled, "I was the only boy from my class who survived the war."

In January 1944, he was assigned to the 326th Infantry Regiment, 198th Infantry Division, as the unit was on its way to Uman, in the heart of the Ukraine.

In action for the next three weeks, his unit found itself alternately fighting one day and retreating the next. Besides facing a Russian winter offensive, Engler would recall years later, "You don't know what cold is until you've had to survive -40 degrees of frost without a roof over your head!"

On March 5, 1944, the Russians launched a massive attack along the front, annihilating Engler's regiment. He was wounded as a bullet grazed his left shoulder blade. He and six comrades took shelter in a village as a tank battle raged around them. With his wound, he knew he had to escape the fighting, realizing that he would receive no medical treatment should the Russians capture him. Despite his comrades' refusal to follow, he ran through the middle of the tank battle to the safety of some woods. It was four days before he was able make his way back to his lines and get his wound treated.

During his evacuation from the front, he was placed on a train of cattle cars. There he believed that providence intervened. "I was told to get into wagon number seven," he said, "and as I was about to do so I heard a voice telling me not to get into wagon number seven, so I got into number eight instead. The next morning the train of wounded soldiers was at a siding when it was bombed. Wagon number seven received a direct hit."

Engler recalled that at one point a Soviet attack resulted in an unusual debt. "I owe my life to a successful counterattack by the SS against a Russian advance that cut the railway line that was taking me to a hospital behind the lines."

He was next sent to another hospital to recover, and in May 1944 was moved to Mühlhausen, Germany. Three months later he was transferred to Münzingen in the Schwarzwald (Black Forest), where the 1121st Grenadier Regiment, 553rd Volksgrenadier Division, was being formed; he was assigned to the Sturm Kompanie (assault company). The 553rd was sent to the Western Front, where it was tasked with defending the French city of Nancy from the Americans in early September 1944.

Upon the regiment's arrival at Nancy, Engler's unit was moved to a position along the Moselle River. For the next few weeks it was in constant action against the U.S. 35th and 80th Infantry Divisions as they maneuvered to cut off and surround the city.

As part of the assault company, Engler was sent on raids against American positions near Millery, a few kilometers north of Nancy. During one mission, his unit blew up a bridge over the Moselle, just south of Millery. On another raid, it crossed the Moselle in rubber boats to destroy a canal or river lock behind American lines.

During September 1944, Engler received the Infanteriesturmabzeichen in Silber (Silver Infantry Assault Medal) for action against the Americans. He had qualified for the decoration many times on the Russian Front but had never been recommended for it. He was also awarded the Eisene Kreuz IIe Klasse (Iron Cross Second Class) for bravery near Millery.

Although he was a loyal soldier and fought well, even Engler had his limits. "I could have become a sergeant," he said, "but I did not want the responsibility of choosing men to go on a patrol which could get them killed."

On October 8, 1944, while in the village of Jeandelaincourt, east of Millery, Engler encountered Americans advancing on his unit's position and came to the realization that "it was all over." In postwar correspondence he indicated that eventual capture was something he'd reckoned with. A short while later he was sitting in a cellar with a comrade, smoking a cigarette, when an American burst in with his weapon at the ready and shouted, "Hands up!" His American captors took everything of value from him, including his watch.

As American POW camps were full, Engler was handed over to the British, and

Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-710-0372-17; Photo: Gerhard Gronefeld

**A German soldier practices assaulting a disabled Russian T-34 tank during field training in the Ukraine in the spring of 1944. Engler was wounded for a second time during a tank battle in the Ukraine in March 1944.**

on November 1 was shipped to Southampton, England. He was transferred to the main processing center for prisoners at Devizes, then in turn to Belfast, Liverpool, and Cheltenham. By 1946 he was in Leckhampton, just outside Cheltenham.

Engler was one of hundreds of thousands of German soldiers captured as the Allies advanced across France and Belgium and into Germany. Plans were to bring many of the prisoners to Britain, where they would remain until Germany's capitulation. After the failure of the German Ardennes Offensive (Battle of the Bulge), some 250,000 German soldiers surrendered. Then, with the collapse of the Ruhr Pocket another 325,000 were taken prisoner. After Germany's capitulation, some 3.4 million German soldiers were in Allied custody.

During 1946, Britain held more than 400,000 German prisoners, many of whom had been transferred from camps in the United States and Canada. Thousands would continue to be held for two to three years after the German surrender and used for forced labor, as a form of reparation. The POWs even referred to themselves as "slave labor." There were reports from Norway and France of many prisoner deaths while clearing minefields.

One report by French authorities stated that in the fall of 1945, 2,000 prisoners per month were being maimed or killed in "accidents." The issue brought about public debate in Britain and was taken all the way to the House of Commons. In 1947, the Ministry of Agriculture argued against rapid repatriation of German prisoners, as they made up some 25 percent of the agricultural workforce and the Ministry wanted to continue to use them into 1948.

With the German surrender, the Allied leadership became concerned that their former adversaries might decide to conduct a guerrilla-style war against the Allied occupation. The Allied powers had decided at the highest levels to repudiate the Geneva Conventions regarding the treatment of prisoners, the Soviet Union having never signed the Conventions. The Conventions prescribed that POWs were to be sent home within months of the end of fighting.

As soldiers of a state that no longer existed because the Nazi regime had been destroyed and no civilian government was yet in place, the Western Allied command decided to create a new classification for the German prisoners—"Disarmed Enemy Forces," or DEF. This allowed the Allied armies to forego treating the German soldiers as prisoners of war—they would not be guaranteed the rights of prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions.

This raised the contention of prisoner protection and welfare—that the creation of the DEF classification was intended to circumvent international laws regarding the handling of POWs, providing a form of reparations to rebuild the damage caused by the war and Nazi actions. The demands of the French government were considered especially compelling, the Germans having held millions of French POWs and civilians as slave laborers.

After Germany's surrender, as the United States shipped some 740,000 German POWs to France, there were newspaper reports of their poor treatment. In October 1945, Judge Robert H. Jackson, Chief U.S. prosecutor at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal, complained to President Harry S. Truman that the Allies "have done or are doing some of the very things we are prosecuting the Germans for. The French are so violating the Geneva Convention in the treatment of prisoners of war that our command is taking back prisoners sent to them. We are prosecuting plunder and our allies are practicing it."

*"We who have lost everything should realize that our future will not be a bed of roses. Then as long as we don't also lose the courage to face life, we will pull through, of that I am convinced."*

Many of the German soldiers captured in the spring and summer of 1945 by the Western Allied armies were interned in Rheinwiesenlager (Rhine meadow camps) or "Prisoner of War Temporary Enclosures." A group of 19 temporary camps was established, holding an estimated 557,000 POWs from April to July 1945. Most of the camps were established west of the Rhine River to prevent prisoners from attempting to rejoin the German armies or organize a resistance.

Plans for the camps called for the use of open farmland close to railroad lines, enclosed with barbed wire and divided into 10 to 20 camps each housing 5,000 to 10,000 prisoners. Some of the camps quickly became overcrowded. For example, Camp Remagen, intended for 100,000, grew to a population of 184,000 prisoners.

The Americans transferred internal operations of the camps to the German prisoners themselves. Camp administration, police and law enforcement, medical, food preparation, and assigning of work details were all managed by the prisoners.

After screening to detain Nazi Party members for possible prosecution, initial prisoner releases included those who were regarded as harmless—women, old men, and boys of the Volkssturm. Later, those professional groups considered needed for reconstruction as well as farmers, truck drivers, and miners were released. By the end of June 1945, the first of the camps—Remagan, Böhl-Ingelheim, and Büderich—had been closed. Then prisoner releases were halted. On July 10, 1945, eight camps with some 182,400 prisoners were transferred to French control. Those prisoners who were considered able to work were transferred to France, and the rest were released.

Under the Geneva Convention, German POWs were to receive the same ration as their Allied captors. Instead, designated as "Disarmed Enemy Forces," they got no more

**German prisoners engage in postwar mine-clearance work near Stavanger, Norway, August 1945. While most German POWs were repatriated after the war, some were held and required to perform such duties temporarily.**

Imperial War Museum

than German civilians. Given the situation in Europe from April to July 1945, this meant starvation-level rations, though enough food was provided to prevent mass famine.

Estimates of deaths among prisoners in the Rheinwiesenlager camps ranged from 3,000 (U.S. figures) to 10,000, due to starvation, dehydration, and exposure. Most of the deaths were attributed to the unexpectedly large number of POWs that suddenly came into Allied hands at the end of hostilities.

Reasons given for the poor treatment of some of the German POWs included the indifference, even hostility, of some U.S. guards and camp officers. Revelations of starved inmates and evidence of the mass murder found in recently liberated Nazi death camps provoked distain, if not outright hatred, toward the Germans. Some senior Allied leaders thought the Germans deserved to experience the hunger they had imposed on others.

General Lucius D. Clay, deputy to General Eisenhower in 1945 and then Deputy Governor of Germany under the Allied Military Government, stated on June 29, 1945, “I feel that the Germans should suffer from hunger and from cold as I believe such suffering is necessary to make them realize the consequences of a war which they caused.”

All of Europe faced dire conditions following the end of the war for a variety of reasons. The collapse of Germany in the spring of 1945 was also an economic collapse, especially of food production. Nitrogen and phosphates needed for fertilizer had been diverted to weapons production since 1943. German rail transportation and food production facilities had suffered heavy bomb damage.

In addition, Hitler did not want the German people to survive his defeat and gave orders that scorched earth operations be conducted—though with limited results. The slave laborers who had maintained German agriculture had departed with few returning Germans to replace them. Tribute and goods seized from occupied territories were no longer available. The Russians also blocked the flow of agricultural surplus from eastern Germany to the west. Even “displaced persons” (DPs), victims of Nazi deportation and slave labor (seven million in Germany, 1.6 million in Austria), were on short rations despite the sympathy and efforts of Allied authorities.

At the time of Engler’s capture in 1944, his family and relatives, including his mother, father, two brothers, an uncle, two aunts, and two cousins, were still living in and around their village of Schöneck.

While Engler was a prisoner in Britain, the Allies were making plans for what to do with his former home in Poland and for postwar Germany.

A decision to shift Poland’s postwar boundary westward was made by the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, having learned the hard way about the use of ethnic bloodlines as a justification for Nazi Germany to expand its borders and invade its neighbors. The precise location of the border was left open, the Western Allies having accepted in principle the Oder River as the future western border of Poland.

The result of the Potsdam Conference, July-August 1945, was to transfer 112,000 square kilometers of former German territory to Poland while also transferring 187,000 square kilometers of former Polish territory to the Soviet Union. The northeastern third of East Prussia was annexed by the Soviet Union, creating Kaliningrad Oblast.

It was also decided at Potsdam that all ethnic Germans remaining in Polish territories should be expelled to prevent any claims of minority rights or possible land claims by any future German government. The Potsdam provisions prescribed “the transfer to Germany of German populations, or elements thereof, remaining in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, will have to be undertaken … in an orderly and humane manner.”

Even British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was convinced that the only way to alleviate tensions after the war was the transfer of people to match the national borders. In a speech before the House of Commons in 1944, he declared, “Expulsion is the method which, insofar as we

German POWs pick crops on a British farm near their camp, late 1945, months after the war ended. Many German and Italian prisoners transported to the United States also performed such work, for which they were paid. Some, like Engler, chose to remain in, or return to, the country where they had been imprisoned.

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have been able to see, will be the most satisfactory and lasting. There will be no mixture of populations to cause endless trouble.... A clean sweep will be made. I am not alarmed by these transferences, which are more possible in modern conditions."

There had been German wartime plans for evacuation of civilian populations in areas threatened by Soviet advances—some were prepared well in advance while others had been haphazard or purposely neglected. The evacuation plans for parts of East Prussia were completed and ready for implementation by the middle of 1944.

Despite these preparations, Nazi officials were late in ordering the evacuation of areas close to the front before they were overrun by the Red Army. This was due in part to paranoia regarding the possible consequence of being labeled a defeatist and Hitler's insistence on holding every foot of ground.

About 50 percent of the Germans residing in areas annexed by Germany during the war and nearly 100 percent of those residing in occupied territory were evacuated. While some 7.5 million Germans were either evacuated or otherwise escaped East Prussia and the occupied territories, many lives were lost because of severe winter conditions, poor evacuation organization, or military operations.

As the war had drawn to a close, many Germans had fled before the Russian advance; however, Engler's parents had decided not to flee because they felt that they had done nothing wrong and naively believed they would be all right. In March-April 1945, their town was occupied by the Red Army, the communist regime interning all ethnic Germans. His family members were subsequently forced to work on farms and in factories, which paid the state, not the individuals, for their labor.

While Engler was in captivity, his hometown came back under Polish control and, apart from his sister, the rest of his family was interned by Soviet authorities. The family's farm was confiscated, and the family members were forced off the land and into camps.

Concerned about his family's welfare, Engler asked in a letter to his sister, "Do you by chance know what has happened to our dear mother and the others and where they are now? It would be the greatest joy for me to now find that out. My letters that I have written back home have so far all remained unanswered. I was captured on 8 October 1944 and was brought to England. I am working here on a farm. Health wise I am very good, which I also hope for you."

Engler was not only a strong individual, having survived several combat wounds, but also exhibited strength of character. In a letter from prison camp to his family in July 1946, he said, "We who have lost everything should realize that our future will not be a bed of roses. Then as long as we don't also lose the courage to face life, we will pull through, of that I am convinced."

After the communists took over in Poland, many Polish ex-servicemen chose not to return home and stayed on in Britain. Their presence seemed to make Engler's life more difficult as he wrote in April 1947: "Unfortunately in the town there are many Polish soldiers and when I see them, the whole Sunday afternoon is ruined."

During his time as a prisoner in Britain, while working on local farms, Engler earned the respect of those he worked for with his strong work ethic, forming lifelong friendships. And while working German prisoners did receive pay for their labor, it was very little. In July 1947, Engler wrote, "Our POW income is very meagre; we earn 5½ shillings a week. For that we can buy 20 cigarettes and a piece of cake."

Engler felt that while he and his fellow prisoners were adequately fed, it was torture to arrive at the farm each day to work and see the farmer eating a hearty breakfast of eggs and bacon, which the prisoners did not receive.

Peter Engler recalled his father telling him how as a prisoner he had porridge for breakfast every day, which was unfamiliar to him. To make it more palatable, he would add bits of chocolate to it. Peter said, "Chocolate porridge with cocoa and sugar became a staple in our house as we grew up."

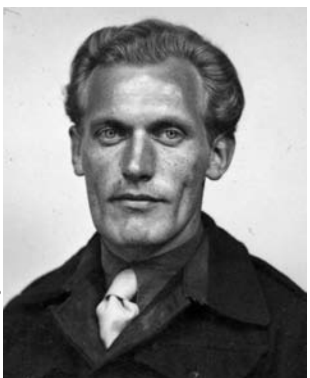
While a prisoner, Engler's mother died of pneumonia in a camp near Potulice, Poland, after having been forced to work in the fields while ill. He was also concerned about his 13-year-old brother, Friedel. Engler had heard rumors that the Russians were abducting children and taking them to Russia.

Engler's surviving relatives were expelled from Poland to Germany during 1948-1950, losing all their property and possessions in the process.

Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans were detained in internment camps or sentenced to forced labor, some of them for years. Even today the expulsions have entered the German vocabulary as "the Flight" or "the Expulsion." The total number of ethnic Germans living in Eastern Europe today is approximately 2.6 million, just 12 percent of the prewar figure.

Because of actions by some Volksdeutsche and particularly the atrocities committed by the Nazis, the Polish government after the war tried many Volksdeutsche for treason. Even today the word *Volksdeutsche* is regarded as an insult in Poland.

While a postwar prisoner, there were still rules to be followed, which Engler apparently violated. For that he was given three weeks in the guardhouse.



Both: Peter Engler Collection

**ABOVE LEFT: Erwin Engler, photographed about the time of his release in 1948. ABOVE RIGHT: Engler and his son Peter. BELOW: An unidentified POW camp in Britain, photographed in December 1945. While most of the camp consisted of tents, Nissen huts—prefabricated metal buildings, visible in the distance—also housed prisoners.**

Imperial War Museum

Toward the end of 1947, Engler was given the opportunity to apply for return to Germany; however, there was nothing to return to. His surviving family members were homeless refugees, having been expelled to Germany.

Many of the ethnic German civilian detainees were held in the same camps that had been built by the Nazis as concentration and death camps. The conditions were abominable, and many perished and were buried in unmarked mass graves.

While working outside his prison camp, Engler met and began dating an English girl. His camp commandant did not approve of the relationship and once told Engler that if he had his way, he would have had Engler transferred to the Shetlands because of his courting the girl.

Nevertheless, the relationship soon flourished. His future father-in-law appealed to the British government and obtained Engler's release in March 1948, over seven years after being conscripted into the RAD. He later became one of the first released German POWs to take up residence in England. Engler and his English wife would have two children, and he would became a naturalized British citizen in the 1950s.

Engler had fought across Europe—from before Moscow to the steppes of the Ukraine to the Moselle River of France. He carried out his duties and was twice wounded in the process. He considered the war an inglorious waste, believing that it took away seven years of his life fighting for a regime that he felt had treated the German people like so much cannon fodder.

Peter Engler believes his father was "an ordinary soldier faced with extraordinary circumstances, but he demonstrated an important lesson about the measure of a man—it's not whether you get knocked down, because everyone does from time to time; the measure is in those that get back up."

Erwin Engler passed away on January 2, 1998, after living a full life during historic times. □

This painting by official Australian war artist Sergeant George Browning, who served in New Guinea, dramatically conveys the difficulties that Australian regulars and militia (not to mention their Japanese enemy) had in trying to maneuver through the steep, steamy, disease-ridden jungles of New Guinea and along the Kokoda Trail, deemed by many as one of the worst environments of the entire war.

# HOLD AT ALL COSTS

## The courage of Australia's troops was tested to the maximum in the desperate struggle to hold New Guinea. BY JOHN BROWN

ONE BLAZING hot day in mid-January 1942, Cornelius "Con" Page, an Australian plantation manager and coastwatcher on Tabar Island 20 miles north of New Ireland reported on his radio a Japanese aircraft passing Tabar and heading for Rabaul on the Australian-administered island of New Britain. A few days later, on January 20, he reported two formations of Japanese bombers and fighters, totaling 100, heading for Rabaul (Page was later executed by the Japanese).

Two of the eight obsolescent Wirraway fighters of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) No. 24 Squadron based at Rabaul were flying patrol at 15,000 feet over Rabaul when the Japanese aircraft arrived. They immediately attacked the bombers, but the much superior Japanese Zero fighters escorting the bombers quickly shot them down.

The six remaining Wirraways of the squadron took off in a desperate attempt to gain height to attack the Japanese. One of them crashed after takeoff, the Zeros shot down two others over the sea, and two crash-landed, riddled with bullets. One survived, its guns empty, to land among falling bombs as the small town and the port were bombed and strafed, as were the airfield, the coastal batteries, and an oil tanker in the harbor.

It was less than six weeks after Pearl Harbor and the Japanese onslaught had reached the South Pacific.

Wing Commander John Lerew, commander of the RAAF at Rabaul, radioed headquarters for modern fighter reinforcements. He was told, regretfully, that HQ was unable to supply any fighters. Next evening, he was asked to attack with any aircraft he could get into the air, a heavily escorted Japanese convoy of transports heading for Rabaul, the transports probably carrying an invasion force.

Lerew signaled headquarters, in Latin—*Nos morituri te salutamus,* the Roman gladiator's salutation, "We who are about to die salute you." He loaded his last remaining Lockheed Hudson with bombs and took off to find and attack a Japanese fleet that included two aircraft carriers, four cruisers, and more than a dozen destroyers and transports. Fortunately for Lerew and his crew, a black night fell and, unable to locate the fleet and with fuel running low, he aborted the mission.

On January 21, aircraft from a Japanese carrier fleet raided Kavieng on New Ireland and Lae, Salamaua, Bulolo, and Madang on the New Guinea mainland. On January 23, 5,300 marines and soldiers of the Nankai, the South Seas Force, landed at Rabaul and quickly overwhelmed the 1,400-man Australian garrison. Two thirds of the Australians were taken prisoner, 160 of them were butchered after they laid down their arms, and 400 escaped to march over the steep, jungle-covered mountains of New Britain to the opposite coast and evacuation by ship to the New Guinea mainland.

Also on January 23, the Japanese landed on New Ireland. There the small garrison of Independent Company soldiers (a soldier of an Independent Company was the equivalent of a British Commando) destroyed their stores and the airfield and, all of them suffering badly from malaria, embarked on a small ship and headed for Australia. They were located by Japanese aircraft, strafed, and forced into captivity in Rabaul.

