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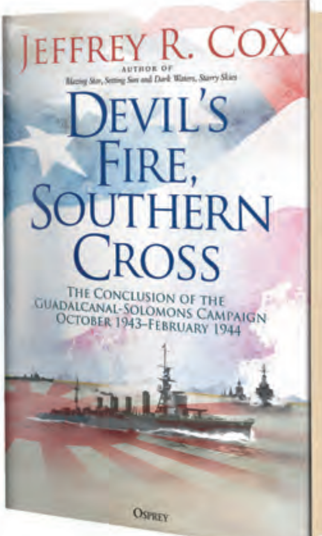

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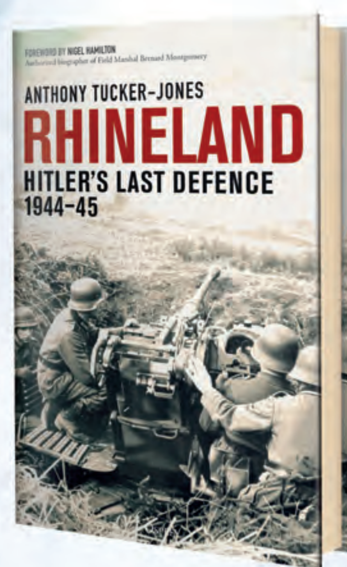

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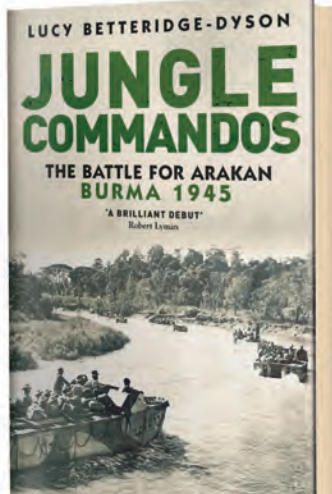

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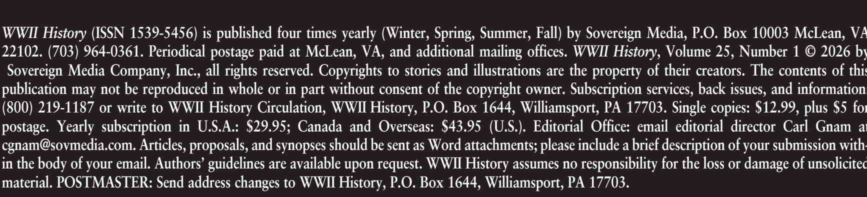

WWII History (ISSN 1539-5456) is published four times yearly (Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall) by Sovereign Media, P.O. Box 10003 McLean, VA 22102. (703) 964-0361. Periodical postage paid at McLean, VA, and additional mailing offices. *WWII History*, Volume 25, Number 1 © 2026 by Sovereign Media Company, Inc., all rights reserved. Copyrights to stories and illustrations are the property of their creators. The contents of this publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part without consent of the copyright owner. Subscription services, back issues, and information: (800) 219-1187 or write to WWII History Circulation, WWII History, P.O. Box 1644, Williamsport, PA 17703. Single copies: $12.99, plus $5 for postage. Yearly subscription in U.S.A.: $29.95; Canada and Overseas: $43.95 (U.S.). Editorial Office: email editorial director Carl Gnam at cgnam@sovmedia.com. Articles, proposals, and synopses should be sent as Word attachments; please include a brief description of your submission within the body of your email. Authors' guidelines are available upon request. WWII History assumes no responsibility for the loss or damage of unsolicited material. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to WWII History, P.O. Box 1644, Williamsport, PA 17703.

Cover: A Panzer VI Tiger rolls across a Russian field in the Spring of 1943.

See story page 72.