At Rabaul, the Japanese commander, General Harukichi Hyakutake, quickly began building Rabaul and the area around it, the Gazelle Peninsula, into a fortress with naval and air bases and a headquarters for operations in the South Pacific. He gave

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Maj. Gen. Tomitaro Horii command of an invasion fleet to capture Port Moresby on the southern coast of Papua from where further seaborne operations could be mounted, air attacks made on northern Australia, and sea and air links between the United States and Australia could be disrupted.

The Japanese overall plan was to enclose an area that would include Burma, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), to Port Moresby in Papua, and from there to the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Fiji, Samoa, and on through the central Pacific back to Japan. This vast area, it was thought, could be secured and defended with available naval, army, and air forces and it would provide Japan with its needs for oil, rubber, minerals, timber, and other resources. It would become part of Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Standing in Japan's path was the continent of Australia. On February 19, 1942, a Japanese carrier force launched two air attacks on Darwin in Australia's Northern Territory causing extensive damage and sinking eight ships in the harbor; 243 civilians were killed in the attacks—an act called "Australia's Pearl Harbor." This would be followed during 1942-1943 by nearly 100 more air raids.

At the beginning of April 1942, the United States assumed responsibility for the whole Pacific area, except Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies; the British took responsibility for Sumatra and the Indian Ocean area. The American sphere was divided in two—the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) commanded by General Douglas MacArthur, who had arrived in Australia from the Philippines, and the North, Central and South Pacific commanded by Admiral Chester Nimitz, with his headquarters in Hawaii. The borderline between their respective spheres came in the Solomon Islands, where a Japanese threat would require action by MacArthur's ground forces and Nimitz's naval forces.

Assembling at Rabaul were Japanese ground and air forces to be used for the attack on Port Moresby and the seizure of the island of Tulagi in the Solomons for use as a seaplane base. Behind the amphibious groups destined for the two invasions would be a carrier striking force ready to beat off any American intervention. It comprised the carriers *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* and an escort of cruisers and destroyers.

On May 3, 1942, the Japanese landed on Tulagi and took the island unopposed. Next day planes from the American carrier *Yorktown* sank a Japanese destroyer. The Japanese carrier group, commanded by Admiral Takeo Takagi, now came south, passing to the east of the Solomons and into the Coral Sea, hoping to take the American carrier force in the rear.

Meanwhile, the carrier *Lexington* had joined *Yorktown* and the two were steering north to intercept the Japanese invasion force on its way to Port Moresby. On May 6 the opposing carrier groups searched for each other without making contact, although at one time they were only 70 miles apart.

On the 7th, Japanese search planes reported spotting an American carrier and cruiser, and Admiral Takagi ordered a bombing attack on them. Both ships were sunk, but they were found to be only a tanker and escorting destroyer.

Meanwhile, Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher's *Yorktown* attacked the Japanese force heading for Port Moresby and sank the light carrier *Shoho*. The sinking of this carrier caused the Japanese to postpone their attack on Port Moresby, and the invasion force turned back for Rabaul.

On the morning of May 8, the two opposing carrier forces met in the Coral Sea, off the Queensland, Australia, coast. They were closely matched. The Japanese had 121 aircraft, the Americans 122. Their escorts were almost equal in strength—the Japanese with four heavy cruisers and six destroyers and the Americans with five heavy cruisers

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**ABOVE LEFT: Major General Cyril Clowes held the enemy at vital Milne Bay, but got only criticism from MacArthur. ABOVE RIGHT: The men of Brigadier General George Wooten's 18th Brigade helped secure the Aussie victory. LEFT: An abandoned Japanese landing barge, riddled with bullet and shrapnel holes, drifts off the Milne Bay invasion beach. Here the Japanese had their string of successful island conquests broken.**


The Royal Australian Air Force's outnumbered 75 Squadron scored important victories at Port Moresby and Milne Bay, thanks to pilots such as Flying Officer Peter A. Masters and his Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawk "Posion P."

and seven destroyers. The Japanese, however, were moving in a belt of cloud while the Americans had to operate under a clear sky.

The aircraft of both carrier forces met in a battle that raged through the morning. The battle was unique in that it was the first large-scale naval action fought between aircraft from opposing carriers, without the opposing fleets ever having the opportunity to engage each other.

The Japanese carrier *Zuikaku* escaped attention in the cloud cover, but the carrier *Shokaku* was hit by three bombs and was withdrawn from the battle. On the American side, *Lexington* was hit by two torpedoes and two bombs, and subsequent internal explosions forced the abandonment of the carrier, a much-loved ship her sailors called "Lady Lex." Most of the crew were rescued. *Yorktown* was hit by only one bomb. The Americans came off a little better in aircraft losses—74 compared with over 80, and in men—543 compared with more than 1,000 Japanese. But the Americans had lost a fleet carrier while the Japanese lost only a light carrier. Most important, though, the Japanese had been stopped short of their strategic objective, the capture of Port Moresby.

In the afternoon, as the threat to Port Moresby had vanished for the time being, Nimitz ordered his carrier force to withdraw from the Coral Sea. The Japanese also withdrew, mistakenly believing that both American carriers had been sunk.

During this time, No. 75 Squadron RAAF flying 17 Curtiss Kittyhawk fighters provided by the Americans was in constant action over 44 days defending Port Moresby against Japanese air attacks aimed to destroy its air defenses, or, led by Squadron Leader John Jackson, raiding Lae and other Japanese-held airfields. Fifty Japanese aircraft were destroyed on the ground or in the air, and 12 Australian pilots were killed or missing. Jackson was killed on April 28 and, on the same day, with only three Kittyhawks still serviceable, the squadron was relieved by two American Bell Aircobra squadrons of No. 35 Group, USAAF. Jackson's brother Leslie succeeded him as commanding officer of RAAF No. 75 Squadron.

The next Japanese attempt to capture Port Moresby was a double thrust. One group would march from the north Papua coast, cross the Owen Stanley Range of precipitous, jungle-covered mountains, and descend on Port Moresby on the south coast.

The other was to seize Milne Bay on the eastern tip of Papua and use it as a pivot for a seaborne offensive along the southern coast to Port Moresby. In mid-July the Japanese took the first step in these campaigns by seizing Buna and Gona on the north coast of Papua as the jumping off point for their offensives.

Milne Bay is a narrow strip of land between the mountains and the sea, no more than a few hundred yards wide in some places and nowhere wider than about two miles. The huge bay is a natural harbor. At the time there was a mission establishment there and a few plantations and native villages. It was an area of heavy rainfall, and it swarmed with malaria-carrying mosquitoes and countless other insects.

Australian and American troops had been there since late June, building a forward air base. After Buna and Gona fell to the Japanese, the base was reinforced by the Australian 7th Brigade Group of three militia battalions, commanded by Brigadier John Field.

Field, a mechanical engineer and university lecturer before the war, had commanded an Australian Imperial Force (AIF) battalion during the Libyan campaign. His professional skill was of great value in helping to develop, from the ground up, two airfields, roads, bridges, wharf facilities, and a system of defenses.

The garrison was reinforced again in August by the veteran 18th Brigade of the AIF, commanded by Brigadier George F. Wootten, who had served with distinction in the seige of Tobruk. With other reinforcements on their way, command of the area passed to Maj. Gen. Cyril Clowes, a regular officer who had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross in World War I and led the Anzac Corps Artillery during the Greek campaign months earlier. By the end of August 1942, he commanded 8,824 soldiers: 7,459 Australians and 1,365 Americans. They were supported by 75 and 76 Squadrons of the RAAF commanded by Squadron Leaders Leslie Jackson and Peter Turnbull.

On August 25, coastwatchers and reconnaissance aircraft reported a Japanese seaborne force with an advance flotilla of seven barges steaming toward Milne Bay.

When this was reported, Milne Bay was under air attack, so RAAF pilots were unable to taxi their aircraft away from their dispersal points. But, as soon as the Japanese bombers departed, the RAAF planes took off and swooped down on the barges with bombs and cannon fire. They sank most of them and damaged the others, killing many of the troops in the barges.

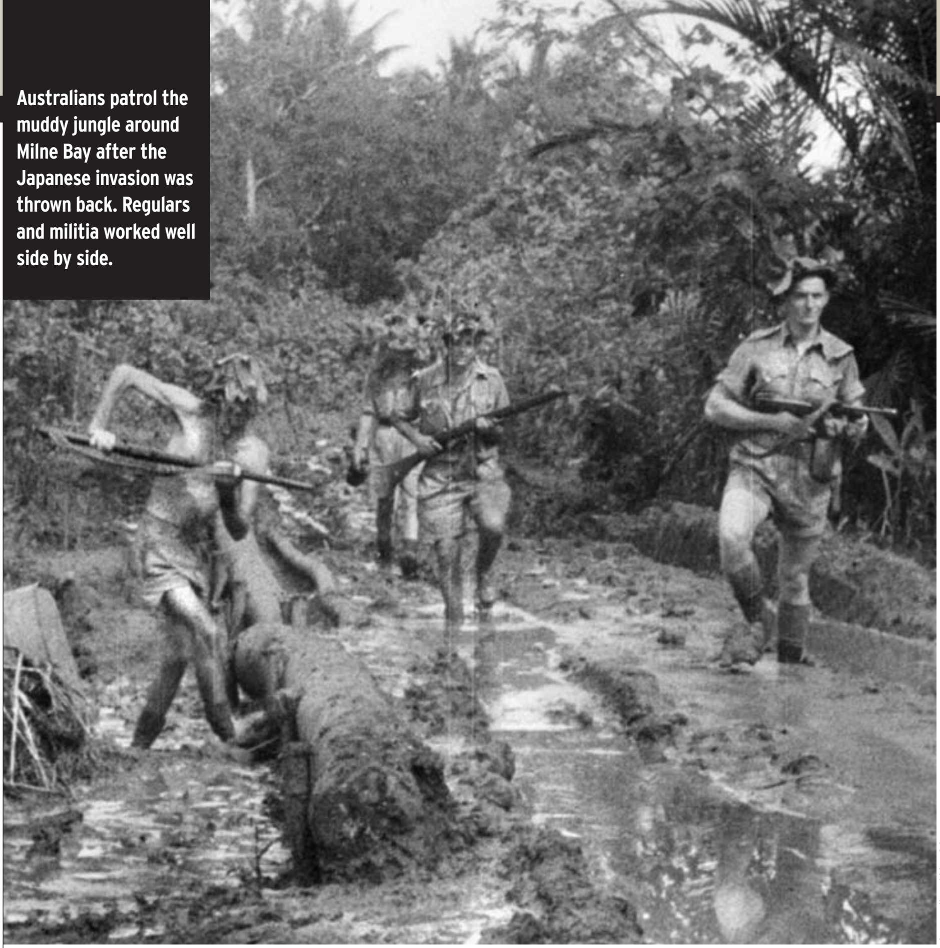
The main Japanese invasion fleet was not far behind. It consisted of three cruisers and two each destroyers, troopships, tankers, and minesweepers. The convoy slipped into Milne Bay that night and began disembarking troops.

To protect the base, Maj. Gen. Clowes had deployed his troops so that inexperienced militia soldiers were interlaced with AIF veterans. The 2/10th AIF Battalion was inserted between two militia battalions of the 7th Brigade; they were responsible for the eastern sector and holding the Gili Gili area. The two other AIF battalions of the 18th Brigade and the remaining militia battalion were given responsibility for the western sector.

Before dawn on August 26, some 800 Japanese Marines supported by light tanks were ashore. The Australian militia engaged them in the areas of K.B. Mission and Cameron's Springs, although they were handicapped by having neither antitank guns nor antitank rifles and fought the tanks with "sticky bombs" that, because of the rain and humidity, would not stick to the tanks.

When the sun rose they could see that the Japanese had landed and piled up stocks of fuel and stores along the shore. Empty landing barges were pulled up on the beach. The RAAF Kittyhawks pounced immediately and, in a storm of antiaircraft fire from the Japanese ships and shore positions, they shot up everything in sight.

During the rest of the day, both sides consolidated their positions, and that night the reinforced Japanese marines attacked again. In dim moonlight, confused fighting went on until 4 AM. The marines used flanking tactics that had proved so successful in Malaya, with one group wading neck deep in the sea to get around the Australians on one flank while another group splashed through mangrove swamps or moved silently through jungle in an attempt to turn the other flank.



Australians patrol the muddy jungle around Milne Bay after the Japanese invasion was thrown back. Regulars and militia worked well side by side.

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The 61st (militia) Battalion, which had borne the brunt of the fighting from the moment of the first Japanese landing, was almost exhausted by the morning of August 27, 1942, when it was relieved by the first of the AIF battalions. The sun rose to disclose that six more Japanese ships had arrived in the bay, and it was guessed that, from the sounds of landing barges heard during the night, 2,000 or more Japanese soldiers had landed.

The airfields, wharf installations, and supply dumps were all located in the vicinity of Gili Gili, and General Clowes was concerned that further Japanese landings would be made to the south of Gili Gili, an area for which he had no reinforcements. He was therefore moving cautiously until he could be sure of Japanese intentions. General MacArthur criticized him for his caution—he was of the opinion that Clowes should have driven the Japanese back into the sea without delay.

In the late afternoon of August 27, the AIF 2/10th Battalion moved into the defenses around the K.B. Mission. About 500 in all, they had last been in action against the German Afrika Korps in the sun and sand and rocks of North Africa. Now, at 8:00 PM, in darkness, blinding rain, and thick mud, chanting to strike fear in the hearts of their enemies, the Japanese attacked the Australian perimeter. Supported by tanks, the infantry threw themselves fearlessly against the Australian positions and the Australians soon found themselves fighting hand to hand, the battle degenerating into a confusion of group and individual contests.

At midnight the Australians were ordered to withdraw to the west bank of the Gama River. The Japanese followed them so closely that they forced them back beyond the river to the vicinity of No. 3 Airstrip defended by the 25th (militia) Battalion, and here the Australians managed to hold them.

The next two days were comparatively quiet except for artillery exchanges and active patrolling by both sides around No. 3 Airstrip. Preparations were made for an attack by Brigadier Wootten's 18th Brigade to drive the Japanese along the north shore as far as the K.B. Mission and to mop up the whole peninsula, but this was canceled on August 29 when a Japanese cruiser and nine destroyers hove into sight.

Next day, both sides were in constant contact, with the Japanese trying to consolidate their grip on the airfield area and the Australians keeping them out. They were helped by the two Kittyhawk squadrons flying almost continuous sorties, strafing the Japanese from treetop height and acting as flying artillery. They caused heavy casualties, kept the Japanese pinned down, and destroyed their supplies and equipment.

Early on August 31, the Japanese launched three heavy attacks on the 61st Battalion defending the northeast perimeter, but the militia soldiers drove them back leaving many dead and wounded on the muddy ground. By full daylight Clowes was sure that the Japanese were concentrating their efforts along the north shore or eastern sector and thus moved up the first of Wootten's brigade to counterattack.

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**ABOVE: Gunners from General Tomitaro Horii's invasion force blast Australian positions along the Kokoda Trail with a 75mm howitzer. BELOW: An Australian patrol passes two Japanese Type 95 Ha-Go light tanks knocked out during the fighting for Milne Bay. The last soldier carries an American Thompson .45-caliber submachine gun, supplied by the United States.**

Australian War Museum

All day long the militia soldiers fought their way through a series of ambushes, proving themselves more than a match for the Japanese as they forced them back through slimy mud and dripping foliage until they finally stormed the K.B. Mission at bayonet point as night was falling.

To the rear, 300 Japanese attacked Australians who had taken up positions along the Gama River. At dusk they charged out of the jungle, screaming and chanting. For two hours there was a confused and savage struggle in slashing rain with opponents slithering and splashing in mud that was in places knee deep. After a severe mauling, the Japanese fell back. The Australians followed to finish them off as the enemy attempted to retire westward.

Clowes felt that he now had the Japanese on the run and planned to continue his advance and mop up the remnants, but at 9:00 AM on September 1, 1942, he received an urgent message from General MacArthur, who would later criticize him for caution. The message said: "Expect attack Jap ground forces on Milne Bay aerodromes from west and northwest supported by destroyer fire from bay. Take immediate stations."

All units prepared to repel this attack, but it never materialized. Two days later, Wootten's troops resumed their counterattack, but the delay had enabled the Japanese to dig themselves into strongly defended positions. The Australians had to drive them out of each position in a series of actions typical of the one in which Corporal J.A. French took part.

French was leading a section of soldiers that was held up by fire from three Japanese machine-gun positions. He ordered the soldiers to take cover and crawled close enough to knock out two of the positions with grenades, then charged the third position firing a Thompson from the hip. He ran into a hail of bullets. Mortally wounded, he kept moving and firing until he fell dead at the position.

Corporal French had killed the crews of all three machine-gun positions, an action that was responsible for keeping Australian casualties to a minimum and added greatly to the successful conclusion of the attack. He was posthumously awarded a Victoria Cross.

Clowes was confident his troops had broken the Japanese invasion, and he began mopping-up operations. The starving and exhausted Japanese soldiers fought to the end—their refusal to surrender meant that every one of them had to be killed.

Two weeks after the first landing, the battle for Milne Bay was over. The Japanese had suffered a decisive defeat—their first defeat on land—partly because of their error in assuming that Milne Bay would be held only by two or three companies of soldiers deployed for the defense of the airfields and had expected to overcome them easily with some 2,000 marines and soldiers, and partly because of the splendid backup by the two RAAF squadrons, but mainly because of the fighting spirit of the young militia soldiers who destroyed the myth of invincibility that surrounded the Japanese Army.

But for Maj. Gen. Clowes there was only criticism from Supreme Commander MacArthur—he criticized Clowes's handling of the operations at Milne Bay and upbraided him for failing to send back a regular flow of information. Nothing was said of inaccurate information supplied to Clowes by MacArthur and his headquarters.

Many of the differences and misunderstandings that arose, and continued to arise, between the two armies could have been avoided if MacArthur had allowed a senior, battlewise Australian officer on his staff, but this he would not do.

The battle for Milne Bay was applauded by Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, then commanding the British 14th Army in Burma. In his book *Defeat into Victory,* he stated, "We were helped, too, by a very cheering piece of news that now reached us, and of which, as a morale booster, I made great use. In August-September 1942, Australian troops had at Milne Bay in New Guinea inflicted on the Japanese their first undoubted defeat on land. If the Australians, in conditions very like ours, had done it, so could we. Some may forget that of all the Allies it was Australian soldiers who first broke the spell of the invincibility of the Japanese Army; those of us who were in Burma have cause to remember."

Earlier at Milne Bay, the militia soldiers of the 7th Brigade, the "chokkos"—chocolate soldiers, a derogatory term used by some AIF veterans to describe a man in a "pretty" uniform who had no intention of doing any real fighting—had had their baptism of fire. Farther to the west, in the "fearful territory" of the Owen Stanley Range of Papua, New Guinea, young soldiers of a smaller militia unit, the 39th Battalion, were undergoing their own baptism of fire on a native footpath that became known as the Kokoda Trail.

On July 21, 1,800 combat troops of the Nankai, the Japanese South Seas Force, landed on the north coast of Papua with supply and base troops and 1,200 natives of Rabaul who would be used as porters and laborers. They came ashore at Gona, a native village and Anglican Mission establishment and hospital.

The combat troops immediately struck inland for Kokoda, an Australian government outpost, airstrip, native village, and a large, privately owned rubber plantation in a valley in the foothills of the Owen Stanley Mountains, about 90 kilometers by air from Gona. The supply and base troops and the Rabaul natives began building bases at Gona and at Buna, a native village and small government outpost a few kilometers along the coast from Gona.

More Japanese landed at Gona and Buna—the total would reach about 13,500—and started a roundup of all Westerners in the area. Some people in hiding at Sangara were betrayed by Papuans to the Japanese; they were beheaded by the sword on Buna beach, among them two Anglican nursing sisters and a seven-year-old boy.

A priest and two sisters from Gona, hiding in the jungle, met up with five Australian soldiers and five American airmen from a crashed plane. They were all betrayed and

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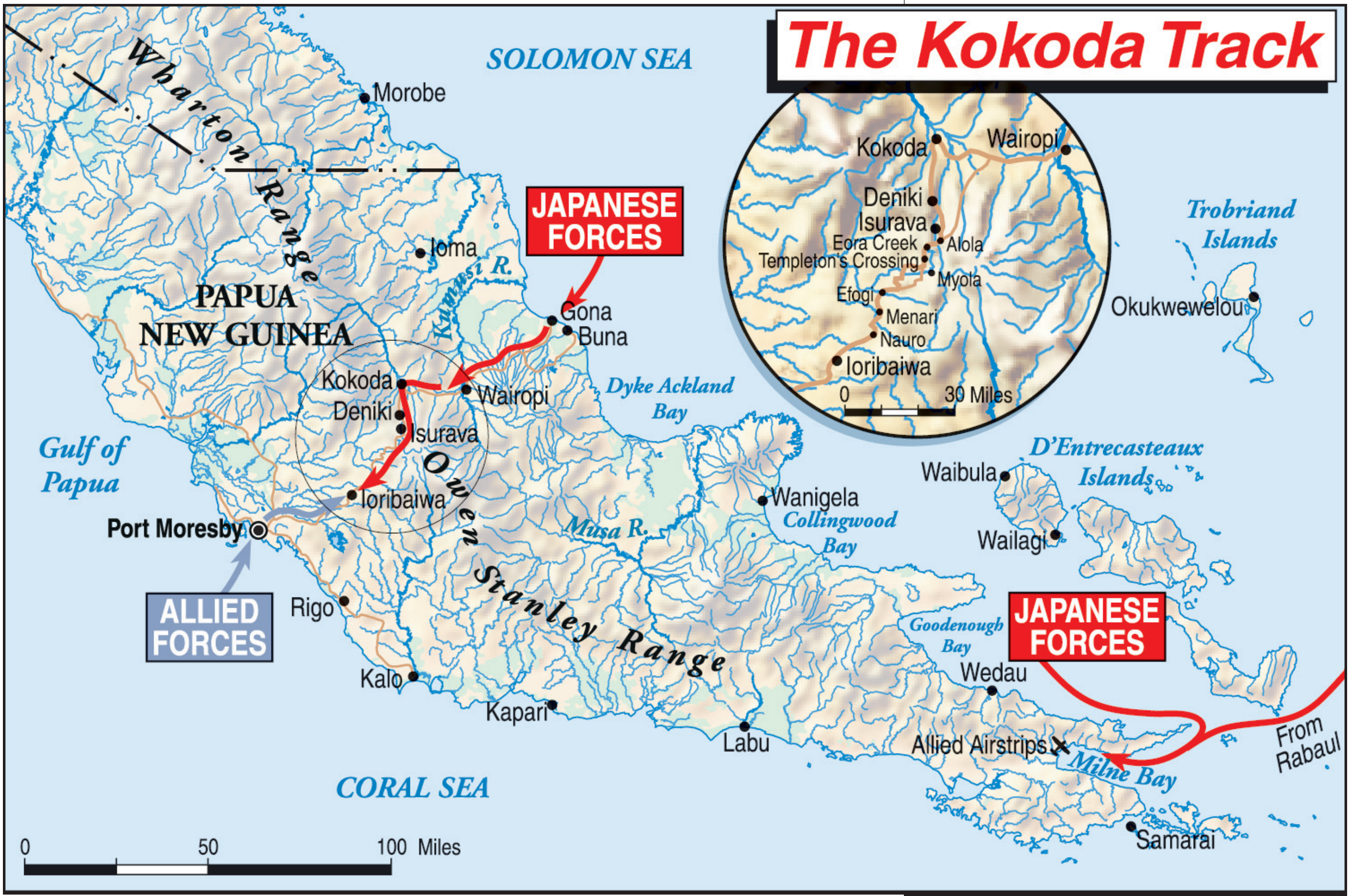
**Papuan porters carry supplies on a makeshift bridge over the Kumusi River at Wairopi. This bridge replaced the more substantial bridge destroyed by retreating Australians earlier in the campaign.**

Map © 2012 Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis, MN




The Japanese strategy was to land one invasion force at Milne Bay (lower right) and another at Gona and Buna, then cross the Owen Stanley Range to take Port Moresby; they didn't figure on the inhospitable conditions—or the stubbornness of Aussie fighters.

killed by the Japanese except the priest, Father Benson, who escaped, was recaptured, and sent as a prisoner to Rabaul.

Another mission group of five men, three women, and a six-year-old boy were beheaded one by one, the boy last. Not far away two women from the mission were stood beside open graves and repeatedly bayonetted until they fell dying in the graves.

The Japanese combat troops marching on Kokoda took a route that appeared on their maps as a road to Kokoda and on to Port Moresby on the south coast. The road was, in fact, merely a track, a native footpath that began in the malaria-ridden swamps near Gona, went across a plain of up to two-meter high kunai grass and into the foothills of the Owen Stanley Mountains and the valley of Kokoda. Kokoda was 400 meters above sea level and was backed by spectacular mountains 2,000 meters high.

The Japanese combat troops hit their first opposition near Awala when they met 11 Platoon, B Company, 39th (militia) Battalion together with an Australian officer and a few native soldiers of the Paciific Islands Battalion. Hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned, the Australians and native troops retreated across the Kumusi River at Wairopi, where there was a footbridge suspended on a wire cable across the river (the name Wairopi was pidgin for "wire rope"). The retreating Australians destroyed the bridge and ambushed the Japanese as they tried to cross the river.

When the Japanese began to encircle them, the Australians fell back to Gorari, where they were reinforced by 12 Platoon from Kokoda. An ambush was sprung on the Japanese at Gorari Creek, but the Japanese were far too strong and experienced in fighting in this type of country, so the Australians fell back again, to Oivi, where heavy fighting began.

At 39th Battalion headquarters at Kokoda, Lt. Col. William T. Owen radioed for two more companies of his battalion to be flown in from Port Moresby, and he sent his last platoon to Oivi.

The 39th Battalion, a battalion of militia with little military training, had been digging trenches and building fortifications in and around Port Moresby for several months when it was alerted to move to the north coast to watch for any Japanese landings in the area.

Colonel Owen, with his battalion HQ and B Company, had marched over the Kokoda Trail from Port Moresby and reached Kokoda while others were still struggling along the trail. Next day, 16 Platoon, D Company, limped into Kokoda and half a platoon was flown in in a civilian plane.

From the Port Moresby end, the Kokoda

Trail began when, after walking for a mile beside the Goldie River, the footpath went up a steep spur on the Imita Range. Soldiers reached the top of it shocked by the strain of the climb and gasping for air to find this was only the beginning. Before them was range after range of similar topography, the jungle-covered mountains and ranges rising higher and higher and continuing to the far horizon.

To all points of the compass, valleys, crevices, and creases sprayed out at random, many of them filled with mist. There was nothing they could do but stagger on, hour after hour, for distance was not measured in yards and miles but in time—how long to the next staging point, the next rest area, the next camp site?

Through it all, roughly northward, poked and prodded the Kokoda Trail, "the bloody track" the Australian soldiers called it. Sometimes gripping the side of a mountain above a raging torrent, sometimes going from rock to rock in a swift-flowing mountain stream, sometimes wading in putrid marsh up to their waists, often going up a slope just a few degrees off vertical and going down a similar bone-jarring, ankle-twisting slope on the other side. There were snakes, spiders, leeches, mosquitoes, insects of all kinds, and constant heavy rain and humidity, eternal slimy mud, freezing cold nights. Diseases soon became rife—dysentery, malaria, typhus, small scratches that quickly became tropical ulcers.

At Oivi, a two-hour march from Kokoda, the situation was now desperate. When darkness fell, Captain Sam Templeton, commander of B Company, slipped off into the jungle to find some reinforcements coming from Kokoda and lead them back in. A few minutes later a shot was heard, then silence. Templeton was never seen again.

Convinced they would not be able to withstand the next heavy Japanese attack, the officers decided to abandon Oivi that night. Later, with each soldier holding a webbing strap from the belt of the soldier in front of him and led by the native soldiers, they made their way slowly through the black jungle to reach Kokoda next morning.

Meanwhile, Colonel Owen, with less than 50 men to defend Kokoda, the airstrip, and the trail, had withdrawn to Deniki where a hill provided a strong, natural defensive position. When B Company arrived from Oivi, Owen returned all the troops to Kokoda, signaled Port Moresby that the airstrip was open, and again asked for reinforcements and supplies. But that evening the Japanese sent a mortar bombardment over the Mambare River into Kokoda and, under the covering fire of heavy machine guns, 400 soldiers launched themselves against the Australians.

When the attack was held, the Japanese increased their mortar and machine-gun fire and sent in more troops; the Australians began to fall back to Deniki. Owen, throwing a grenade at Japanese advancing on him through the night mist, was shot in the head. Beside him, Private "Snowy" Parr, a Bren gunner, enraged at the loss of a respected and popular CO, moved off into the night with his "number two," Private "Rusty" Hollow, looking for vengeance. They found a group of 15 Japanese. Parr opened fire on them with the Bren at close range and wiped them out. Then he and Hollow joined the retreat to Deniki.

In the meantime, C Company had arrived at Deniki and next day A Company came in. Then D and E Companies arrived and with them a replacement CO for Owen, Lt. Col. Alan Cameron. The 39th was now a battalion again, a force of 480 all ranks, and Cameron decided to recapture Kokoda while the Japanese were awaiting reinforcements for the next stage of their assault.

A feint attack on Kokoda and withdrawal to Deniki drew the Japanese out of Kokoda, and their commander, Lt. Col. Tsukamoto, committed his whole force in an attack on Deniki. While the attack was taking place, A and D Companies of the 39th moved behind the Japanese and walked into a deserted Kokoda. They signaled Port Moresby that the airstrip was open again and reinforcements and supplies should be sent at once. They then prepared for the return of the Japanese.

They waited all day but no reinforcements or supplies arrived. At the end of the day the Japanese came back, in torrential rain, and the Australians fought them off through that night and the next day. When night fell, the Australians tied their wounded onto makeshift stretchers and, eight soldiers to a stretcher, carried them away in the darkness

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**Members of 9 Platoon, A Company, 2/14th Infantry Battalion, rest in camp at Uberi on the Kokoda Trail, August 16, 1942. Nearly a third of the men shown would be killed within weeks after this photo was taken.**

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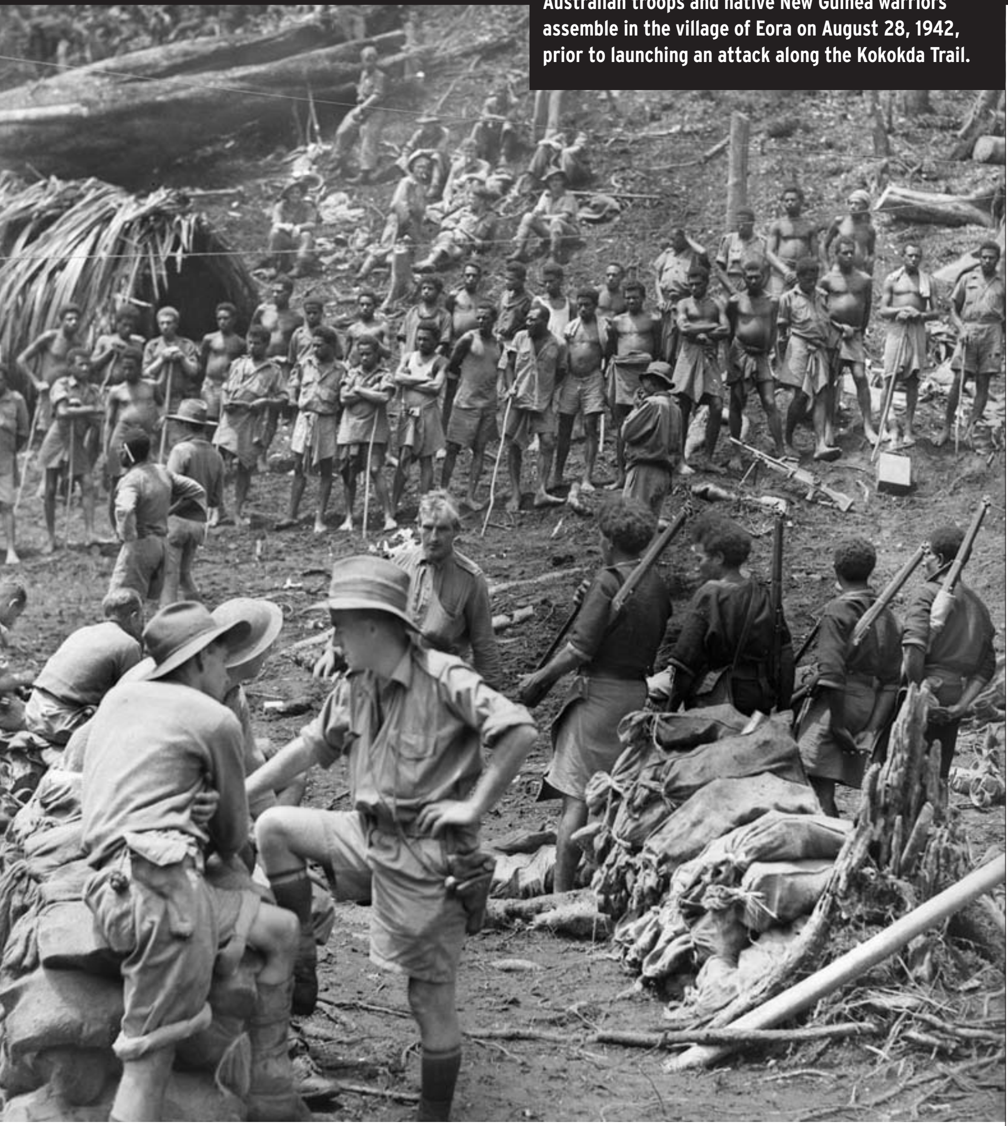


Australian troops and native New Guinea warriors assemble in the village of Eora on August 28, 1942, prior to launching an attack along the Kokokda Trail.

across the plateau and up the mountain slopes, the remainder of the two companies close behind them. Next morning the Australians, in the mountains and still within sight of Kokoda, looked back to see two Allied planes dropping supplies on the airstrip.

The Japanese reurned to Deniki looking for blood. For two days the Australians held them off, then, in danger of being completely cut off, retreated to Isurava and formed a defense perimeter. Lt. Col. Ralph Honner arrived at Isurava with part of the 53rd (AIF) Battalion and Brigadier Selwyn H. Porter, who was in command of all Australians and the few Australian-officered native troops in the area. Total strength was now 45 officers and 584 other ranks.

At this time, Maj. Gen. Tomitaro Horii, commander of the Nankai, arrived with reinforcements at the Gona-Buna beachhead to take command of the assault on Port Moresby. He moved quickly to Kokoda with a fighting force numbering 10,000.

On the morning of August 26, Horii's battalions overran the outer defenses and swept on in an all-out offensive against Isurava. At the same time the Australians were strengthened by the arrival of one company of the 2/14th (AIF) Battalion; the rest of the battalion was coming over the trail with the 2/16th (AIF) Battalion. These AIF soldiers were veterans of the desert war in North Africa who had returned to Australia and had been sent almost immediately to Port Moresby. At this time, many Australians, in military and civilian life, believed that once the Japanese had taken Port Moresby Australia would be invaded.

The onslaught on Isurava continued through August 27 and 28 with the Japanese trying to outflank the Australians by moving on surrounding jungle-covered slopes. From his headquarters on a mountainside overlooking Isurava, General Horii watched the battle and chafed at this early hold-up of his campaign to take Port Moresby. He ordered up two more battalions and, on the 29th, five battalions began attacking in waves.

The Australians held, breaking each attack. But each attack brought the Japanese closer until some of the Australians were fighting with fists and boots and rifle butts. At one point, Corporal Charles McCallum, bleeding from three wounds, held off the Japanese with a Thompson submachine gun he fired from the shoulder and a Bren gun he fired from the hip. One Japanese soldier came so close he tore an ammunition pouch from McCallum's chest before the Australian could club him with the Thompson. Australians who were nearby reported McCallum killed at least 40 Japanese in this action.

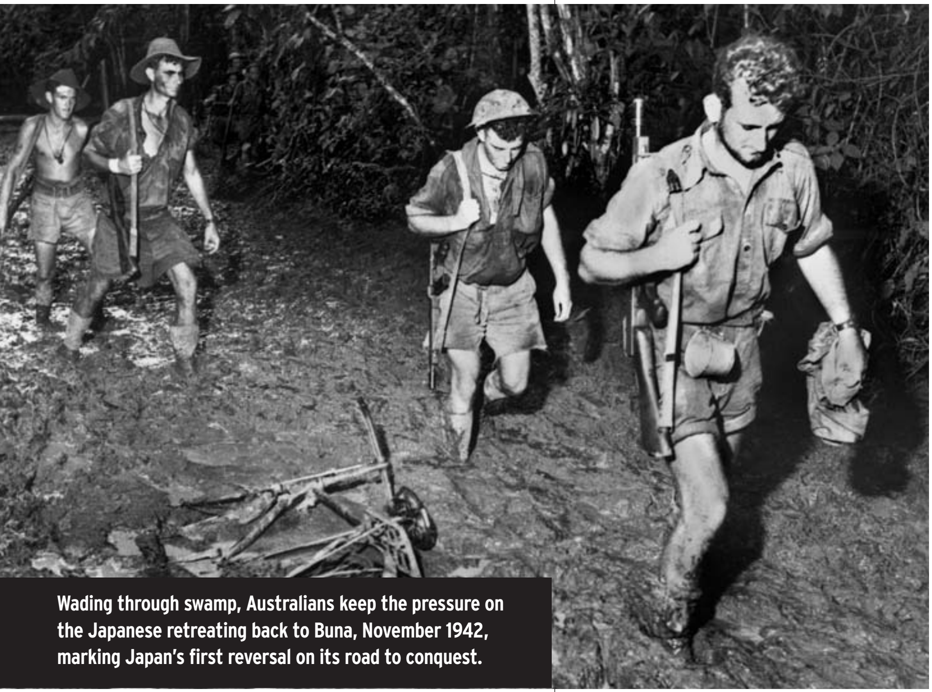
Not far away, some Japanese soldiers were preparing for another attack. Private Bruce Kingsbury charged in among them with a Bren gun and grenades, scattering them. He then charged one machine-gun post after another, using the Bren and grenades on them, while several of his comrades followed him, killing any Japanese he missed. In the process they forced the Japanese line back 100 meters. Kingsbury, running toward another machine gun, was shot dead by a sniper. For his part in defending battalion headquarters, Kingsbury was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

By evening the weary Australians could hold no longer, and that night some of them withdrew to a ridge behind Isurava. The others withdrew to a few native huts at the village of Alola, where the wounded were being held. Next morning, the Japanese, finding that the Australians had left Isurava, took up their pursuit and began a day of perhaps the heaviest fighting on the Kokoda Trail. In the afternoon the Australians were forced off the ridge and, in a welter of savage fighting, fell back on Alola.

The evacuation of the wounded began. The badly wounded were tied onto stretchers made of tree branches and vines and were carried away on a seven- to eight-day journey in the rain and mud and over some of the roughest country in the world, while the walking wounded began to do so, helping one another as best they could. That night and throughout the next day the remaining Australians fought to hold Alola and give the wounded as much time as possible to move on, but when night came again they were driven out.

They retreated to Eora. At Eora the trail plunged 350 meters on a 45-degree slope to a creek and went up the other side so steeply the soldiers had to climb the slope on hands and knees.

Australian War Museum



Wading through swamp, Australians keep the pressure on the Japanese retreating back to Buna, November 1942, marking Japan's first reversal on its road to conquest.

A medical team was in action at Eora, performing surgery on the wounded brought in from the fighting and on passing stretcher cases. Under a thatch roof on which the rain pelted down and on a floor of mud, amputations and treatments were carried out with the aid of flashlights. Exhausted surgeons, doctors, and medical aides worked through the night to clear the worst cases, knowing that the rearguard, with the Japanese close behind, would arrive by dawn.

The last of the Australians straggled in during the night, and they assembled all who could possibly fight and prepared for the attack they knew would come soon. A lieutenant colonel and his headquarters were missing, lost somewhere during the night. The survivors of the 39th Battalion had not had a change of clothing in three weeks; they were ragged, their boots were falling apart, and they were riddled with dysentery and malaria. They had been fighting day and night since before Kokoda, with very little food to sustain them, and were now little more than moving scarecrows.

The stretcher cases were moved out. Among the walking wounded was a soldier with two bullet wounds in one leg and one in his other foot; he moved crab-wise along the trail with others pushing him up the slopes. Another soldier crawled and hopped along—one leg had been blown off below the knee and the stump was ligatured and dressed and wrapped in a rice sack. Another walked along with his shattered arm splinted on a bayonet. Behind them the troops took up positions they knew they would not be able to hold for long.