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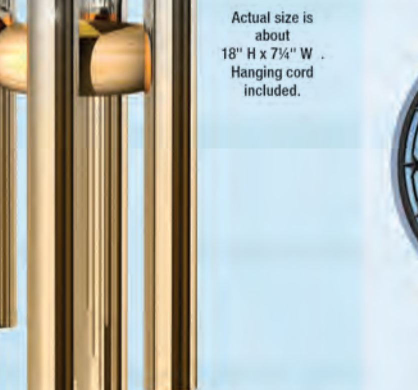

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U.S. Navy Pilot's Jacket
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The Great Patriotic War cost the Soviet Union 20 million lives in the fight against the Nazis.

"Citizens of the Soviet Union," blared the voice of Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov to a stunned nation on June 22, 1941, "the Soviet government and its head, Comrade Stalin, have authorized me to make the following statement: "Today at 4 o'clock am, without any claims having been presented to the Soviet Union, without a declaration of war, German troops attacked our country, attacked our borders at many points and bombed from their airplanes our cities; Zhitomir, Kiev, Sevastopol, Kaunus and some others, killing and wounding over 200 persons.

"There were also enemy air raids and artillery shelling from Rumanian and Finnish territory. This unheard of attack on our country is perfidy unparalleled in the history of civilized nations. The attack upon our country was perpetrated despite the fact that a treaty of nonaggression had been signed between the U.S.S.R. and Germany and that the Soviet government most faithfully abided by all provisions of this treaty….

"The government calls upon you, citizens of the Soviet Union, to rally still more closely around our glorious Bolshevist party, around our Soviet Government, around our great leader and comrade, Stalin. Ours is a righteous cause. The enemy shall be defeated. Victory will be ours."

It came to be known as the Great Patriotic War, and the mass graves of civilians and Red Army soldiers killed during the four-year war are places of reverence across Russia today. The great statue of Mother Russia crowns Mamayev Kurgan on the Stalingrad battlefield and defines for the world the extent of the horror and sacrifice of an embattled people. Soviet citizens did rally behind their army and their leaders in repulsing the Nazis, but could the 20 million lost lives been spared if Joseph Stalin had been a different kind of leader?

By the time the Germans crossed the Russian frontier on June 22, 1941, the Red Army's command structure was weak. Stalin's paranoia had cost many high-ranking officers their lives during his purges of the 1930s. Political opponents, real or imagined, had been executed.

In August 1939, German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop flew to Moscow and signed an infamous nonaggression pact with the Soviets that supposedly guaranteed peace between the countries and partitioned Poland. The result was borrowed time for the Nazis and a false sense of security for the Russians. Stalin supplied Germany with materials vital to a growing war machine and allowed the Germans to train on Soviet soil. All this occurred nearly two decades after Adolf Hitler published *Mein Kampf*, in which he outlined his plan for conquest in the East in the name of lebensraum, or living space, for the German people.

Stalin discounted these ominous signs, but as Nazi forces were marshaled for the start of Operation Barbarossa, he chose to ignore a series of even more frightening events that could have warned of impending disaster.

On June 18, the Kremlin a message detailing a Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, forwarded from Switzerland by Soviet agent Alexander Foote, even with the date and approximate time. That same day, a defecting German soldier begged for his life after striking a superior officer. He reportedly begged for leniency because Germany and the USSR would soon be at war.

In March 1941, the Americans supplied the Soviet embassy in Washington, D.C., with details of Operation Barbarossa. A month later, the British government provided similar information. Perhaps the most convincing message to be ignored came from Soviet spy Richard Sorge, who had been operating in Tokyo for some time. He reported in May that the Germans would strike with 150 divisions on June 20. Shortly afterward, Sorge followed up with a revised date for Operation Barbarossa: June 22.

Stalin's failure to act on these warnings is a subject of debate to this day. One inescapable conclusion, however, can be drawn. The initial result was catastrophic for the Soviet Union, and hundreds of thousands died—perhaps needlessly.

WWII History Volume 25 • Number 1 WARFAREHISTORYNETWORK.com

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COMAG MARKETING GROUP
WORLDWIDE DISTRIBUTION

SOVEREIGN MEDIA COMPANY, INC.
Sovereign Media P.O. Box 10003
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Lieutenant-General Philip Neame, who earned the Victoria Cross and Olympic Gold, was Rommel's first prey.