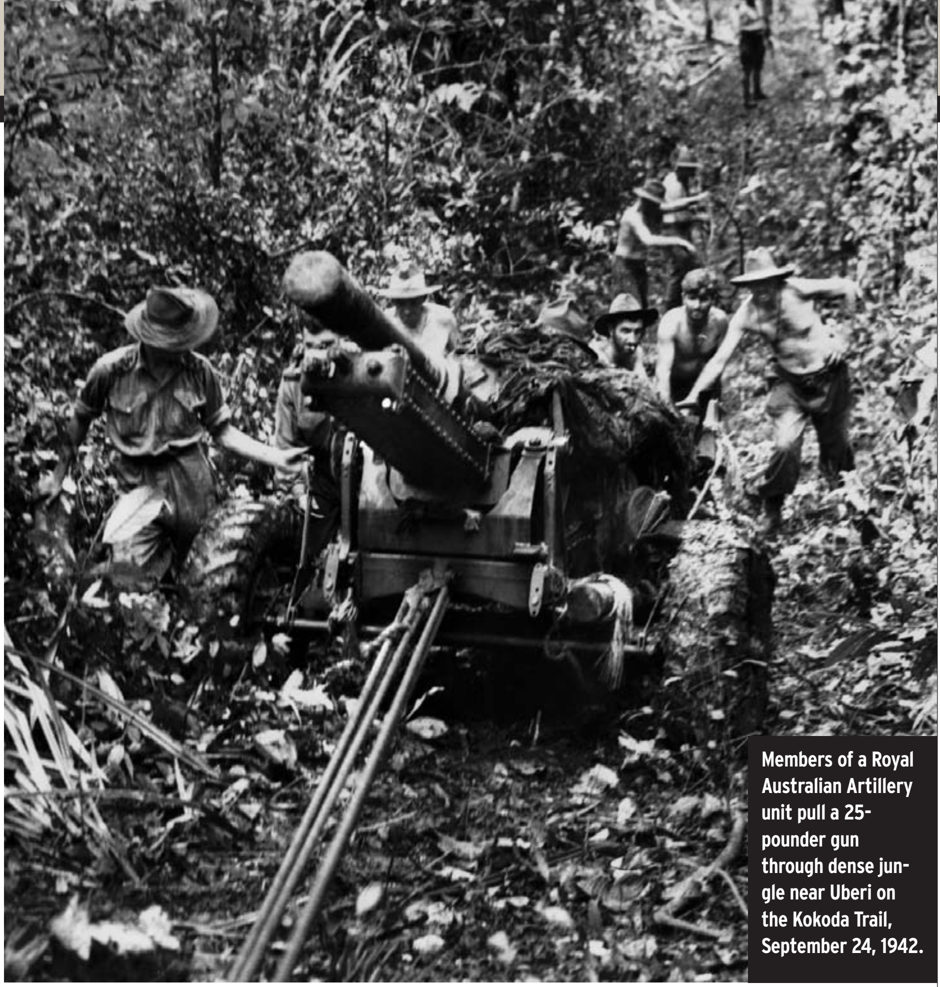
They held for a day, then retreated to Myola where food and ammunition had been dropped by aircraft. They ate a good meal, destroyed what they couldn't carry with them, and continued the retreat to Kagi. Here they enjoyed a short respite while the hungry Japanese foraged among the stores left behind at Myola, picking up rice that had been tipped into the mud and punctured cans of meat already mildewed and spoiled. Up to now the Japanese had carried ammunition rather than food, hoping to capture Australian supplies, but the Australians had left very little for them.

The 2/27th (AIF) Battalion arrived at Kagi over the trail from Port Moresby to relieve the 39th Battalion; the remnants of the 39th handed over their automatic weapons and began the long walk to Port Moresby.

The respite at Kagi allowed the Australians the luxury of removing their boots for the first time in 10 days and more; they found their feet, as one described them, "like grotesque, pulpy gloves." When socks were removed, skin came away with them. Voicing the opinions of the troops was the comment, "Why should we be fighting for country like this? We should be glad to give it to the Jap bastards."

From Kagi the Australians retreated to the village of Efogi and, from the heights above the village, guided in eight Bostons (Douglas A-20 Havoc bombers) and four Kittyhawks to disrupt Japanese attacks for a few hours. This allowed them time to dig in on the slopes, but Japanese soldiers in ones and twos walked calmly toward them, allowing themselves to be shot dead while disclosing Australian positions to comrades behind them. Then came a bombardment by a mountain gun, mortars, and heavy machine guns, together with assaults that often brought the Japanese to within 15 meters of the Australians before they could be driven back.

Again it was the Japanese tactic of encircling in numbers that forced the Australians out of Efogi. With no positions behind them that could be held against these tactics, the Australians fell back to Menari and then to Nauro, under attack all the way, and then to Ioribaiwa Ridge. At the Ridge, Brigadier Ken Eather's 25th Brigade of North African veterans was preparing to counterattack and begin pushing the Japanese back. But the Japanese,



Members of a Royal Australian Artillery unit pull a 25-pounder gun through dense jungle near Uberi on the Kokoda Trail, September 24, 1942.

National Archives

so close now to their objective, Port Moresby, could hear the sounds of aircraft taking off and landing at the town's airport, and immediately attacked Ioribaiwa Ridge.

The battle for the ridge continued through September 15 and 16, and Eather and his 25th Brigade, caught up in it, did not have the freedom of movement necessary for him to begin his offensive. He asked for and was given permission to fall back to Imita Ridge across the valley. When the Australians left Ioribaiwa, the Japanese swarmed in, looking for supplies, so intent on finding them that they failed to follow the Australian rearguard; they found very little. Forty hungry Japanese coming down the ridge into the valley were all killed in an Australian ambush.

This was the limit of the Japanese advance. Eather's patrols now dominated the Uaule Valley between Ioribaiwa Ridge and Imita Ridge four kilometers away.

Horii brought forward 1,000 reinforcements, enlarging his force to two brigades—about 5,000 fighting men—but the reinforcements, like the troops already on the ridge, were starving. The mistake of hoping to capture Australian supplies was being fully driven home. Humanly incapable of going any farther without food and rest, the Japanese dug in on Ioribaiwa Ridge and awaited the fresh reinforcements Horii was promised and with which he intended a final strike through to Port Moresby.

On September 28, 1942, two Australian 25-pounder field guns smashed holes in the palisades the Japanese had erected on Ioribaiwa Ridge, and the 25th Brigade went in with bayonets and grenades—the counterattack had begun.

Rather than a battle, however, there was only anticlimax. There were no living Japanese, only the dead—hundreds of corpses of soldiers who had fallen and died from wounds and disease and starvation.

Over to the east in the Solomon Islands, the battle for Guadalcanal was raging, and the Japanese high command had decided to give that battle priority over Horii's thrust to Port Moresby. The reinforcements Horii had been promised were diverted to Guadalcanal, and he was sent a message ordering him to fall back to the Gona-Buna base from which another attack would be launched on Port Moresby when the battle for Guadalcanal was over.

Horii was stunned, as were his officers and men. Japanese soldiers were being told to retreat in the face of the enemy. It was unbelievable. But the message was in the name of the Emperor and Horii dared not disobey it. He began withdrawal at once.

Some of the retreating officers and men fell out to fight to the death rather than retreat any farther. Many wounded and sick stayed behind, with their weapons loaded, hoping to take one or more Australians with them when they died.

The 25th Brigade followed them, moving in three prongs, one in the center on the slimy mud of the Kokoda Trail and the other two in the wet jungle on either side. They scouted every side track, every possibility where the Japanese might have circled to come in behind them. It was time consuming but necessary, for they had heard stories of atrocities from natives who came out of the jungle to meet them.

Some were natives of New Britain the Japanese had brought with them to work as porters and laborers. They told of being worked until jabs from from bayonets could no longer keep them on their feet, then bayonets put an end to some. Villagers along the trail told horrendous stories of bayonetings and shootings and the rape of their women. They found some Australians, here one beheaded, there another tied to a tree and bayoneted.

The 25th pushed on through Nauro and Menari, littered with the rotting corpses and skeletons of Japanese and Australians who had died in the fighting a few weeks before. The stench of death and decay was everywhere. At Templeton's Crossing on October 8, Horii put up a defense so strong that the Australians thought the enemy had received reinforcements from the Gona-Buna base.

The Australians were held up for six days, and from General MacArthur and others in Australia came accusations they were dragging their feet. It was here they found that, whatever help Horii might have received, it was not food. Diaries and other evidence found on the bodies of Japanese confirmed that some had resorted to cannibalism.

The Australians, like the Japanese going the other way, were soon outrunning their supplies. Each man carried a heavy load, and 800 native porters were employed to carry supplies along the trail, but it was estimated that 3,000 were needed. Some supplies were dropped by aircraft, but the recovery rate was low. And there was the problem of the wounded and chronically sick.

A runway was prepared on a dry lake bed at Myola to evacuate the casualties by air, but requests for aircraft did not result in any arriving. A few pilots did land to show that it could be done, and they took out a handful of the wounded, but those who were left and could possibly move began to walk out. A grim column of 212 battle casualties and 226 sick began the long trek back.

The Japanese retreated from Templeton's Crossing to Eora Creek to make a stand behind three lines of fortifications built by reserve units with weapon pits bristling with heavy and light machine guns. Stung by accusations of timid tactics from American and Australian commanders in Australia and Port Moresby, the Australians on the trail overran the fortifications, and the advance on Kokoda continued.

When they reached Kokoda on November 2 they found the Japanese had abandoned it and had fallen back to fortifications built at Oivi. Here the Australians used Japanese encircling tactics with small groups meeting and killing each other in the tangled, sodden jungle, and any open space became a killing ground. Exhausted, the Japanese somehow found the strength to counterattack, and the fighting was vicious.

The rate of one Australian killed to two wounded was an indication of the closeness of the fighting. Japanese losses were very heavy, but some escaped the encirclement, only to be hunted down and killed as they tried to cross the Kumusi River. General Horii drowned as a canoe he was in was washed out to sea and overturned 10 kilometers from shore.

The first American troops arrived in Papua on September 12, 1942; they were the 126th and 128th Regiments of Maj. Gen. Edwin F. Harding's 32nd Infantry Division, and they began to cut a track designed to outflank the Japanese at Kokoda. But by the time of General Horii's death, Americans, apart from flying air support, had not been used in the campaign.

MacArthur's communiqués stated that "Allied" troops had won the long campaign for Kokoda and an American press report stated that the announcement of the presence of American infantry in the area "clarified the apparent mystery of the precipitous Japanese retreat across the Owen Stanley Range."

Hanson Baldwin, the well-known American military journalist, stated in the *New York Times* that only the intervention of American infantry had saved the Australians from defeat. "American soldiers," he said, "were rushed into action, and were instrumental in saving the day. With the Australians, they have since given the Japanese a dose of their own medicine, outflanking them and constantly infiltrating into enemy lines until the Japanese are now fighting desperately for their beachhead."

Both: National Archives

**ABOVE: Lieutenant General Hatazo Adachi commanded invasion forces in Papua-New Guinea. Below, Major General Tomitaru Horii, who led Japanese attack along the Kokoda Trail, drowned trying to evade capture.**

With the Wairopi Bridge down, the Australian 16th and 25th Brigades crossed the Kumusi over bridges improvised by the engineers and continued down the Kokoda Trail to the coastal swamplands where it all began four months before. Here, with some reinforcements and the Americans, they would face the Japanese in their heavily defended base at Gona, Buna, and Sanananda.

Plans for the attack on Buna had already been made at MacArthur's headquarters. The Australian 16th and 25th Brigades would press on to Buna, a battalion of the American 126th Regiment would march through Jaure and attack from the south, and the rest of the 126th plus the 128th Regiment would fly to Wanigela and Pongani and attack from there. By the time the Australians had crossed the Kumusi, the Americans were moving on Buna in three separate columns, supported by Australian commandos and artillery.

The Japanese had bounced back from their defeat and were turning their beachhead into a bastion that would maintain their tiny hold on Papua. With reinforcements, they now had some 9,000 troops in the beachhead, and Lt. Gen. Hatazo Adachi of the 18th Army was in overall command of Papua-New Guinea operations. On the morning of November 19, advance elements of Brigadier Eather's 25th Brigade ran into Japanese positions just south of Gona village. Behind the positions were strong defenses. The Australians attacked the defenses and gained some ground but were forced to retire next day with heavy casualties. The brigade, reduced to 736 mostly sick and tired troops, lost another 204 killed and wounded in the assault.

They were reinforced by Brigadier Ivan N. Dougherty and his 21st Brigade, veterans of the campaigns in Libya, Greece, and Crete, and now located between Kokoda and Ioribaiwa. Doughherty took responsibility for the Gona area. He quickly engaged his brigade in offensive operations and, although his first attacks failed, a series of grinding assaults blasted the Japanese out of their defenses; the village of Gona was occupied on December 9. The Japanese garrison of 800-900 was almost entirely wiped out; the brigade buried 600 of their dead.

The Australian operations had secured the left flank of the advance, but along the Sanananda Track and at Buna the advance had become confused and stalemated. The American 126th and 128th Regiments, advancing along two coastal trails from the south

Australian War Museum

ABOVE: Muddy and rain-soaked members of the Australian 2/7 Cavalry Regiment move toward Buna, still confident in the face of savage enemy resistance. The smiling soldier at right carries a 23-pound, .303 Bren light machine gun. BELOW: The price of aggression: A group of dead Japanese, killed during in the final Australian assault on Gona, December 17, 1942, lie in the rubble of their ammunition dump.

Australian War Museum

toward Buna, met only isolated resistence as they approached the main Japanese lines, but resistance soon hardened.

MacArthur, intent on his Americans speeding up the campaign, instructed the Australian commander, General Thomas Blamey, that his land forces must attack the Buna-Gona area on November 21, saying: "All columns will be driven through to objectives regardless of losses."

Harding launched his division into the offensive on the morning of November 21, and for the next nine days there was great confusion. The troops, badly led, poorly trained, and conditioned to a soft life prior to their arrival in Papua, were badly mauled in their first attacks on the main Buna defenses.

MacArthur, disappointed, sent for Lt. Gen. Robert Eichelberger, commander of the American I Corps; he arrived at MacArthur's temporary headquarters in Port Moresby on November 30. MacArthur told him, "Bob, I'm putting you in command at Buna. Relieve Harding. I want you to remove all officers who won't fight. Relieve regimental and battalion commanders if necessary. Put sergeants in charge of battalions and corporals in charge of companies—anyone who will fight.... I want you to take Buna, or not come back alive, and that goes for your Chief of Staff too. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Eichelberger arrived at Buna the next day and was appalled by what he found. The command structure was chaotic, the morale of the troops was low, and "a general malaise hung over the whole operation." He immediately relieved Harding and two regimental commanders and replaced them with members of his own staff. He ordered an attack to be launched with Australian Bren gun carriers in support on December 5.

The attack was launched on two fronts, one against Buna village, the other against the strong defenses east of the village along the airstrip known as New Strip. Some success was achieved in the village area but the main garrison held firm and the airstrip defenses could not be cracked despite heavier American attacks. By December 10 the Yanks had lost 1,827 men killed, wounded, missing, and sick, and Eichelberger relieved the 126th Regiment with the 127th.

The fresh 127th entered Buna village to find the remnants of the garrison gone but the airstrip defenses still holding, and Eichelberger prepared for another assault. He was then advised that Brigadier Wootten's 18th Australian Brigade was coming into the line to take over responsibility for the airstrip sector. The brigade would have with it two highly trained troops of Stuart light tanks of the 2/16th Armored Regiment.

Wootten took over the command, including three American battalions, on December 17. His intention was to capture the Cape Endaiadere-New Strip-Old Strip-Buna government headquarters region.

The first objective was the whole coastal area between New Strip and the mouth of Simemi Creek, where the Japanese were entrenched in a series of powerful strongpoints. Each was a small fortress concealed and camouflaged, some protected by interlaced coconut logs covered with six feet of earth, some steel roofed, others concrete.

Wootten's assault began at 7 AM on December 18, with the Australians spearheading the operation behind seven tanks. "Their extraordinary courage as they walked forward into a torrent of fire and disposed of one strongpoint after another captured the imagination of the Americans," General Eichelberger wrote after the war. "It was a spectacular and dramatic assault, and a brave one. From New Strip to the sea was about a mile. American troops wheeled to the west in support, and other Americans were assigned to mopping-up duties. But behind the tanks went the fresh and jaunty Aussie veterans ... with their blazing Tommy guns swinging before them.

"Concealed Japanese positions, which were even more formidable than our patrols had indicated, burst into flame. There was the greasy smell of tracer fire, and heavy machine gun fire from barricades and entrenchments. Steadily tanks and infantrymen advanced through the sparse, high coconut trees, seemingly impervious to the

U.S. 32nd Infantry Division troops clear a Japanese bunker near Buna, November 1942. MacArthur, unhappy with progress, inserted the 32nd to bolster Aussie lines and retake Buna.

National Archives

heavy opposition."

By the end of the first day the Australians had cleared the Japanese from their positions on a line that ran from the sea due south to the east end of New Strip, despite having lost about one third of their attacking strength. But Wootten maintained the momentum of his operations, and each day brought further gains despite the depth of the Japanese defenses.

By January 1, 1943, the three battalions of the brigade had reached Giropa Point. They had suffered 863 casualties, 45 percent of their total strength. In the final count of the battle for Buna, almost the whole of the American 32nd Division had become involved, and the total Allied losses amounted to some 2,870 battle casualties. Of these, the Australians suffered 913. Known Japanese losses were 900 killed by the Australian 18th Brigade east of Giropa Point and 490 in the village and local government headquarters. How many more were killed is not known.

Some American and British historians claim Buna a victory for U.S. forces, but credit for the victory should at least be shared with the Australians. Anxious as the Americans were to obtain a quick and decisive result in their own right, it was the intervention of Wootten's troops that broke the back of the Japanese defenses on the coast.

With the left and right flanks of the Allied advance to the coast now secure, attention was concentrated on Sananada, where the Japanese had established their main defensive positions astride the Sananada Track in terrain that was a mixture of heavy swamp, kunai grass, and thick bush.

From mid-November to mid-December 1942, the Japanese garrison of some 6,000 troops had stubbornly held off attacks by the 16th Australian Brigade, a brigade in the last stages of physical endurance after its long and arduous fight over the Owen Stanley Mountains. When they were pulled out of the line in December, the brigade's fighting strength was reduced to 50 officers and 488 other ranks.

The troops of the U.S. 126th Infantry Regiment who relieved them were fresh and full of confidence. They told the Australians, "You can go home now. We're here to clean things up." But this confident spirit was soon broken by the malarial swamps and the savage Japanese resistance. They were relieved by two Australian militia battalions of the 30th Brigade, but the battalions' heavy attacks achieved only limited success, and Maj. Gen. George Vasey reluctantly decided he would have to wait until Buna had been eliminated before finishing the fight at Sanananda.

When Buna was eliminated, it was decided that Australian forces would attack Sanananda frontally from along the Sanananda Track, while the Americans moved on Sanananda along the coast from Buna. Brigadier Wootten's 18th Brigade would spearhead the attack.

Wootten attacked on the morning of January 12, sending two battalions in a flanking movement against the Japanese defenses. This resulted in a long day of murderous fighting in steaming heat and foul swamplands. By nightfall it seemed that the attack was going to fail, but early next morning a Japanese soldier was captured. He revealed that all fit Japanese troops had been ordered to withdraw, leaving only the sick and wounded to defend the strongpoints. Wootten immediately attacked.

By nightfall on January 14, the 18th had captured the road junction that had delayed the advance for so long, and Australian and American troops continued attacking the remaining defensive positions until all organized resistance ceased on January 22.

The defense of Sanananda was another demonstration of the extraordinary tenacity of the Japanese soldiers. They lost some 1,600 killed and 1,200 wounded in defending the swamp surrounding Sanananda, held up the Allied advance for two months, and inflicted heavy casualties on the Australians—600 killed and 800 wounded—and the Americans—274 killed and about 400 wounded. The toll of sickness in both armies was greater than these figures.

Australian infantrymen follow a tank leading the final assault on Buna, December 28, 1942. The Japanese defeat proved they were not supermen and gave the Allies hope of eventual victory no matter how far off.

Australian War Museum

The ending of the Sanananda operations completed the first defeat of a Japanese land force during World War II. About 20,000 soldiers were in action in the Kokoda, Milne Bay, and Buna-Gona operations, and it is known that more than 13,000 of them perished in various ways. About 2,000 were evacuated by sea, and some relative few escaped from the battle areas to join comrades elsewhere. However, most of the remaining Japanese died of wounds, disease, and starvation, leaving their bones in the mountains, swamps, and jungles of Papua.