During the Second World War the Western Desert campaign was a graveyard for the reputations of British generals—all at the hands of the Desert Fox, Gen. Erwin Rommel. The first of these officers to face Rommel in the desert was Lt.-Gen. Philip Neame, who had been awarded a Victoria Cross during the Great War. After the war, he rose to the rank of general—along the way winning a gold medal at the 1924 Olympics and surviving a tiger attack while hunting in India. But by 1941, Neame's extraordinary run of luck and success ran out. Just days after taking command of an understrength and disorganized British corps-level formation, he took the field against Rommel and the German Afrika Korps, both freshly arrived on the continent. The fight did not go well for Neame and the British.

Neame was born on December 12, 1888, and went to the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich from which he passed out sixth and was commissioned to the Royal Engineers in 1908. Described as "short, slim, wiry, and always superlatively fit," Neame was thought to be "utterly fearless, a man of strong character, with tremendous drive and determination."

Stationed in Gibraltar at the outbreak of WWI, Neame returned to England and was then

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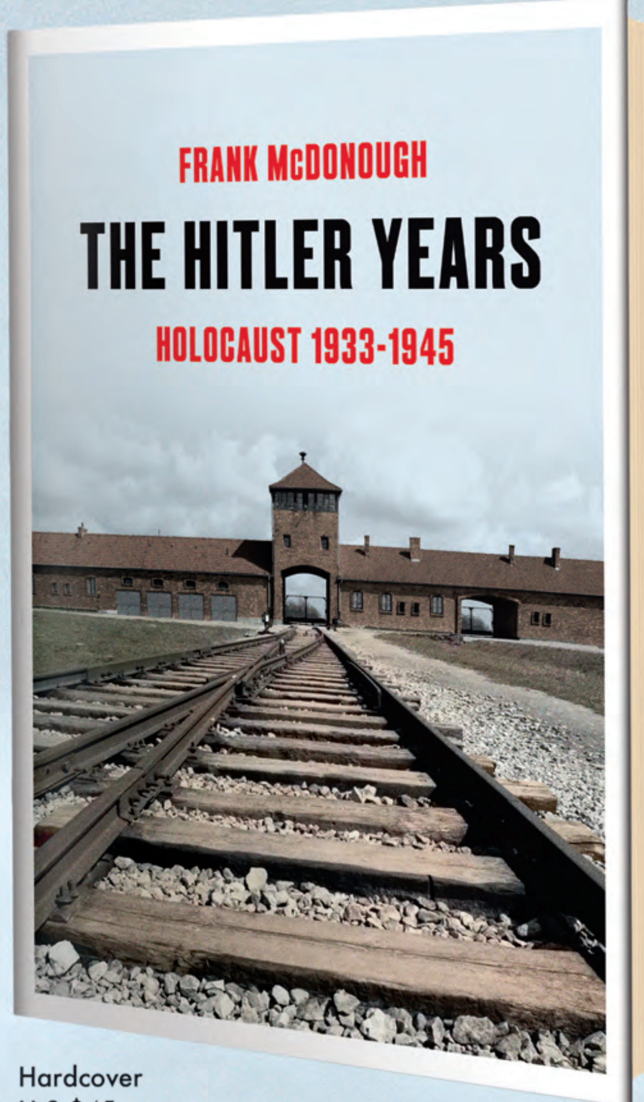
ABOVE: Philip Neame was a 26-year-old lieutenant serving with the 15th Field Company of the Royal Engineers during the First World War when he was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions near Neuve Chapelle, France, on December 19, 1914. He was promoted to captain in 1915. TOP: This German lithograph depicts the moment a patrol of Rommel's Afrika Korps captured British generals Philip Neame (left) and Richard O'Connor about 100 miles west of Tobruk, Libya, in April 1941.