The Australians, who had borne the lion's share of the fighting, suffered 5,689 battle casualties between July 22, 1942, and January 22, 1943, and the Americans, during their involvement in the Buna and Sanananda sector, lost 2,931.

During the fighting in Papua, the Australian Army developed techniques of tactical leadership that were very useful in later fighting in New Guinea and by the British in Burma. The Australian soldier became expert in jungle warfare—at least the equal or even better than Japanese soldiers who had established an almost superhuman reputation.

Whether the savage fighting and heavy casualties suffered in the final stages of the campaign, especially at Buna, Gona, and Sanananda, were strategically justified is open to question. Perhaps the Japanese garrisons could have been isolated and left to wither on the vine or to be overwhelmed by superior forces—a strategy MacArthur adopted later in the New Guinea campaign.

In any event, the victory in Papua gave a boost to Allied morale. It also destroyed any chance of the Japanese invading Australia, although the Japanese high command was coming to the conclusion that the invasion, capture, and garrisoning of such a huge country was well beyond their resources.

And, importantly, as Field Marshal Slim pointed out, the Australians "broke the spell of the invincibility of the Japanese army." □

National Archives

# Forgotten ALLY: THE BRAZILIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

South America's only force to fight in World War II contributed to the Allied victory in Italy.

**THE TERM "UNITED NATIONS"** was in large part derived from the large number of nations that joined in common cause between 1939 and 1945 to defeat the Axis powers of Germany, Japan, and Italy during World War II. Scores of nations joined the major Allied powers to contribute, directly or indirectly, to the defeat of the common enemy.

One of those nations was South America's largest country, Brazil. The significant contribution of her wealth, resources, and blood of her own people is, unfortunately, little remembered today.

Originally, Latin America was important to the United States for the resources it provided to a nation soon to be at war. In 1940, 90 percent of the region's coffee, 83 percent of the sugar, 78 percent of the bauxite, 70 percent of the tungsten, as well as significant percentages of tin, copper, and crude oil were imported to the United States for both domestic and military consumption.

Although the United States was not yet at war, it had concerns about Latin America, for a dictator sympathetic to Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini might cause trouble for a United States that was trying to remain neutral. German propaganda took full advantage of the opportunity and distributed literature and films in Spanish to encourage dissension throughout Latin America. It even established a propaganda radio station in Montevideo, Uruguay.

Mexico was already at odds with the United States. It had expropriated American oil companies, and the United States was claiming that communist and National Socialist plots were prevalent throughout that country. And the Mexican government was ready to expel any American agents within its borders that were identified. Mexico also clearly anticipated a German victory, which the country was expected to use to strengthen its position with the United States. Mexico finally sent a squadron of fighter aircraft to the Pacific late in the war.

Other Central and South American countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Columbia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Peru, and Venezuela wanted no part of the conflict and remained on the sidelines.

In Brazil in June 1940, President Getúlio Vargas had already informed the German ambassador that Brazil fully intended to maintain its independence, despite Vargas's known dislike of the democratic system and the appeal he personally felt for totalitarian states. Other states, like Argentina, were split in their loyalties. Chile, Uruguay, and Panama (of the Spanish-speaking countries, only Panama entered into a declaration of war) were sympathetic to the American camp, but the United States had to bring the entire continent onto its side.

To do so, President Franklin Roosevelt established the Inter-American Financial and Economic Committee, based in Panama. Then a number of conferences were held in Panama, Rio de Janeiro, and Washington, D.C., to settle differ-

A grinning Brazilian artilleryman in Italy loads a 105mm howitzer with a round inscribed with the troops' message for Hitler in Portuguese: "The snake is fuming" (angry). The Brazilian Expeditionary Force was part of the multinational Fifth U.S. Army in Italy.

BY NATHAN N. PREFER

ences between the members. The Chapultepec Conference held in Mexico resulted in an agreement that laid the foundations of the future cooperation of the American states. With Nelson A. Rockefeller as his coordinator for inter-American affairs, President Roosevelt loaned the Latin American states money, increased imports from them to the United States, and sent American technicians to modernize the economy of the various countries.

The Germans did much to push Brazil into the American camp. U-boat attacks off the coast of Brazil sank several Brazilian ships and killed over 600 of its citizens, including women and children. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Vargas decided to honor his nation's commitments to the United States and, in January 1942, broke diplomatic relations with Germany, Japan, and Italy.

The Brazilian Navy immediately took steps to protect its shipping while the air force conducted offshore patrols to detect enemy submarines. Several Brazilian military bases were ceded to the United States for similar uses. The sinking of Brazilian ships continued, however, with another dozen ships gone by August 1942. Vargas and his government had enough provocation by this point, and in the same month declared war on Germany and Italy.

It took longer for Brazil to decide how to contribute to the Allied war effort. Concerns that the fascist forces in North Africa, which bulged too close for comfort just across the South Atlantic, might take some aggressive action against Brazil, kept her forces at home in a protective mode. But with the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942 and the eventual defeat of the Axis forces there, Brazil turned to a more active role in the war.

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**ABOVE: A second contingent of Brazilian troops boards a U.S. transport ship bound for Italy. Many of the troops, however, were not in the best of condition and would need to improve their level of fitness before being deployed to the front. RIGHT: The BEF, in their distinctive dress uniforms, parade past Naples' Castel Nuovo shortly after their arrival, July 1944. Led by Major General João Baptista Mascarenhas de Moraes, Brazil would provide over 25,000 troops to the Allied cause.**

On December 31, 1942, President Vargas announced in a speech that his government was beginning to "think on the responsibilities of an extra-continental action." This idea would soon develop into the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, which would fight alongside the Allies in Italy in 1944 and 1945.

The first concrete steps were taken at a conference between Presidents Roosevelt and Vargas at Natal in northeastern Brazil on January 28, 1943. There the two heads of state agreed that Brazil would make some physical contribution to the Allied war effort beyond protecting its own borders. That March, President Vargas issued an "Explanation of Motives" written earlier by the war minister in which he proposed the organization of an expeditionary force to fight outside the continent. Thus was born the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, or BEF.

Although the idea had taken hold, there remained problems within Brazil itself. There were strong elements within the Vargas government who opposed Brazil's participation in the war against the Axis powers. Then there was the problem of organizing, training, equipping, and staffing such a force. There was also a need to infuse into the Brazilian people a will to fight a war in the Old World, which was far away and often resented by factions of the populace. But Vargas and his followers began campaigns to overcome each of these obstacles in turn, and by the fall of 1943 he accomplished his goal. The BEF would consist largely of a single infantry division based on the contemporary American model. To create such a unit, existing Brazilian military units would be consolidated into the necessary combat formations. Thus, the three infantry regiments were formed from units spread across Brazil. The 1st Infantry Regiment, or Sampaio Regiment, came from the military district of Rio de Janeiro. The 6th Infantry Regiment, formerly the Ipiranga Regiment, came from São Paulo State. The 11th Infantry Regiment was formerly known as the Tiradentes Regiment and came from Minas Gerais State. Most of the artillery was formed from units then based in and around Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

The unit's 9th Engineer Battalion came from Aquidauana, Mato Grosso State, while the Reconnaissance Squadron was formed out of the 2nd Mechanized Regiment, based within the city of Rio de Janeiro. The medical battalion consisted of units based in both Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. On October 7, 1943, Maj. Gen. João Baptista Mascarenhas de Moraes was appointed to command the assembled units.

The general was born in São Gabriel, Rio Grande de Sul State, in 1883, and at age 16 entered the Rio Pardo Military School as a cadet. He then completed his military training at the Brazilian Military School in Rio de Janeiro and was commissioned a second lieutenant. Later in his career he won first place in the Officers' Higher Training School and third place at the General Staff School; both courses were directed by the French military mission. He continued to rise in rank and responsibilities until he reached the highest post of chief of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force.

For many years prior to the outbreak of World War II, the Brazilian military had been instructed by a French military mission. All of its military equipment was European. This ceased with the surrender of France in 1940. Now the Brazilian forces were to participate in a foreign war with different allies, and new tactics and techniques, not to mention organizational skills, had to be learned. To this end, General Mascarenhas traveled to the United States to quickly learn American military techniques, organization, and equipment.

In Brazil the complete transformation of the BEF from a European-model organization to an American-based one took time and a great deal of effort. For example, the BEF had to be motorized, more specialists trained, and new equipment introduced. The M1 Garand rifle, the 60mm mortar, bazooka, .30-caliber light machine gun, 57mm antitank gun, and the 105mm artillery pieces, among others, were unknown to the Brazilians. These all had to be acquired, learned, and then implemented within the unit's structure, which itself was changing.

Recruitment of personnel, particularly for the specialist positions, was difficult and time consuming. Additionally, many of its leading officers were still undergoing training in the United States. In December, General Mascarenhas traveled to Italy with a group of observers viewing the Italian campaign.

On December 28, 1943, Mascarenhas was officially named commander of the 1st Expeditionary Infantry Division (1st EID), and in January, upon his return from Italy, he assumed command of the still-forming BEF.

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Meanwhile, the Brazilians were still struggling to convert from a French-oriented military organization to an American one. U.S. Army training manuals had to be translated, training methods adapted to U.S. standards, and the officers and men made physically ready for overseas deployment and the rigors of combat. This adaptation and training continued for many months, not unlike a U.S. division then training at home, and by April 1944 it became apparent that the BEF was being readied for overseas deployment. That deployment, in the greatest secrecy, began in late May 1944. In three separate groups, the 1st EID moved to embarkation points on the Brazilian coast and loaded into transports. Soon they were at sea in the Atlantic, bound for an unknown destination.

It turned out that the destination was Naples, Italy, where the division assembled in mid-July 1944. Here the first group, commanded personally by Mascarenhas, was greeted by Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, a commander of American troops in Italy.

Indeed, the Brazilians were probably more welcome than they knew. Italy had been the only area of operation for nearly a year until the Allies had, after a series of viciously difficult campaigns, finally captured Rome on June 4, 1944. But two days later, Italy became a secondary operation area as the main Allied forces landed in France at Normandy.

By July 1944, Allied commanders in Italy were in a desperate struggle to maintain their strength as forces were slowly but surely being drained away to northwestern Europe. In addition, another major landing on the southern French coast was scheduled for August, and some of the most experienced units and commanders in Italy were scheduled to depart for the operation. Thus the arrival of the fresh Brazilian Expeditionary Force with its 25,334 men was more than welcome.

The Brazilians immediately faced difficulties. The medical condition of many of the Brazilian troops was not up to standards, their uniforms were inadequate for the climate of Italy, and the general unpreparedness of the unit presented immediate problems. Despite the recommendations of the observer group (which had reported back that heavier and warmer clothing, sturdier boots, and other items were necessary to enable the combat troops to survive in the cold climate of mountainous central Italy), little had been done to make these available to the troops before their arrival at Naples.

Alerted to these problems by his personal inspection of his latest troops, Lt. Gen. Mark W. Clark, commanding the Fifth U.S. Army to which the Brazilians were assigned, took immediate steps to correct the deficiencies. Taking what the Brazilians needed from U.S. Army stocks, Clark equipped them sufficiently to allow them to participate in the coming battles.


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More training was also on the agenda for the 1st EID. Although training facilities were few, the Brazilians used what was available and included sports, training marches, and sessions of close-order drill to acclimate themselves to their new surroundings. However, reports by inspecting U.S. medical authorities had some unflattering things to say about the physical condition of many of the Brazilian troops. Many suffered from easily preventable diseases while others suffered from dental problems which, once treated, would make the soldier ready for combat. These were all addressed immediately by the Brazilian command.

Relations between the Brazilians and Clark's Fifth Army were good from the start. Having several other nationalities already under his command, Clark and his staff were used to dealing with unfamiliar methods, traditions, and customs. General Mascarenhas felt "the spontaneous and unanimous cordiality with which the U.S. officers at the headquarters in Cecina treated their Brazilian comrades was evident."

But the Brazilians had not come to Italy to meet and greet new friends. They had come to fight and, after more training and updating of equipment, that is what Clark assigned them to do. With the loss of seven of his most veteran divisions to the invasion of southern France (Operation Dragoon), he needed combat units at the front to replace those veterans. In August 1944, Clark had available two new divisions—the 92nd U.S. Infantry Division (Colored) and Mascarenhas's EID. Both of these he now sent to the front lines along the Arno River in northern Italy and into combat.

First to taste battle was the 1st Company, 9th Engineer Battalion, of the 1st EID under Captain Floriano Moller. Beginning on September 6, 1944, it was operating one of the bridges across the Arno River under the command of Maj. Gen. Willis D. Crittenberger's U.S. IV Corps. Crittenberger attached two American tank companies and a communications platoon to the 1st EID, since the Brazilians had no armor of their own and communications with American units needed some sort of a liaison between the Brazilians and American headquarters.

Brigadier General Eurico Gaspar Dutra, in his position as Minister of War and representing the Brazilian government, took up a position as the liaison between the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, which included many supporting units outside the 1st EID plus reinforcement draftees to replace casualties, and Fifth Army to which the entire force was assigned.

When the first Brazilians arrived at the front lines, the Germans had been driven from the river and were retreating to their next major defensive line, the Gothic Line in northern Italy.

Assigned to the U.S. IV Corps on the left (west) of the Allied line, the BEF was to cover Route 64, a major highway leading into northern Italy through one of only a few passes in the high mountains of the region. The Brazilians were alongside the 1st U.S. Armored Division and the 6th South African Armored Division, along with a composite infantry group known as Task Force 45 made up of former American antiaircraft units converted hastily into infantry battalions.

The first combat assignment of the Brazilians was to replace American troops on the front lines. This they did on September 14, sending forward Colonel João Segadas Vianna's 6th Infantry Regimental Combat Team and allowing the tired elements of the 370th Infantry Regiment and Task Force 45 to recuperate behind the front lines. Facing the Brazilians was the battle-hardened German XIV Corps, which had first begun fighting the Allies in Sicily more than a year ago.

Brazilian patrols quickly ascertained that the Germans had retreated from their front and, with authority from General Crittenberger, Major João Carlos Gross moved his 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, up to the Monte Comunale-Il Monte line, followed swiftly


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ABOVE: A BEF gun crew mans a 57mm antitank gun and watches for enemy action, September 1944.
LEFT: Company officers from the BEF study maps before attacking Germans along the Fifth Army front line in the Northern Apennines, October 1944.

by Major Abilio Cunha Pontes's 2nd Battalion.

Soon, Captain Alberto Tavares da Silva had his 2nd Company, 6th Infantry, ride on American-supplied trucks into the towns of Massarosa and Bozzano, capturing the first towns in the Brazilian offensive. At 2:22 PM on September 16 the first rounds of Brazilian artillery were fired at the Germans by Captain Lobato's battery of the Brazilian Field Artillery Group. Brazil was now in the war.

But Mascarenhas was still anxious to try his troops against Germans who stood their ground. To do this, he planned an advance to a new line of operations around the area of Camaiore-Monte Prano. To reach this area the BEF would first have to capture Camaiore. Brig. Gen. Euclydes Zenobio da Costa, the division's infantry commander, assigned a special mixed group under the command of Captain Ernani Ayrose of the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, to attack. This they did on September 18, supported by U.S. tanks.

But the tanks were halted by a destroyed bridge and Captain Ayrosa left them behind as his infantry continued the advance. Under intense artillery and mortar fire, the Brazilian infantry entered Camaiore and secured it against light opposition. First Lt. Paulo Nunes Leal was the first man into town, leading his combat engineers to clear German mines and booby traps. Close behind came the 7th Company under Captain Alvaro Felix, moving quickly in jeeps and trucks. Combined with other actions that day and the next by Major Abilio's 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry, the Brazilians were now facing the advanced positions of the vaunted Gothic Line.

Next on General Zenobio's list was Monte Prano itself. From these heights the Brazilians would have better observation while denying the Germans the same advantage. A combined artillery, tank, and infantry attack was launched between September 21-26, and a series of violent patrol actions resulted in Lieutenant Mario Cabral de Vasconcellos reaching the peak with his patrol of the 6th Infantry Regiment. The entire action had cost the Brazilians five dead and 17 wounded.

Soon after this first victory, the Brazilians were moved into the Serchio Valley to replace the 1st U.S. Armored Division, which in turn was transferred to another sector of the front. Still connecting the IV Corps front between the 92nd Infantry Division and Task Force 45, the Brazilian 3rd Battalion, 6th Infantry, under Major Silvino Nobrega, replaced the 3rd Battalion, 370th U.S. Infantry Regiment, while the rest of the 6th moved into position. Support in the form of the 2nd Battalion, 1st Self-Propelled Mortar Regiment, under Colonel Da Camino, followed immediately behind the infantry.

Skirmishing with the German 42nd Infantry Division began immediately. When heavy rains began on October 1, 1944, the Brazilian infantry, like those of all the combatants in Italy, were hampered by the wet, muddy, and difficult terrain.

Slowly the Brazilians maintained an advance into the Serchio Valley, capturing Fornaci and beating back a German counterattack. Intelligence gathered from patrols inspired General Zenobio da Costa to request permission of General Crittenberger to launch an attack to seize the Gallicano-Barga road. When permission was received, the Brazilians moved out and by October 11 had occupied Barga.

Gallicano was abandoned by the Germans, but the Brazilians were kept from occupying it due to the heavy artillery fire the Germans poured on the town. The Brazilians' new positions dominated the road, which was their objective. Meanwhile, Colonel Jose Machado Lopes's 9th Engineer Battalion worked on improving communications and supply routes behind the advancing BEF.

During October, the Brazilian Minister of War, General Eurico Dutra, visited Italy and the Brazilian troops. In his tour he noted that the American and British troops all wore an emblem that differentiated them from each other. He inquired why the Brazilian troops had no such emblem, and General Mascarenhas gave Lt. Col. Aguinaldo Jose Senna Campos, his chief of staff, 4th Section, the job of creating an emblem for the Brazilian troops.

General Clark, the American commander, also expressed an interest in a unique Brazilian emblem. Taking the troops' phrase "the snake is angry," Lt. Col. Campos devised an insignia which quickly received the approval of the higher command. It depicted a coiled snake about to strike.

Patrols soon discovered that the enemy troops in front of the 1st EID had been replaced. The replacements were identified as Italian fascist troops of the Monte Rosa Division. Once again the Brazilians sought permission to attack. By the end of October 1944, the entire Brazilian Division was at or near the front lines.

Mascarenhas delayed the attack for a few days to allow the full supporting elements of the division to arrive. That attack, launched October 30, succeeded in securing all of the initial objectives and placing the Brazilians within four kilometers of the main enemy defenses of the Gothic Line.

The Germans objected to the close proximity of the Brazilians. At dawn on a rainy October 31, they counterattacked in strength. The Brazilians, surprised by the ferocity of the attack, were unprepared to meet it. Believing that they faced only weak Italian forces, they had relaxed their guard. As a result, several Brazilian units were forced to retreat and the Germans established footholds on two of the more recent Brazilian conquests, Hills 906 and 1048.

One Brazilian company of the 6th Infantry ran out of ammunition and was forced to retreat, while another found itself nearly encircled and managed to pull back only at the last possible moment. At a cost of 13 dead, 87 wounded, seven missing, and 183 non-battle casualties, the Brazilians had suffered their first reverse in Italy. But they had held their line with only limited withdrawals.

Events elsewhere halted further operations for the immediate future. At a conference of commanders called by General Clark on October 29, General Mascarenhas learned that the American infantry divisions were exhausted, seriously short of infantry, and needed rest and reorganization before the offensive could be renewed. Alongside Fifth Army, the British Eighth Army was equally depleted.

To assist in refreshing the understrength units, the Brazilians would be asked to move once again, this time to relieve the 1st U.S. Armored Division and a part of the 6th South African Armored Division to allow them to move behind the lines to reorganize. For now the entire army group would go on the defensive. Plans were to renew the offensive in December once the assault troops had rested and been reinforced.

Pleased at being called a member of "the First Team" by General Clark, General Mascarenhas was soon busy moving his 1st EID's infantry, artillery, and headquarters units to the Reno Valley area. Behind them the EID's 1st and 11th Infantry Regiments continued to train, and General Zenobio da Costa returned to his position as Chief of Infantry to supervise the training, employing his recently gained experience to further enhance that training.

At the front, the 6th Infantry Regiment had to be split to maintain control of the Serchio Valley while other elements deployed to the Reno Valley area. Tanks of the 751st U.S. Tank Battalion were divided between the two groups. Company C of the 701st U.S. Tank Destroyer Battalion was also attached to the Brazilians. Actual command of the Serchio Valley sector passed to Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond, commander of the 92nd U.S. Infantry Division. While waiting to transfer to the Reno Valley sector, the Brazilians incorporated about 50 Italian deserters into their own ranks to make up for combat losses which, up to October 31, had totaled 322, including 13 killed in action and seven missing.

Beginning on November 2, the Brazilians were relieved in the Serchio Valley by elements of the 92nd Division. Over the next five days the advance Brazilian detachments moved into the Reno Valley and relieved the 1st U.S. Armored Division. Colonel Vianna of the 6th Infantry assumed command from Colonel Lawrence R. Dewey of the U.S. Combat Command in the valley. For the next three months the Brazilians would be defending the Reno Valley.

General Mascarenhas had some serious concerns with his assignment. First, he had to relieve the Americans immediately and therefore overruled the request of Major Gross

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to delay the deployment of his 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, for a day to allow it to rest and replace needed equipment. Later this would become a matter of some controversy in postwar Brazil, but Mascarenhas's decision was fully supported by letters from both General Crittenberger and Colonel Dewey.

Next, Mascarenhas was tasked with holding a divisional front with only one reinforced regimental combat team. His engineers were available as infantry, and his reconnaissance squadron was also available, but two of his infantry regiments were still training and being equipped behind the lines and therefore unavailable. His artillery was adequate, as was his communications company, but his experienced frontline troops were tired and under their authorized strength. Only time could rectify his situation, allowing his remaining units to complete training and equipping before joining the division at the front.

In the meantime, his orders from Fifth Army were "to continue the replacement of the U.S. 1st Armored Division, maintain contact with the South African 6th Armored Division (in position to the east of the Reno River), and be prepared to follow the enemy if he should retreat."

The first two weeks of November were quiet in the Brazilian sector. On November 8, the 15th Army Group Commander, Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander, came for lunch with Generals Crittenberger and Mascarenhas. Someone seems to have invited the Germans as well, for the high command group was subjected to a severe artillery barrage that they chose to ignore while finishing lunch. Field Marshal Alexander later jokingly thanked General Mascarenhas for the artillery barrage fired in his honor.

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**ABOVE: A Brazilian mortar crew fires their 81mm mortar in support of infantry in the Sassomolare area of the Fifth Army front north of Florence, April 1945. LEFT: Italian civilians look on as vehicles and troops of the BEF cross a treadway bridge on their way to a forward position, October 1944.**

Meanwhile, behind the lines the equipping of the remaining infantry regiments continued to lag, and in fact never caught up with needs. Nevertheless, the 1st Infantry Regiment under Colonel Aquinaldo Caiado de Castro was moved up to the front on November 19 and was soon replacing the worn out and depleted 6th Infantry in the front lines. As was typical of German tactics, as soon as they learned of the new regiment's arrival, counterattacks were launched to test the new men. The 1st Infantry held all its positions without difficulty.

Nearby, Task Force 45 was assigned the mission of capturing additional ground as a prelude to renewing the offensive in December. Assigned to assist the attack were the 3rd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, and the division's Reconnaissance Squadron under Captain Flavio Franco Ferreira. Artillery support was provided by the 2nd Battalion, 1st Self-Propelled Mortar Regiment. Task Force 45 succeeded in the attack and was soon facing the German stronghold at Monte Belvedere that overlooked Highway 64. This initiated a major Brazilian attack against nearby Monte Castello.

Although the Brazilian division was without one-third of its authorized units, IV Corps ordered an attack against Monte Castello as another preliminary movement before resuming the full offensive. General Mascarenhas was now responsible for maintaining the defense of the Reno Valley, the offensive against the Monte Castello-Monte Della Torraccia (Hills 1027 and 1053) area, and seizing the town of Castelnuovo.

To accomplish these missions, he had no choice but to call to the front the remaining regiment of his division, Colonel Delmiro Pereira de Andrade's 11th Infantry Regiment. Although incompletely trained and equipped, it was nevertheless necessary that it take its place at the front.

In fact, by early December the entire Fifth Army had been brought up to strength. Four American divisions in Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Keyes's II Corps stood poised to renew the attack along Highway 65 to breach the German defenses of the Gothic Line. General Crittenberger's job was "to maintain pressure against the enemy by continuing the series of limited objective operations initiated earlier by the Brazilians on the Bombiana-Marano sector."

Bad weather and lack of available close-air support caused the first in a series of delays that eventually continued over the winter. Later in December, when the Battle of the Bulge began in Belgium and Luxembourg, Field Marshal Alexander became concerned about a similar attack in Italy


ABOVE: Brazilian artillerymen repair a blown bridge along a mountain road in the autumn of 1944. The BEF acquitted itself well during the Italian campaign and earned much praise. RIGHT: Brigadier General Eyxlydes Zenobio da Costa (pointing), field commander of BEF Combat Team 11, poses with some of his troops manning a machine-gun position.

which would no doubt be aimed at the weaker of his two armies, the Fifth. He expected the attack to come in either the sector of the Brazilians or the nearby 92nd Infantry Division. The Fifth Army's new commander, Maj. Gen. Lucian K. Truscott, Jr. (Clark was promoted to command of 15th Army Group), took immediate steps to place reserve units behind IV Corps.

Supported by the 13th Tank Battalion from the 1st Armored Division, and elements of the 751st Tank Battalion and 894th Tank Destroyer Battalion, the Brazilians launched their attack. Against an estimated battalion of German infantry, the attack on November 29 immediately ran into trouble when a German counterattack on nearby Monte Belvedere drove the Americans off the key hill and placed a strong enemy force on the Brazilian flank.

Deciding to renew the attack under cover of darkness, the Brazilian forces, led by the 1st Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, under Major Olivo Gondin de Uzeda, and 3rd Battalion, 11th Infantry, under Major Candido Alves da Silva, immediately faced steep terrain and determined resistance but continued slogging upward.

Covered by the artillery directed by Brig. Gen. Oswald Cordeiro de Faria, the advance went well until about noon when the enemy's consistent heavy mortar, machine-gun, and artillery fire halted the attack. German counterattacks soon followed, and the exposed Brazilians had little choice but to retire. They suffered 190 casualties in the morning attack.

The Germans pursued what they perceived as an advantage and in the next few days counterattacked the Brazilians repeatedly. At one point Major Jacy Guimaraes's 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, was driven from its positions, but Major Silvino Castor da Nobrega's 3rd Battalion, 6th Infantry, quickly regained the lost ground.

With high command still determined to renew the major offensive before the new year, the Brazilians were given responsibility for the entire Monte Belvedere-Monte Della Torraccia hill mass. General Mascarenhas, with his infantry and artillery commanders and several staff officers, made a personal reconnaissance of the entire area to plan their next attack.

He decided that without sufficient men to maintain a 15-kilometer front and launch a major attack simultaneously that he would instead attack Castello and thereby isolate the Monte Belvedere-Monte Gorgolesco massif. Then, once supporting weapons had been moved forward, he would renew the attack on Belvedere itself. Heavy artillery fire was laid on the targets, and a diversionary group formed to distract the Germans. The main attack, to be launched on December 12 and led by General Zenobio, would be carried out by a strongly reinforced 1st Infantry Regiment.

Things could not have gone much worse. The attack began in a thick fog and light rain, and visibility was under 50 meters. Although some initial progress was made, strong enemy fire, mud, and terrain difficulties halted the attack by mid-afternoon. Another 140 Brazilians had become casualties with no gain to report.

Overall, the Brazilians lost 1,000 men in just over a day of intense combat. This failure was soon to be a point of contention between Brazilian and American leaders in the theater, but nothing serious came of it and relations continued amicably. It was also at this time that the high command in Italy came to the conclusion that nothing further could be accomplished during the Italian winter. All contingents were advised to go over to the defensive until spring.

For the next 100 days, despite miserable weather conditions, the Brazilian division defended the mountains while awaiting better weather and orders to renew the advance. As early as February, plans for that advance were discussed by division and corps commanders. This time the Brazilians would be accompanied by another new American division, the 10th Mountain Division, under Maj. Gen. George P. Hays.

The Brazilians turned over the high mountains to the Americans, specially trained for mountain and winter warfare, while they would attack alongside, again against Monte Castello. Coordinating its attack with Hays's mountaineers, the 1st EID struck again on February 21, 1945, supported for the first time by Brazilian-manned aircraft.

This time battalions of the 1st and 11th Infantry Regiments attacked and, after a fierce struggle, succeeded in taking Monte Castello just as Belvedere fell to the neighboring Americans. Congratulations quickly poured in from Generals Clark, Truscott, Crittenberger, and others. The last major line of German defenses before the Po River Valley had been broken.

The Brazilians had at last proved themselves in a major operation and would be used again by Fifth Army. They relieved the 10th Mountain Division on Monte Belvedere and later fought at La Serra, Castelnuovo, the Marano Valley, and the Panaro Valley, and in the spring offensive (Operation Craftsman) that quickly turned into a pursuit of retreating German forces.

General Crittenberger sent his 34th U.S. Infantry Division and the 1st EID northwest along Highway 9 to seal off the German LI Mountain Corps and its three divisions, followed nearby by the 92nd Infantry Division. By this time, April 23, 1945, the strong defenses of the northern Apennines were far behind and the Germans, weak, disorganized, and defeated, were on the run.

Soon, IV Corps, including the Brazilian division, were in the Po Valley cleaning up lingering German resistance and assembling thousands of surrendering German soldiers. With the 34th Infantry Division on its right, the 1st Brazilian Infantry Division led the way up Highway 9, closely supported by the 1st Armored Division. By April 29, the Brazilians had forced the surrender of significant elements of the German Fourteenth Army, including the 148th Infantry Division, elements of the 90th Panzergrenadier Division, and an Italian fascist division. The full capitulation was only days away.

That same day, April 29, the Brazilians were alerted to move to Turin and Alessandria to take on the German LXXV Corps, which was reportedly moving from the Franco-Italian border toward the advancing Fifth Army. This strong force was the only serious remaining enemy threat left in northern Italy. To meet it, three BEF combat teams were formed (Combat Teams 1, 6, and 11). The Brazilians made good progress, and Combat Team 11, commanded by Brig. Gen. Eyxlydes Zenobio da Costa, soon had Alessandria under control. Combat Team 6, under Brig. Gen. Falconié da Cunha, sent out patrols looking for the reported Germans but could find none. It would turn out that, harassed by the French Army and pro-Allied Italian guerrilla forces, the reported German advance had been turned back. Two days later, on May 2, 1945, the Germans in Italy surrendered.

The Brazilian Expeditionary Force (including the Brazilian Air Force, which included the 1st Fighter Group and an observation and liaison squadron) had accomplished its missions. The BEF had captured more than 20,000 enemy soldiers and killed thousands of others at a cost to themselves of 88 killed, 10 missing, 486 wounded, and 252 noncombat injuries, for an April 1945 battle casualty total of 836.

The full campaign in Italy had cost Brazil 454 dead, including 14 unknown, plus eight air force officers. Two others were missing and presumed dead, and one body was never recovered. Thus the total cost to Brazil for its participation on the Allied side in Italy was 465 dead or missing.

On other fronts the Brazilians had contributed three destroyer escorts to protection of merchant traffic in the Atlantic, escorting 2,981 merchant ships in 251 convoys carrying over 14 million tons of supplies to the fighting forces. No ship escorted by the Brazilian Navy was lost to enemy action during the war. Its own merchant marine suffered the loss of 31 ships sunk and 969 crew members killed.

After the war Maj. Gen. João Baptista Mascarenhas de Moraes would be promoted to the title of Marshal of the Army and held that post until his death in 1968 at the age of 84.

By June 25, 1945, the Brazilian Expeditionary Force was assembled in Francolise, Italy, awaiting shipment home. One group, known as Task Force Italy, would remain to assist in the occupation of the country, but the majority of the troops would depart for Brazil as they had come—in echelons depending upon the length of their overseas service and the needs of the military.

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Back at home the War Ministry issued Order 217-185, dated July 6, 1945, which decreed that as each echelon returned home it would be subordinated to the 1st Military Region, effectively disbanding the Brazilian Expeditionary Force. Stopping only once at Livorno to pick up the wives of Brazilian soldiers who had married while in Italy, the Brazilian Expeditionary Force sailed home and into history. □

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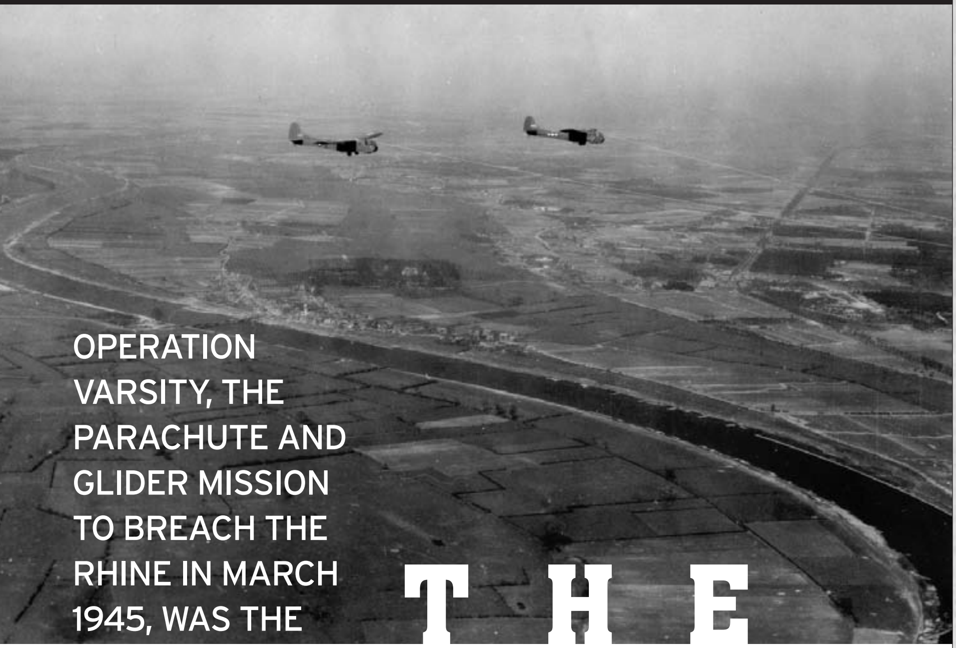
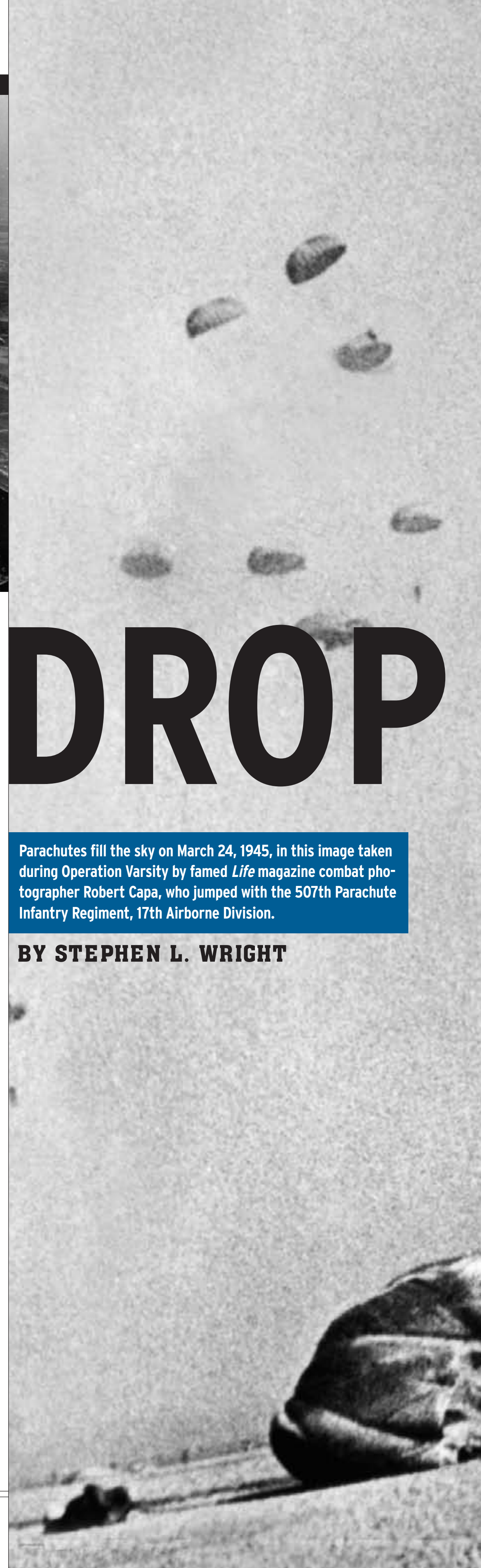


OPERATION VARSITY, THE PARACHUTE AND GLIDER MISSION TO BREACH THE RHINE IN MARCH 1945, WAS THE ALLIES' BIGGEST—AND FINAL—AIRBORNE/GLIDER OPERATION OF THE WAR.

# THE LAST DROP



Parachutes fill the sky on March 24, 1945, in this image taken during Operation Varsity by famed *Life* magazine combat photographer Robert Capa, who jumped with the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 17th Airborne Division.

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**BY STEPHEN L. WRIGHT**

The jerk of the canopy opening was a reassuring sensation. Not so reassuring was the storm of small arms and artillery fire that roared up from the ground. The troopers from the 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 17th U.S. Airborne Division, had already been shaken around in their aircraft by the buffeting of antiaircraft shells.

Along with their fellow troopers and airborne colleagues from the British 6th Airborne Division, they had trained hard for this moment and they were ready to do their job: to seize, clear, and secure German-held positions east of the Rhine. It was Saturday, March 24, 1945, and Operation Varsity, the largest single lift in history, was under way.

Varsity was the parachute and glider component of a larger operation known as Plunder, designed to breach the Rhine at Wesel and complement two earlier American crossings of Germany's major waterway.

The two divisions had only been out of the line for two months, having suffered heavy casualties in the brutal and bitter conditions of the Belgian Ardennes. They were, respectively, part of Maj. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway's 18th U.S. Airborne Corps and Maj. Gen. Richard S. Gale's 1st British Airborne Corps, together forming the First Allied Airborne Army.

The 6th had entered the Ardennes as a veteran outfit, having fought throughout the Normandy Campaign under Gale, its founding CO. An experienced paratrooper, Gale had previously commanded the 1st Parachute Brigade during the Normandy invasion.

The division would fly to Germany in its original format of two parachute brigades, each of three battalions, and a glider-borne airlanding brigade, again comprising three battalions. Support was provided through artillery, medical, sig-

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nal, and engineer units. Maj. Gen. Eric Bols would be Gale's successor.

For the 17th, the Ardennes had been its baptism of fire. Its CO, Maj. Gen. William "Bud" Miley, like his British counterpart, was an experienced paratroop commander who had followed the traditional route of Army service. In 1940, he was given command of the 501st Parachute Battalion, thus becoming the first American officer to command a designated airborne unit. After time with his battalion in Panama, he returned to the States in 1942 to take charge of 503rd PIR.

Three months later he was promoted to command the 1st Parachute Brigade. He served for a short time as assistant commander of the 82nd Airborne Division before taking command of the 17th. Following the losses in the Ardennes, particularly in the 193rd Glider Infantry Regiment, which was all but reduced to nothing, Miley instigated a new table of organization and equipment.

Consequently, the division would field three combat teams (two parachute and one glider) with support for the 6th. The other parachute regiment was the 507th PIR which, until the Ardennes, was the only unit of the 17th to have previously seen action.

The 9th U.S. Troop Carrier Command (TCC) provided paratroop transport for both divisions and gliders for the 17th. On September 1, 1944, it was reassigned to the U.S. Strategic Air Force, for administration control, and the First Allied Airborne Army for operational control.

The Royal Air Force's 38 and 46 Groups were part of that organization's Transport Command. Ordinarily, they carried the 6th's paratroopers and towed the airlanding gliders, but for this operation, the latter role would be the task of the 9th TCC.

The Glider Pilot Regiment (GPR) would provide transport for the Airlanding Brigade. Its members were all volunteers from the many regiments and corps throughout the British Army, and they had been trained to fly and to fight. The regiment's greatest loss to date had been in Holland during Operation Market-Garden. Time was not available to train new pilots, so RAF pilots were drafted in.

Ridgway was given operational command. He met General Miles Dempsey, C-in-C British Second Army, on February 14 and was given a broad outline of the overall plan; Gale was appointed his deputy.

Careful study of the photographic reconnaissance of the area showed that suitable drop zones and landing zones were available adjacent to the immediate objectives. In an attempt to disperse the enemy's attention and fire, 10 zones were chosen, seven for the 6th and three for the 17th.