NEW FROM HEAD OF ZEUS

The Hitler Years: Holocaust is the fourth volume in Frank McDonough's brilliantly reviewed and bestselling history of Germany from 1918 to 1945.



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The penultimate title in the Hitler's Germany series, this book marks the end of the Second World War and the Nazi regime. It provides detailed year-by-year analysis of a horrific period of Nazi doctrine, and places into context the events that followed the Nazi Party's rise to power in 1933 and beyond. A meticulous chronicle of the experiences and testimonies of survivors, this book demonstrates how violence against the Jewish population migrated from the beerhall to state bureaucracy.

"Yet again McDonough shows why he is one of the best chroniclers of 20th-century Germany."

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"This accessible history will keep the subject alive for a new generation."

—*The Times*

HEAD of ZEUS

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This illustration depicts Lieutenant Philip Neame firing his pistol as he holds back the Germans while preparing to hurl grenades. Early British army-issue hand-grenades often failed to fire, so soldiers improvised. Neame and Reginald Thomas, both of the Royal Field Artillery, are credited with developing an early alternative, the "Tickler's Artillery"—jam tins filled with gun cotton, scrap metal and other materials set off by a lit fuse.

sent to France with the 15th Field Company, Royal Engineers, in November 1914. About a month after arriving at the front, having already seen service in the First Battle of Ypres, Neame's section was ordered to move forward on December 19, 1914 to repair and consolidate a section of enemy trenches near Neuve Chapelle that had been captured as part of an attack the previous day by the 8th Division. On reaching the part of the trenches being held by the 2nd West Yorkshires, Neame heard the sound of heavy fighting including the explosions of hand grenades—then called "bombs"—as the Germans counterattacked. The British had already lost several hundred yards of freshly gained trench and were being driven back. As the situation seemed quite serious, Neame left his sappers to work on the British trenches that then constituted the old front line and went forward by crawling along a ditch to get into the captured German trenches.

Once safely in the trench he spoke to the infantry officer in command who, amid the heavy incoming machine gun fire and hand grenades, told him that their bombers were nearly all dead or wounded and that their hand grenades would not go off. Neame told him he would see what he could do. The trench was densely packed with British infantrymen and more were coming back. Neame had to squeeze past them as he went forward. Reaching the most advanced part of the line he learned from three West Yorks holding the position that their supply of jam tin bombs were not working as their fuses were damp and could not be lit. Just then a fusillade of German grenades coming from two directions exploded forcing them to give ground. Neame knew that the British grenades could still be used and shouted for all the available bombs to be sent up to him. Acting quickly, he used a knife to cut the bomb fuse much shorter than usual and then lit it with a match. He stood up on the fire-step exposing his head and shoulders above the trench, took a quick look, and threw the first grenade. It exploded with a destructive roar. Neame ducked down and prepared another bomb. As he stood up to throw it a rifle bullet cracked past his head and a machine gun opened up. From then on every time he stood up to throw a grenade, rifles and a machine gun fired at him. Somehow the Germans missed each time. Enemy grenades kept coming over and caused heavy losses. Neame recalled that the trench about him was "a dreadful sight, men lying with bodies broken and maimed" and that he never "saw anything worse in the succeeding years of warfare."

Guarded by an escort of two or three West Yorks with fixed bayonets in case the enemy tried to rush them, Neame kept up his one-man barrage and managed to halt the German advance. He replied with a grenade every time the Germans threw one. His bombs had an effect. The German volley of grenades slowed and then stopped entirely.

While Neame held off the enemy, the West Yorks received the order to fall back. After 20 more minutes, during which time he periodically hurled a grenade to keep the Germans back, he received a message that the infantry were all safely withdrawn. By then Neame had only seven or eight bombs left and was thus released from his task "just in time." Accompanied by his West Yorks escort, Neame was the last to fall back from the position. After aiding some of the wounded and helping blunt a further German follow-up, he then rejoined his engineer section after a stiff morning's work. On July 19, 1915, Neame was decorated with the Victoria Cross for his actions by King George V at Windsor Castle.