The 6th Airborne would be required to land on the northern edge of the Schnepfenberg, a high feature topped by the Diersfordter Wald, opposite the point at which British XII Corps would cross the Rhine on the outskirts of the village of Hamminkeln and beside two road bridges across the Issel Canal. The parachute brigades would take care of the first area. The Airlanding Brigade (12th Devonshire Regiment) would secure Hamminkeln and capture two road bridges and one railway bridge. In a repeat of the initial landing in Normandy, Company B of the 2nd Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and Company D of the 1st Royal Ulster Rifles would execute a coup de main landing on the bridges.

The town of Wesel and its environs were the main objectives of the 17th. The parachute regiments were to drop to the south and east of the Schnepfenberg while the gliderborne elements were to land to the north of Wesel. Tasks included seizing a bridge over the Issel, which ran along the eastern edge of the landing area. While not a particularly wide river, the Issel's steep banks were a natural tank trap. The 194th was also to protect the right flank of the landing, and establish contact with the British 1st Commando Brigade, which was expected by then to have captured and secured Wesel.

Waco CG-4A gliders carrying troops of the 17th Airborne Division fly over Wesel, Germany, in a new, double-tow formation the morning of March 24.

The 513th and artillery forward observers would jump from the two-door Curtiss C-46 Commando aircraft, and its glider troops would be in double-towed gliders. This technique had been tried the previous year, unsuccessfully, in Burma.

For the first time, glider troops would be landing in unsecured zones. For this reason the gliders were to execute tactical landings to confuse the defenders about the direction from which the main attack would come and to enable troops to land as close as possible to their objectives.

This latter innovation had, like several other factors of the operation, been influenced by the contents of a captured German document, which had come into the Allies' possession in December 1944. This was an appreciation of the mistakes made in Operation Market (the airborne phase of Market-Garden).

The document found fault with the Allies' failure to put down the maximum force possible on September 17; slowness in building up forces, following the first lift; keeping to the same route in resupply missions and a concern to overprotect the immediate drop zone area rather than put pressure on German forces. This latter failure allowed the Germans to concentrate troops and organize rapid counterattacks.

Following their findings, the Germans put into place measures that would seek out areas most likely to be chosen for large-scale airborne landings. Antiaircraft and mortar defenses would be concentrated on these areas. Air raid precautions would be improved, and new mobile patrols, trained for antiairborne defense and capable of mobilization at 20 minutes' notice, would be created.

In all the reorganization, the 194th Glider Infantry Regiment was still short one company. Following a request from Miley, Captain Charles O. Gordon, glider operations officer with the 435th Troop Carrier Group (TCG), made an immediate decision that his pilots could handle this assignment based on his knowledge of their previous combat experience and the use of various weapons. They received two weeks' infantry training from the 194th.

As mentioned earlier, the GPR suffered grievously during Operation Market-Garden. With the ensuing airborne operation leaving too little time to train new pilots from scratch,

C-47 Skytrain transport planes release hundreds of Allied paratroopers and their supplies over the Diersfordt area east of the Rhine River. This picture was taken from a B-17 that was shot down shortly thereafter.

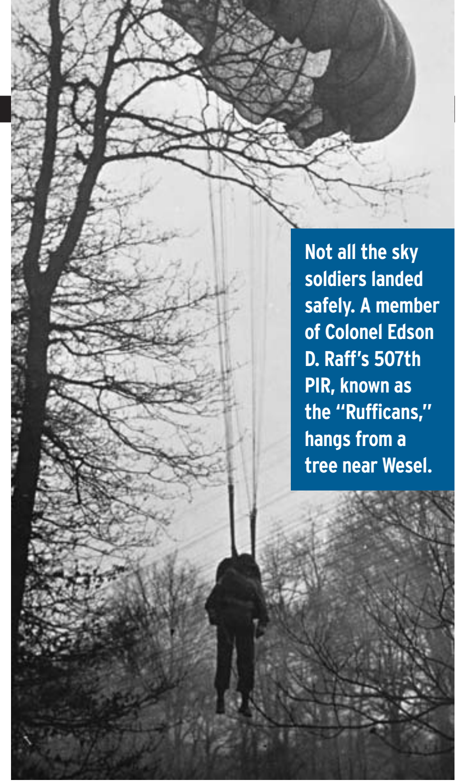
Imperial War Museum

the decision was made to bring in RAF pilots. For some of these, their posting to the GPR is remembered and regarded as more by foul means than fair. Be that as it may, they all played an important role in the GPR at that time.

Following the push to the Rhine, the Allies were faced with the remains of the German First Parachute Army, the 84th Infantry Division and its supporting armor, and the 47th Panzer Corps with the 116th Panzer and 15th Panzergrenadier Divisions. On March 10, the German forces crossed the Rhine using a heavy rainstorm as cover and blew the last bridge behind them. At this time, the Allies estimated that the Germans had lost some 40,000 killed and over 50,000 captured.

The panzer divisions had also been badly mauled by the intense assault of the combined Allied presence. Estimates of the number of enemy troops occupying the crossing and invasion area vary: 7,500-12,000 with 100-150 armored fighting vehicles and their crews available in support. More significantly, and proving that the Germans expected an airborne landing, approximately 800 antiaircraft guns were noted in the week running up to the operation.

In overall command was Generaloberst Alfred Schlemm, CO of First Parachute Army. Using what time he had, Schlemm ensured that defensive works were constructed to secure or cover all areas that could be used for waterborne or airborne landings, height advantage, or speeding movement through and beyond the defensive zone. Farmhouses



Not all the sky soldiers landed safely. A member of Colonel Edson D. Raff's 507th PIR, known as the "Rufficans," hangs from a tree near Wesel.

National Archives

and suitable farm buildings were also turned into strongpoints.

Understandably, as the operation drew closer security was stepped up. So it seems rather odd, then, that a reconnaissance flight of tugs and gliders was sent along the planned route for Varsity. The exercise, or Operation Token, as it was officially known, was carried out without incident and, of course, as secretly as possible.

Nevertheless, there was a widespread belief that the Germans were ready for the landings. The taunts of radio propagandist Axis Sally to the 17th Airborne were taken in good stead. The joke among the troopers was: "Axis Sally knows we are coming, and we know she knows, but she doesn't know when."

Final briefings took place on March 22 and 23. On the 24th, dawn was just breaking as the British and Canadian troopers left for their respective airfields; in France, dawn revealed the 17th's airfields as the spawning of a huge new airborne invasion. With the time difference, the Americans would be taking off as the Commonwealth contingent passed overhead.

At 8:20 AM, artillery units of medium, heavy, and super-heavy guns dug in on the west bank of the Rhine, began to bombard the German positions in two phases; the second was to end as the first transports passed overhead at 10 AM. As it happened,

the planes arrived six minutes early.

The German defenses were not subdued for long and began a steady and accurate fire as the troop carriers approached, crossed, and turned away from the zone.

Across the whole area stretched a smoke screen that rose up to 2,500 feet; it was Montgomery's idea to cover his river crossing with smoke, but it caused severe harassment and problems for the airborne element.

The 513th was dropped a mile off the zone, where the 12th Devons' gliders were headed. The C-46 of the executive officer, Lt. Col. Ward Ryan, was burning as he and his stick hooked up; the men landed in the middle of a German artillery command post. The regiment's CO, Colonel Jim Coutts, slipped out of his harness, walked through the machine-gun fire, and began to attack before he had a battalion. The misdrop was fortuitous for the Devons, as it meant their zone was cleared.

As Company E of the 513th's 2nd Battalion was approaching a farmhouse, it came under fire. It was here that the actions of Pfc. Stewart Stryker led to his posthumous Medal of Honor. With no regard for his own safety, Stryker left cover and ran to the front of a pinned-down platoon. He encouraged its members to follow him, which they did. Stryker only covered a few more yards before he was cut down, dying as he fell. He had done enough, though, and the house was taken.

For the 513th's comrades in the 507th, its 1st Battalion suffered a similar fate, landing 2½ miles off zone. The 507th's CO, Colonel Edson D. Raff, quickly realized that the woods were east and southeast, not north and northwest. Soon, men came from various directions, and Raff assembled a solid fighting force.

Enemy machine-gun and artillery fire was coming from the village of Diersfordt and the nearby woods, and a battery of five 150mm guns was also firing. Raff detailed a party to capture the guns, while he and the remaining troopers engaged in clearing the woods and taking the village.

About 11 AM, Raff and his men were close to Diersfordt castle, an objective, when they met up with another group from 1st Battalion led by Major Paul Smith, whose group had landed closer to the village. With the majority of the 1st Battalion now assembled, an immediate assault was made on the castle.

Company A led the attack, but just as the remaining companies were about to be committed, Company I from the 3rd Battalion arrived. Since the castle was an objective of this battalion, Raff withdrew the 1st Battalion, less its lead company, and ordered it to proceed in its primary role as regimental reserve.

The 2nd and 3rd Battalions were dropped squarely on their DZs and assembled quickly against heavy machine-gun, small arms, and light artillery fire from enemy troops dug in in the woods north and east of the zone. One of the members of the battalion was also to be awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor. Private George J. Peters singlehandedly attacked a machine-gun position that was preventing his group from reaching its weapons.

Private First Class John Kormann was a member of the 517th Signal Company attached to the 507th; his glider had received intense antiaircraft fire and had crashed into a grove of trees. All the occupants were thrown out, and upon coming to his senses Kormann found himself alone with a lot of gunfire and mortar shells exploding close by. He grabbed his gun and, keeping low, made for the woods, where he found a trench running alongside a single-track railroad. He left the woods and joined a group of paratroopers in charging some farmhouses, from which the Germans had been shooting at them.

Bringing up the rear as they passed the last farmhouse, Kormann heard noises coming from a cellar. Convinced that some of the enemy was hiding there, he lifted the slanted wooden cellar door cautiously and was about to toss in a grenade when he remembered the letter he had received from his mother the previous day. She sensed that her son was going into battle. "Son, I want you to be merciful," she wrote. "Never forget that the young man you are fighting has a mother who loves him and prays for him, just as I love

Paratroopers of Colonel James W. Coutts' 513th PIR hug the ground on Landing Zone "P" as others begin to dig slit trenches along a roadway. A British-made Horsa glider is visible in the distance.

National Archives

British glider troops of the Royal Ulster Rifles dig in on the banks of the Issel River after landing. The RUR were "old hands" at such operations, having successfully knocked-out the Merville Battery in Normandy on D-Day.

National Archives

and pray for you."

Infuriated, Kormann thought: "Mother, what are you trying to do, bring about my death? I am trained to kill or be killed!" Now, he was conscious of his mother's plea: "Be merciful!" So, instead of throwing the grenade he shouted in German for them to surrender and come out with their hands up. There was silence. His second shout brought stirring. The first to come up was an elderly grandmother. Then another woman appeared, followed by four or five little children. Finally, 14 women and children stood before him. Kormann shuddered at the thought of what he might have done and the burden it would have placed on his life had he not received his mother's letter.

National Archives

Pfc. Stuart S. Stryker, Company E, 513th PIR, was awarded the Medal of Honor, posthumously.

National Archives

Lt. Col. Jeff Nicklin was killed while commanding the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion.

The 194th, with the 681st Glider Field Artillery Battalion in support, was to seize and hold two bridges over the Issel, clear its section of the landing area, defend the line of the Issel River and Canal, and prevent enemy incursion from the southwest.

In the first two serials, four gliders pulled out. Only 29 of the remaining 156 gliders reached the ground undamaged. In the third and fourth serials, 139 gliders arrived but only 18 landed without being hit. The landings were spread across the zone, and a good number of gliders landed outside it.

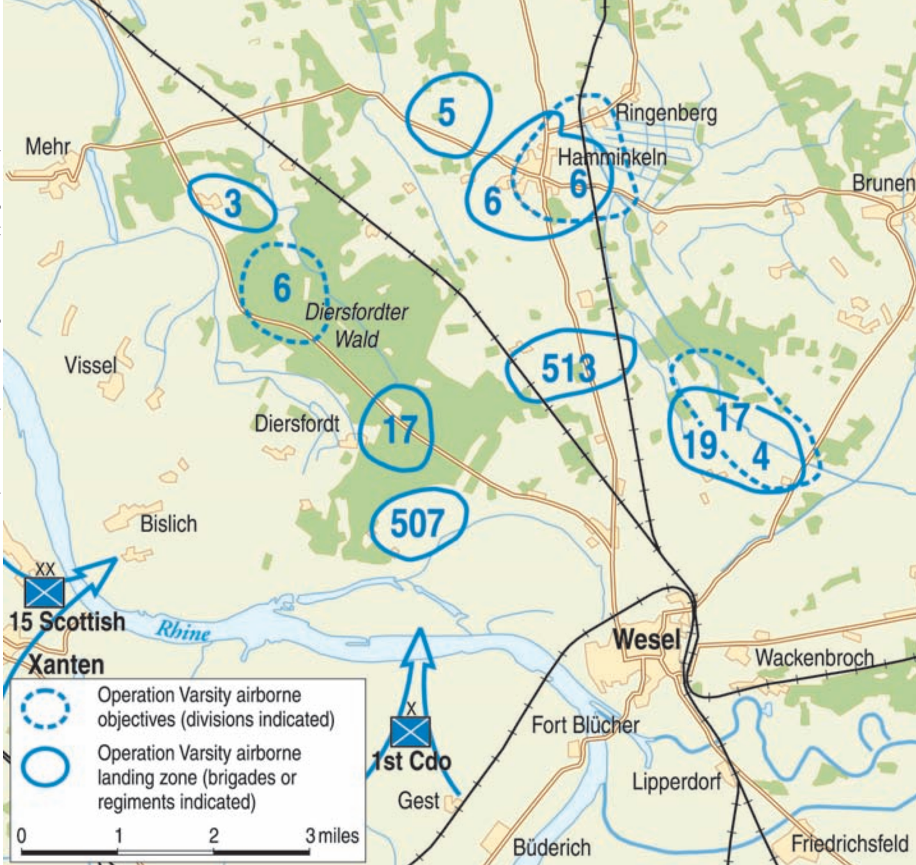
Companies were assembled within an hour of landing, and moving toward their objectives found a solid German defense, although the enemy's troops had no real idea where the front line was. They simply attacked U.S. positions as they came across them. Some of their machine guns were overrun, but the American line held steady.

In the British sector, the paratroop and gliderborne battalions also suffered from the intense and concentrated antiaircraft fire. The 3rd Parachute Brigade's 8th Parachute Battalion was first out, dropping into a wall of fire. Sergeant Ted Eaglen had been wounded in the Ardennes and had returned to his battalion just in time for Varsity. On his way down from his burning C-47, he felt the draft of a shell as it zoomed by. He landed on barbed wire and had a struggle to get out of his parachute—all this while bullets were hitting the barbed wire and whining past him. It seemed endless. He couldn't believe that he was not being hit. Eventually, he got free and scuttled behind a tree, from which vantage point he saw three Germans. Giving them a burst from his Sten sub-machine gun, he saw them disappear.

Despite all the fury of the enemy's welcome, Eaglen's Company C and Company A quickly took their objectives. For Company B it was more of a fight as a well dug-in enemy hung onto a wooded area. The company commander, Major John Kippen, led a ferocious charge through a trench; he was killed in the ensuing hand-to-hand struggle, but the area was taken along with several prisoners. The company's Antitank Platoon also became caught up in a fierce firefight with a German signals platoon, but the British troopers came out the victors. They arrived at their rendezvous in a captured three-ton truck, which came in very handy in the later gathering of supplies from the gliders.

The brigade's 1st Canadian Battalion CO, Lt. Col. Jevon "Jeff" Nicklin, a former football star for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, had landed above a machine-gun position and was shot and killed as he struggled to get free from his harness. His second in command, Major Fraser Eadie, took charge of the battalion. The unit's main objective was a group of well-defended farm buildings. As with their British mates, the Canadians fought in a determined fashion and took buildings and prisoners.

The 316th TCG aircraft carrying the brigade's 9th Battalion received a tremen-




**Just as during the Normandy invasion, the Allied push toward and across the Rhine between Emmerich and Wesel was spearheaded by U.S., British, and Canadian parachute and glider forces.**

dous amount of attention from the German gunners. Of the 37th Squadron's 21 aircraft, 16 were hit by enemy fire.

One of the aircraft ended up, fully loaded, at Eindhoven's airfield in Holland. The parachute on one of the parapack containers attached to the underside of the plane had blossomed underneath the door. Attempts to bring the container on board were unsuccessful, and it was too dangerous for the paratroopers to attempt to jump past it. The men were later returned to the front by road.

Another aircraft, flown by the 45th Squadron's CO, Lt. Col. Mars Lewis, was hit by antiaircraft fire as Lewis executed a left turn from the drop zone. He held the plane straight and level for a few seconds, but the rudder and elevators were burning fiercely. The aircraft went into a diving turn to the right; no parachutes were seen.

Again, as with their colleagues in the other two battalions, the 9th Battalion's troopers suffered mixed experiences on the ground, some having to fight desperately to overcome enemy positions, others having little difficulty. Within 45 minutes of landing the battalion was almost at full strength and by 1 PM it was dug in by company, A on the Schnepfenberg, B across the main road to the southwest, and C in woodland south of the road.

The quiet of their positions was broken by the arrival of a German assault gun and infantry. The Company B clerk stayed out on the road and slapped a Gammon "sticky bomb" onto the vehicle's engine cover. The vehicle stopped, and a crewman was shot as he looked out to investigate. The rest of the crew surrendered. The vehicle, still in running order, was taken over by the British and crewed by two ex-tank drivers from the company and, with its German markings covered over, became part of the battalion's transport for the next week or so.

In the 5th Parachute Brigade aerial formation, the pilot of the aircraft carrying men of 13th Battalion, which included Captain David Tibbs, the medical officer, had suggested that the troopers jump when they saw the men from the other planes jumping. As the red light came on, Tibbs could see the broad glint of the Rhine below.

Looking out, he and his friend and fellow passenger Sergeant Webster decided that they should not jump until the aircraft had cleared the trees and crossed a line of electric pylons and power cables just beyond the forest. To the men's horror, they saw that the other two planes in their "V" were dropping their paratroops into the woods and their own dispatcher was motioning the stick to go. Ironically, most of them landed safely but dropped directly in front of a German machine gun, leaving only five survivors out of 30 men.

The 5th Battalion's mission was to clear and hold an area bounded by roads, a stream, and a collection of buildings; this it did with little opposition. Consequently, the battalion was also dug in by 1 PM. The battalion's trenches were expertly dug by German prisoners, who seemed quite content with the work, having been told earlier by their superiors that they would be shot by the British rather than taken prisoner.

Meanwhile, the 12th Battalion's CO, Lt. Col. Ken Darling, had ensured that his men would jump as light as possible. Every other man carried a toggle rope, so no one had any entrenching tools or grenades, and the only spare clothing carried were socks.

In addition, platoons were allocated to aircraft so that members would land on their intended part of the DZ. Flying in the face of the enemy fire, the battalion's transport group CO, Colonel Howard Lyon, took his aircraft down to about 450 feet before the green light came on. The rest of the serial followed suit. Consequently, the battalion spent little time in the descent and landed close together on the zone.

Disaster struck as Lyon turned for the run back to the river. A shell entered the cockpit, went through his foot, and exited through his knee. Instinctively, he pushed out everything that would make the aircraft climb, which it did. One of the two navigators, Captain Bernard Coggins, helped Lyon out of his seat just as another shell crashed into the cockpit. Lyon took another wound in the leg, as did Coggins, while the co-pilot, Captain Carl Persson, had part of his hand taken off. All the crew managed to bail out and were captured by the Germans. Luckily, the medical aid station where they were taken was overrun by friendly troops and they were freed.

National Archives

Another Robert Capa photo, taken the morning of March 24, shows a German SdKfz-251 halftrack, knocked out by an American bazooka, burning near a small village.

All three companies had a fight to capture their objectives. Company B's objective—a group of buildings—was so well defended that the buildings could only be taken one by one. In Company A, Lieutenant Phil Burkinshaw also attacked and captured a battery of 88mm guns.

While the 12th and 13th Battalions concentrated on capturing the brigade objectives, the 7th Battalion was to land at the northern edge of the drop zone. Its main tasks were to defend the zone and to prevent enemy troops from reaching the brigade's objectives until the other two battalions had consolidated themselves. At such time, the 7th would move into a reserve position.

Thanks to a well-considered drop plan, the 7th Battalion landed in companies; B and C established themselves in their respective defensive areas and began digging in. Initially things were quiet. Over the next few hours, however, concerted enemy probing attacks kept both units busy. Company B contended with attacks of platoon size or slightly larger, while Company C fought off one determined attack, which was at full company strength.