During the remaining years of the war, Neame was in the thick of the fighting, serving with the engineers at the front while holding appointments at the brigade, division, corps, and army headquarters levels. He was

mentioned in dispatches five times, awarded the Distinguished Service Order, and awarded two brevet ranks, that of major and lieutenant-colonel. He also received the French Legion of Honour and War Crosses of France and Belgium.

By the Armistice in 1918, Neame was a rising star in the army. Immediately after the war he went to the Staff College as an instructor when it first reopened in 1919, this despite never having attended as a student. In the four years at Camberley, Neame counted John Dill and J.F.C. Fuller among his fellow instructors and Alan Brooke, Lord Gort, and Jumbo Wilson as students. In 1923 he published a book based on his staff college lectures, *German Strategy in the Great War*.

After the staff college, Neame went to Aldershot as a brigade major. He found the appointment "intolerable" and asked to go to India. He was transferred to the Bengal Sappers and Miners and arrived in India in 1925. He largely remained in the country for the next 12 years, including service on the North West Frontier and on a political-military mission to Tibet.

Neame was an excellent athlete and avid outdoorsman. He played polo, hockey for the Royal Engineers and army, rode point to point, and was an accomplished skier and mountaineer. When posted to India he tried hawking and pig-sticking. A great rifle and revolver shot, Neame was a member of the Army Rifle XX and Army Revolver VIII for several years. He competed at Bisley before and after the Great War, with his best showings being in 1910, 1925, and 1929 when he had time for adequate practice.

The peak of his sporting career was the 1924 Olympics in Paris. As a member of the British team he won a gold medal in the sporting rifle event. The team edged out Norway by a single point. Neame remains the only person to have won an Olympic Gold Medal and the Victoria Cross. Neame continued to participate in competitive shooting events into the 1950s.

Neame was an avid sportsman and big game hunter. He hunted in various parts of Britain as well as the Pyrenees, Spain, Sardinia, and Poland. In India, Neame shot tigers and panthers, and made expeditions to Kashmir, the Himalayas, and Tibet. He always emerged unscathed from these hunting trips and dangerous mountaineering expeditions—until 1934, when he was charged and mauled by a tiger while hunting in an inaccessible country in north India. The tiger had a reputation among the locals as a man-killer. Neame managed to kill the animal but was left badly injured, bleeding profusely from his arm and chest.

The mauling by the tiger cost Neame four months in hospital and a further six on medical leave. At one point the doctors thought they might have to amputate his injured arm, but in typical fashion he made a full recovery and later married one of the nurses who had attended him in hospital. They had four children.

In 1938 he returned to England and took up the appointment as Commandant of the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich. The Academy closed on the outbreak of the war and he went to France, serving as a deputy chief of the general staff with the British Expeditionary Force during the Phony War phase. In early 1940 he was sent to the Middle East to command the 4th Indian Division before being appointed General Officer Commanding, Palestine and Transjordan.

In a reshuffling of commanders in March 1941, Neame was suddenly ordered to take over as GOC, Cyrenaica Command. His appointment was made without the entire confidence of the theatre commander, Archibald Wavell.

"I did not know [Neame] well," Wavell later claimed, but guessed that as a former instructor at the staff college and author of a book on strategy Neame was a "skillful and educated soldier" while his VC was a "guarantee of his fighting qualities."

The Cyrenaica front against the Axis in eastern Libya was considered temporarily dormant. In Operation Compass, which had ended only a couple weeks earlier, Gen. Richard O'Connor had destroyed the Italian 10th Army and advanced across Cyrenaica. The opportunity to push on into Tripolitania was passed up as the British went on the defensive in Libya and, instead, dispatched an expeditionary force to Greece. While the British turned to Greece, Germans began landing at Tripoli under Rommel.

In Neame's first days in command he visited all of his troops, including the forward area. It was a discouraging situation. With the transfer of British ground and air forces

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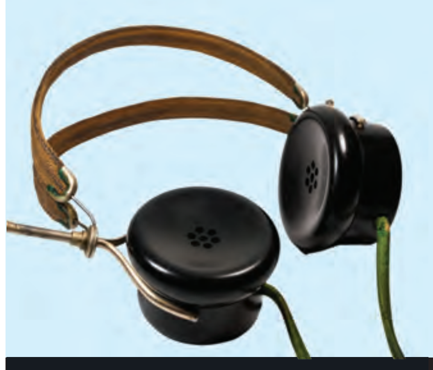

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ABOVE: Brigadier General Philip Neame (in the dark jacket) observes an artillery drill demonstration by a Tibetan gun crew during a review of the Tibetan Army in September 1936. OPPOSITE: British troops from the 9th Rifle Brigade watch as an ammo dump burns in the Libyan Desert during their retreat in 1941.

to Greece, his command was grossly inadequate. It consisted of only two understrength divisions, the Australian 9th and the 2nd Armoured. His army, which largely had not had training in desert warfare, was lacking in both men, tanks, and other equipment. Being deficient in motor transport and signaling equipment, the army was not fully mobile. Neame later noted that it lacked everything that made "a modern army."

Against this, intelligence was being received that large enemy forces were assembling on the desert front and more troops were moving up from Tripoli. Based on these reports, Neame expected an imminent attack.

"The Germans had not come to Libya for nothing," he thought and that they "would not long rest content with a defensive role." Wavell did not share Neame's fear of an early resumption of fighting in the desert. He disregarded Neame's pleas for reinforcements, though with three simultaneous campaigns in Greece, North Africa, and East Africa, he had none available anyway.

Instead, Wavell ordered Neame to maintain a static defence on his front and, only if pressed, make a fighting withdrawal back to Benghazi or, if necessary, further east. The theater commander was convinced that a German attack could not be expected until early May at the earliest as it would take weeks to build up a resupply system from Tripoli to the front line in Cyrenaica. Wavell had not counted on Rommel.

On March 31, 1941, Rommel attacked. The weak forces under Neame were quickly thrown into confusion and started to crumble in the face of the onslaught. There was fierce fighting but the British started to withdraw. Three days into the offensive, Wavell flew to Neame's headquarters. The theatre commander was unhappy with what he found. Although overly optimistic about what could be done, Wavell deemed, perhaps correctly, that Neame had lost his grip on the battle and made no effort to regain it by personally going forward. Wavell ordered Gen. O'Connor to come up from Cairo. O'Connor was not pleased at the prospect of taking over a battle that was already lost. Arriving on April 3rd, O'Connor convinced Wavell not to sack Neame. Instead, O'Connor stayed on at Neame's headquarters as an adviser. It was a bad decision. Wavell should have backed Neame or sacked him.

With O'Connor looking over Neame's shoulder and Wavell interfering in his tactical dispositions, the confused fighting continued as orders and counter-orders were issued. On the night of April 6, with the British in retreat, Neame and O'Connor and their immediate staff set out by car to retire eastward. With Neame alternating at the wheel with his tired driver, they turned off the main road to Derna on to a cross-country track. Amid the dust and moonlight, they became lost in the desert. As they drove, O'Connor protested they were going too far to the north and on the wrong track. Eventually they stopped and took their bearings. Neame still thought they were all right. They resumed driving. With the two generals now asleep in the back seat of the Lincoln Zephyr staff car, they stumbled into a German patrol and were captured. The advance elements of the 3rd German Reconnaissance Battalion that grabbed Neame and O'Connor were 50 miles ahead of the last known enemy positions.

On April 7th the generals were reported missing. In their absence, the battle continued and in 12 days Rommel "swept the British forces out of Cyrenaica in a whirlwind campaign." Neame later took consolation that his army managed to retreat eastward evading capture and that Tobruk, which had been

Imperial War Museum

garrisoned with sufficient forces on his orders, was held.