The glider landings were fraught with difficulties. British war correspondent Stanley Maxted's glider was one of 12 assigned to the 716th Company, Royal Army Service Corps. Also on board were Lance Corporal Michael Ham; two fellow wireless operators, a Major Oliver, a public relations officer, a Bren carrier, and a radio trailer. Maxted planned to make a live radio broadcast from the field, but things didn't work out that way. The glider was hit by 20mm shells and crashed close to the Hamminkeln railroad station. The carrier hurtled from the wreckage and Maxted was struck by it. Pilots and occupants managed to get clear and eventually found their way to safety.

On the 3rd Parachute Brigade's dropping zone, the 6th Parachute Battalion's CO, Lt. Col. George Hewetson, was briefing his intelligence officer, Lieutenant John England. Two sergeants were standing a few yards away. Suddenly, with a terrific crash a glider came through the trees, and Hewetson found himself lying under the wheel of a jeep. The glider pilots were killed along with Lieutenant England and the two sergeants.

The Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire coup de main gliders were met with blistering fire. The first glider was seen to break apart; there were no survivors. In the second glider, over half the occupants were killed or wounded. Glider three came down hard but only because its pilots dived earthward to avoid the fate of the others.

The fourth glider had the most remarkable fate of all. Hit by an antiaircraft shell, its nose was sheared off and both pilots killed. One of the passengers, Quartermaster Major Aldworth, was also slightly injured but managed to get one of the pilots out of his seat and occupied it himself. With brief instructions from the towing plane's co-pilot, Aldworth managed to land the glider, helped by a ditch and a hedge. With nothing more than bumps and bruises, the platoon made its way to the railway station.

On the other bridge, the Royal Ulster Rifles' gliders fared in a similar manner. One wing of the glider of the company commander, Major Dyball, dug a trench as the aircraft slewed to a stop. The pilots and front passengers went out through the front of the glider and were met by enemy fire. The trench was welcome cover for them as they scrambled toward it.

Canadian paratroopers man a position at the edge of a forest shortly after landing. The soldier in the foreground is armed with a Bren gun.

Imperial War Museum

Dyball's radio operator was killed as he left the glider, so the commander had no way of contacting his other platoons. He decided to head toward the house that he had chosen as his HQ. As he reached it, he found that 21 Platoon had landed in good order and had taken the house and several prisoners. On the other side of the bridge, 22 Platoon had also had a fight against strong opposition but had captured the bridge. Dyball set up a defense force with support from the Ox & Bucks and glider pilots.

The main parties of both battalions and the men of the 12th Devons landed against similar opposition.

Squadron Sergeant Major Lawrence "Buck" Turnbull's glider had a platoon of Ox & Bucks on board. As he cast off from his tug and prepared for the landing, a C-47 cut in front of him, and its trailing towrope began to wreak havoc on the glider. First the starboard aileron was torn off, then the lower part of the cockpit with the loss of the air bottles (required for brakes and flaps), most of the instrument panel, and half the control column. As the rope came loose, the Horsa was virtually flipped upside down.

As if all this wasn't enough, the glider was also the focus of antiaircraft batteries. Showing great calmness, Turnbull managed to right the glider and land without crashing. For his actions he was awarded Britain's Conspicuous Gallantry Medal—

the only one to be awarded to a soldier during the war.

The Ox & Bucks were near Hamminkeln railway station. In the 10 minutes it took to land, the battalion lost half its strength. For several hours some of the survivors played a game of cat and mouse with German Mk. IV tanks, which used stacks of timber as cover. Private battles erupted across the compound and railroad tracks. But, despite all, the battalion's objectives were taken within the hour, and the companies dug in.

In the Royal Ulster Rifles' (RUR) sector, both the CO and the adjutant had their gliders break up around them. The adjutant, Captain Robert Rigby, took command and coordinated the neutralizing of enemy strongpoints before organizing a march to the station and level crossing, which were the RUR's objectives.

In addition to the support from artillery on the west bank of the Rhine, each division was also supported by its own artillery units.

For the U.S. 17th, the 464th and 466th Parachute Field Artillery Battalions supported the 507th PIR and 513th PIR; their 75mm pack howitzers were dropped in parapacks. For the 464th, three of its 12 guns were damaged, but by noon 10 guns were in action. The 466th was dropped on the correct zone and therefore left without infantry support. Before setting up their guns, its members took on an infantry role as they worked to suppress the concentrated fire that swept their zone.

Luck, however, was on the unit's side as T/Sgt. Joseph Flanagan landed beside a German 20mm gun. He captured it and its crew, and the gun was later used to destroy stronger emplacements. Yet, American losses were significant; all the battery officers were either killed or wounded. Through sheer grit and determination, the 466th continued to ready its guns and began firing.

The 194th GIR was supported by the 681st Glider Field Artillery Battalion; its gunners were under steady fire as they left their gliders and were forced to set up and fire using the glider wings as cover. By 4 PM, 10 howitzers were blazing away, and the battalion continued to give solid support through the rest of the day.

The 680th Glider Field Artillery Battalion had a general support task and was to answer any specific calls from the 513th's 3rd Battalion. Its gunners also came under fire, and ammunition and guns were lost as transport gliders were hit and set on fire. During the day, the battalion captured three batteries and took 150 prisoners. For its actions it received a Distinguished Unit Citation.

The 155th Antiaircraft Battalion had four batteries, two in support of the parachute regiments, one in an antitank role, and one under control of the 194th. Members of Battery C made good use of their 75mm recoilless rifle.

In the British 6th Airborne, the airlanding battalions had their own antitank guns as part of their support companies, and these were used in varying degrees throughout the day. In addition, the division had the 53rd (Worcestershire Yeomanry) Airlanding Light Regiment RA (Royal Artillery) and the 2nd Airlanding Anti-Tank Regiment. Both units had mixed days, losing men and guns in the landing—a horrifying example of the fury into which the units traveled.

For the second and last time in the war, light tanks were taken directly to the battlefield. Eight of the mighty Hamilcar gliders carried an American M-22 Locust tank and its crew. Seven of the relatively light (eight tons) tanks, purpose-built for airlanding operations, arrived on German soil, and four reached the rendezvous point with a single tank firing in support of the 12th Parachute Battalion. The four occupied a section of high ground in the Devons' sector and gave support during the rest of the day.

For medics on both sides, there was much work to be done.

The 17th's 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion's medical personnel were carried in two gliders, one of which landed right beside a defended house. The glider was carrying a medical officer, a medic staff sergeant, a jeep and its driver, and much of the battalion's medical supplies. The 40 German occupants of the house brought concentrated fire to bear on the glider. A direct mortar hit destroyed the supplies and the jeep and killed the driver; the other two men managed to escape the burning wreckage. With limited equipment, the battalion surgeon had an aid station up and running in no time.

As the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion settled into its defensive positions, one of its medics, Corporal George Topham, was watching the attempts of two members of 224th Parachute Field Ambulance help a wounded man on the drop zone. Under intense fire, the medics made a dash for the casualty but were both killed.

Without hesitation, Topham raced out to the man. Enemy fire continued to sweep the

A "Firefly" tank of the 15th Scottish Division supports Canadian troops on March 24. The Firefly was an up-gunned Sherman with a 17-pounder gun that was a deadly tank killer.

Imperial War Museum

zone, and Topham was shot through the nose. Yet, even in severe pain, he continued to give first aid. He then hoisted the man on his shoulders and carried him to cover. Topham refused treatment and went back into the zone to help more wounded. He also refused to be evacuated and, such was his determination, he was allowed to continue on duty.

Sometime later, as he was returning to his company, Topham came across the mortar platoon's Bren carrier, which was burning fiercely. The platoon, under Lieutenant G. Lynch, had landed to the north of the LZ and it was during its attempt to reach battalion HQ that its Bren carrier had suffered a direct hit.

Enemy mortar fire was landing in the area, the carrier's own mortar ammunition was exploding from the vehicle, and an officer was not allowing anyone to approach. Topham didn't agree and ran to the carrier. In turn, he carried the three occupants to safety. For his gallantry throughout the day, Corporal Topham was awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest military medal.

Despite all the damaged gliders, plenty of stretchers had arrived intact. Private Lenton, attached to the 8th Parachute Battalion, said he would go and get some. His section commander, Staff Sergeant Walsby, said he'd never make it back alive. Undeterred, Lenton and his mate, Private Downey, ran to the gliders. Not only did they make it there and back alive, but they also rescued some wounded men who had been left in the open. For this action, Downey was mentioned in dispatches and Lenton received the Military Medal.

Sometimes adversaries helped to aid wounded enemy soldiers. Captain David Tibbs, having landed safely, made his way to the house he had selected as his field dressing station. Settling into his work, he was surprised by the arrival of a tall, distinguished-looking German officer and several men. The officer saluted Tibbs, wished him a "good morning" and said, "Why have you been so long? We have been up all night waiting for you!" He worked alongside Tibbs for a while, but since there were few German casualties coming in, soon left.

American Corporal Bill Tom arrived in the Wesel zone by jeep. Tom had started his military career as a rifleman in the 194th GIR. By various twists he became a medic-at-large in the Ardennes. When the 17th returned to France, Bill remained with the 9th U.S. Army. On March 24, he had to care for a wounded German soldier who was shot in the head. The man was injured beyond the care of the field medics and was about to be moved to a larger aid station.

Before that could happen, he died and Bill Tom was ordered to move his body to the morgue tent. It was now midnight, and no flashlights were permitted. With the help of a private, Tom carried the body to the area where the morgue tent was located, but in pain from the man's weight he lost count of the tents (he needed number eight).

He finally saw the one he thought was the morgue tent. Entering, he stepped on something hard and round and fell down. The German was thrown off the stretcher, landing heavily and making a grunt. Tom and the private took off like a shot. The tent was, in fact, the kitchen supply tent and the following morning Tom received a real chewing out from the cook sergeant for scaring his cooks half to death by finding a body on their potatoes.

The planned resupply drop arrived on schedule at 1 PM; 240 Consolidated B-24 Liberators from the Eighth Air Force's 2nd Air Division each carried 2½ tons, which had been packed into 20 bundles, distributed in three locations: 12 in the bomb racks, five in and around the ball turret (the turret itself had been removed), and three by the emergency escape hatch in the tail.

Imperial War Museum

A Churchill tank of the 6th Guards Tank Brigade carries paratroopers of the American 17th Airborne Division through Dorsten, Germany, March 29.

The vast majority of bundles were fitted with parachutes. The planes came in at 100 feet, half to DZ B (6th) and half to DZ W (17th). As with the transports, many did not escape German fire and headed for home with flames streaming from their engines.

General Ridgway arrived on the east bank around 3 PM. His first stop was Miley's HQ, where he received a brief report on the day so far. Miley was still concerned that he had yet to hear from Eric Bols at Kopenhof Farm.

As the light began to fade, Ridgway, Miley, and their escort set off for Kopenhof. The convoy's route ran through the 194th's sector and then the 513th's.

*Continued on page 97*

# Massachusetts' Battleship Cove is a fitting tribute to U.S. Navy sailors.

THE NEW ENGLAND coast is studded with countless bays and coves. One of these watery inlets, known as Battleship Cove in Fall River, Massachusetts, is home to a floating museum complex that holds some priceless World War II treasures. All the ships on display here but one—the Soviet-built missile corvette *Hiddensee*—date to the Second World War. The State of Massachusetts has a long and distinguished naval history, and most of the vessels have a Bay State connection as well.

Many associate Massachusetts with the Kennedy family, and its influence is evident at Battleship Cove. The World War II record of the Kennedys is a distinguished one. Lieutenant John F. Kennedy, who would later become president, was nearly killed fighting the Japanese in the South Pacific. Fittingly, an exhibition hall holds two PT boat specimens. *PT 617,* the type on which Kennedy served, is the last surviving Elco-class ship in existence. *PT 796,* painted with menacing shark teeth on its bow, was the product of the famous Higgins shipyards in New Orleans. Both of these were constructed in 1945 but never saw combat.

One of the most impressive displays is the PT boat exhibit. Usually associated primarily with the Pacific, these small, plywood boats actually saw service in European and Mediterranean waters as well. They were organized into squadrons of about 15 boats. In the Battleship Cove exhibit, each squadron has its own display case housing photos, news clippings, and other souvenirs the sailors brought home and later donated to the museum. The exhibit also gives a sense of the war's immense scope. The wide range of ethnographic artifacts include a war club from the Philippines, a grass skirt from New Guinea, and a miniature totem pole from Alaska.

Moored nearby is the destroyer USS *Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.,* named in honor of JFK's older brother, who died during a top-secret air mission (Operation Aphrodite) in August 1944. Constructed at Quincy, Massachusetts, and commissioned in December 1945, the *Kennedy* just barely missed World War II. However, she saw extensive service during the Cold War, most notably during the Korean War and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The ship contains exhibits about the role of destroyers in U.S. Navy history and also serves as the Bay State's official memorial to its citizens killed in Korea and Vietnam.

Moored next to the *Kennedy* is a Balao-class submarine, the USS *Lionfish* (SS-298). Completed in Philadelphia in 1943, the *Lionfish* conducted its shakedown


The submarine USS *Lionfish* (foreground) with the *Massachusetts* looming behind her, as seen from shore.

All Photos: Author's Collection

cruise in New England waters and then saw action in the Pacific on two war patrols, battling Japanese ships and rescuing downed American fliers. She has been at the museum since 1973.

The main attraction is the 35,000-ton battleship USS *Massachusetts*. "Big Mamie" was constructed at Quincy and commissioned in May 1942. She did not have to wait long to see action. In November 1942, the *Massachusetts* took part in Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of North Africa. Off Casablanca, Morocco, she engaged in a duel with the Vichy French battleship *Jean Bart,* still under construction in Casablanca harbor; the *Massachusetts* won.

She then headed to the Pacific and played a role in some of World War II's greatest battles, including Leyte Gulf and Okinawa. Decommissioned in 1947, the *Massachusetts* was destined to be sold for scrap until Bay State children raised enough money to save her. She was brought to Fall River in 1965.

Standing on the deck of a battleship is an awe-inspiring experience. Walking onto the *Massachusetts*' 680-foot deck and looking up at its massive 16-inch guns–more than 60 feet long and pointing skyward–one cannot help but simply say: "Wow!" Having been decommissioned so soon after the war, the ship has changed little since its days in combat. Indeed, scars from the ship's duel with the *Jean Bart* are still evident. Numerous pock marks, accentuated with red paint, mark where a Vichy French shell hit her on the morning of November 8, 1942, some of the first shots fired at Americans in the fight against Hitler.

The interior of the ship is like an entire

**ABOVE: Bow of PT 796, with shark teeth.**
**TOP: The impressive 16-inch main guns of the USS *Massachusetts*.**

city encased in steel. Indeed, during the war it was home to more than 2,000 men. Many rooms are left much as they were during the war. Walking through the main galley, the sick bay, the machine shop, and even the brig gives one an intimate sense of the sailor' workaday environment.

Those interested in naval combat will also want to explore the barbettes—the massive circular structures that protect the workings of the 16-inch guns. Video monitors play interviews of the ship's veterans, further enhancing the experience. Many portions of the *Massachusetts* have been converted into museum exhibits covering a wide range of World War II topics, from Pearl Harbor to Rosie the Riveter.

Battleship Cove bills itself as "the world's largest naval ship museum," and the ships certainly are magnificent. While some of the museum exhibits seem rather careworn, they still successfully capture the experience of the American sailor in World War II, with all its joys and hardships, heroism, and sacrifices. □

## BATTLESHIP COVE

5 Water Street, Fall River, MA 02721
(508) 678-1100
**Website:** www.battleshipcove.org

**Hours:** Open daily 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM (closed Christmas and New Year's Day; closes at noon on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve)

## operation varsity

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Ridgway stopped to get a report from each commander. At the 513th's HQ, he heard about the misdrop and the ease with which the C-46s had caught fire. He later gave instructions that the aircraft would never be used again to carry paratroops. At Kopenhof, the party also met General Gale.

Ridgway and Miley left the farm about midnight. Fighting was now under way nearby, and they ran into a German patrol. As Ridgway was reloading, a grenade exploded by one of the jeep's wheels, and he was hit in the shoulder by a piece of shrapnel. The wheel absorbed some of the fragments and undoubtedly saved his life. The Germans were soon driven off, and the party continued to Miley's HQ.

Both divisions had mixed fortunes during the night. For many men, it was a quiet one, but for the fighting pilots of the 435th TCG it was anything but, as they came into contact with German armor and infantry in a battle that would later be known as The Battle of Burp Gun Corner.

The pilots were well dug in near some houses and a road junction; about 11:30 PM, their listening post reported an approaching enemy tank leading a force consisting of two 88mm self-propelled guns and two mobile 20mm guns with over 200 supporting infantrymen. The pilots laid down a solid field of fire, and a well-aimed shot from a bazooka struck the tank and sent it fleeing back along the road, running over the 20mm guns as it went.

By 1:30 AM on the 25th, the enemy had had enough and began to withdraw. The pilots did the same, strengthening the line of defense with their colleagues from the 436th.

Throughout the 25th, the men of the two Allied divisions continued to move deeper into Germany supported by the troops who had crossed the river, meeting little resistance and continuing to take prisoners.

Two days later, Miley gave the order, "Advance to Dorsten. This is a pursuit." The last drop was over. In less than two months, Hitler's 12-year Third Reich would be over, too. □

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the part of Hitler and the German military.

Unknown to the world, Hitler was in the process of undoing the nonaggression pact he had made with Soviet Premier Josef Stalin and was preparing an invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa). Hitler realized that if the attack were to work he had to have a safe haven on the borders of Greece and Yugoslavia to blunt any possible British advance against Germany when the attack on Russia took place. Hitler placed intense pressure on both governments to join the Axis cause.

In his meeting with Prince Paul, Donovan tried to persuade the regent not to ally himself with Hitler, but to no avail. After the conference ended, Donovan made his way to the headquarters of General Dusan Simovic, the commander of the Yugoslav opposition to Hitler. His meeting with the rebel leader went much better than that with Prince Paul, and Donovan told Simovic that the United States would not take kindly to any nation that sided with the Germans. Donovan noted that President Roosevelt said that the United States would try to help Simovic's cause if and when he joined the Allied side. Simovic told Donovan that his forces would resist the Germans if they attacked either Bulgaria or Greece.

When British forces arrived in Greece, Prince Paul attached himself to Hitler and Simovic overthrew Prince Paul, refuted the treaty with Germany, and installed himself as the new prime minister. Unfortunately, Hitler unleashed his powerful divisions against Yugoslavia and, by April 1941, the country was under the Nazi boot. The British then invaded Crete, and Hitler had to expend more men and time to beat them back.

The Yugoslav operations put back the invasion of Russia from May 14 to June 22, 1941. Why was this important? This delay caused the Germans to later become bogged down in the fierce Russian winter that engulfed the German troops, who were forced to fight a battle against nature that was unwinnable. Ultimately, the German Army was unprepared for the harsh conditions that engulfed it and finally led to defeat three bloody years later.

Bill Donovan returned to the United States after a grueling 30,000-mile adventure on March 18, 1941, landing at New York's La Guardia Field. He soon found himself debriefing the president and his cabinet on his whirlwind Mediterranean and Near East trip. He told his listeners that the British would be able to break the Nazi stranglehold as long as they were well equipped with the tools of war—tools that only the United States could provide.

It was also during this trip that British intelligence agents approached Donovan with the idea of a centralized American intelligence agency. Donovan presented the idea to FDR, but military leaders met it with hostility. General Miles, the head of Army intelligence, wrote to General Marshall: "In great confidence, ONI (Office of Naval Intelligence) tells me that there is considerable reason to believe that there is a movement on foot, fostered by Colonel Donovan, to establish a super agency controlling all intelligence. This would mean that such an agency, no doubt under Colonel Donovan, would collect, collate, and possibly evaluate all military intelligence which we now gather from foreign countries. From the point of view of the War Department, such a move would appear to be very disadvantageous, if not calamitous."

Despite the military's objections, President Roosevelt took the first tentative step in the creation of an American espionage establishment when he appointed William Donovan as head of an intelligence gathering body called COI—Coordinator of Information. The COI morphed into the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) after the United States entered the war. Once the war was over, the OSS was disbanded by President Harry Truman, and in 1947 it was replaced by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

William Donovan's two trips to Europe between the summer of 1940 and the spring of 1941 helped create the alliance that won World War II and set up a permanent U.S. espionage agency that, for better or worse, has become part of the nation's history. □


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