After their capture, Neame and the others were held in the bare desert for 48 hours surrounded by German guards. Both Neame and O'Connor removed their rank badges and hoped to slip away into the desert during the night. An opportunity did not present itself and both generals eventually provided their names and ranks. They were handed over to the Italians to be flown to Italy. They thought again of escape, of overpowering the Italians and seizing control of the plane midair, but the plot fizzled out.

In the first six months Neame, O'Connor, and other senior British generals and air marshals were held at the Villa Orsini on Sicily before being moved to a restored medieval castle, the Castello di Vincigliata, near Florence. The prisoners numbered about 25 and included the legendary British general Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart. As senior officer in the camp, Neame was responsible for the welfare and morale of the other prisoners.

While others used the long hours of imprisonment to sketch, garden, keep lizards, or learn Italian, Neame used his time to write a draft of his memoirs, embroider, and engage in epic backgammon duels with Carton de Wiart. More importantly, Neame and other prisoners plotted escape. Once while a search of their quarters by the Italians was underway, Neame was told that incriminating notes and plans for an escape had been left about and could be easily found. He at once bluffed his way past a guard, ran up the stairs, found the documents, and crawled out to the top of the battlements where he hid the papers under a loose tile.

A plan to escape by tunnel succeeded. Work began on the tunnel in September 1942 with Neame using his knowledge as a sapper to design and direct its construction. He worked out its dimensions, slope, and length. The tunnel was finished at the end of March 1943. On the night of March 29, Neame and his aide went into the tunnel and cut away the final nine inches of earth to the surface. It was never planned that he would be one of the prisoners to go out through the tunnel. The six selected to escape went out via the tunnel and got away from the camp. Two made it to Switzerland.

On September 7, 1943, the Italian Armistice went into effect. The Italians bundled away their VIP prisoners just as the Germans arrived and released them, telling them to board the first train at the station. Over the next four months, Neame and O'Connor hid out and scrambled over rough country by foot and

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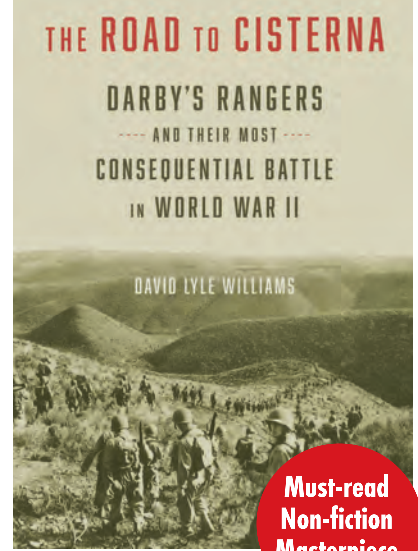

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ABOVE: From left are Brigadier John Coombe, Lt.-General Philip Neame (circled), Lt.-General Richard O'Connor, and Maj.-General Michael Gambier-Parry after they were captured by a patrol from General Rommel's Afrika Korps on April 6, 1941. O'Connor and Neame were captured as they were driving to Neame's HQ west of Tobruk. BELOW: Vincigliata Castle, near Florence, Italy, was known as Castello di Vincigliata Campo P.G. 12 when it served as a secure POW camp for up to 25 high-ranking British and Commonwealth officers at a time between 1941 and 1943. Along with the other prisoners, generals Neame and O'Connor were able to leave the castle after the Italian Armistice, but spent three months avoiding the Germans before reaching Allied lines.

Massimo Civitelli Arezzo/Wikimedia

bicycle to avoid recapture by the Germans. Courageous Italians hid them in monasteries, a chapel, farmhouses, isolated mountain hamlets, and homes. Neame gave these Italians the lion's share of the credit for the British party being able to elude the Germans.

The escapees made contact with General Harold Alexander, British army group commander, by means of a courier who crossed the front lines. A plan was made to take them out by submarine and they made a three-day trek across the mountains down to the coast. The submarine, however, did not appear. They continued southward, avoiding the Germans, and hiding out in Italian homes.

A new plan was hatched that Neame and O'Connor would escape to the Allied lines aboard an Italian boat. Contact was made with the captain of a fishing trawler docked in Cattolica, which was under German occupation. Money changed hands and the captain agreed to take them south.

After dark in mid-December 1943, the British slipped past the Germans on bicycles and went aboard the boat. They immediately went below into the hold. It was blowing hard with heavy rain as the fishing boat sailed. After a day's sailing the boat turned south around midnight. Neame and the others were then allowed on deck and as dawn broke were thrilled to see Allied squadrons overhead. When the boat put in at Allied-held Termoli, Neame and O'Connor along with the others aboard the trawler were arrested as they stepped ashore, but they quickly explained they were escaped prisoners of war.

After cleaning up, the generals were immediately taken to Bari to meet with Alexander and theatre commander Dwight Eisenhower, before being flown to Tunis. Prime Minister Winston Churchill was in the city recuperating from an illness and on learning of the generals' escape invited them to his villa. Neame and O'Connor were interviewed by Churchill on his sick-bed and they told him of their adventures. He was very interested. In turn, he gave them a thorough update on the war that left them "spellbound." Neame was flown back to Britain, arriving on December 25, 1943.

On returning to England, Neame was frustrated to find that no further army commands or appointments were available for him. His army career was over. In 1945 Neame was appointed Lieutenant-Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Guernsey. He published his autobiography, *Playing with Strife*, the following year. He had written most of the manuscript while a prisoner of war and hid it in a tomb in a monastery during the escape across Italy. It was later retrieved by a British intelligence officer and returned to him.

After an extraordinary life of danger and adventure—surviving two wars, a tiger attack, Rommel, and a prison camp—Neame died at home on April 28, 1978, at the age of 89. □

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The long, strange odyssey of the *Luigi Torelli*, the Italian submarine that sailed under the flag of the three main Axis navies.

Look and Learn

The April 5, 1942, cover of the weekly Italian newspaper, *La Domenica del Corriere*, depicts an unidentified Italian submarine torpedoing an Allied tanker off the eastern coast of the United States. Though the *Luigi Torelli* had some success, Italy's fleet of 32 submarines in the Atlantic sank only 600,000 tons of shipping in three years of war—less than the same number of German U-boats destroyed in two months in the summer of 1941.

History has not been kind to the Italian Royal Navy. Since World War II scholars have largely ignored *La Regia Marina Italiana* and the often pivotal role it played in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations. By relegating her naval forces to what is essentially a footnote in history, many influential historians suggest that Italy simply was not a worthy foe.

This prejudice also existed during the war, both among Italy's allies and her adversaries. Privately, Adolf Hitler complained about Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini's lack of aggressiveness after Italy joined Nazi Germany's fight against France and Great Britain in the summer of 1940. Hitler's enemies shared his disdain for Italy's martial competence. One English broadside from 1943 crowed "that the British Fleet should be pushed out of the Middle [Mediterranean] Sea by a crowd of Italian Jackals is unthinkable."

Yet the facts tell a far different story. In particular, the Italian submarine *Luigi Torelli* fought stubbornly for five years, first as a commerce raider and then as a stealthy supply boat. This vessel distinguished itself as one of only two warships to have served with all three Axis powers before final surrender in 1945. The *Luigi Torelli* also became the center of a diplomatic firestorm when in 1942 its captain deliberately kidnapped sev-

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eral citizens of a neutral nation in his desperate attempt to escape imprisonment.

At the start of hostilities, Italy possessed the world's fifth largest navy. Her modern, well-armed surface fleet greatly outnumbered the British and French warships then available for service in the Mediterranean. Italy's submarine force totaled 117 vessels, second only to Soviet Russia and more than double the number of operational U-boats with the Germany *Kriegsmarine*. On paper anyway, the Regia Marina represented a formidable fighting force.

Such potential appealed to Hitler, whose own navy remained woefully outgunned by its enemies' powerful fleets despite a massive rearmament program initiated under the Nazis. In May 1939, Hitler and Mussolini signed the "Pact of Steel," pledging mutual economic and military cooperation. As part of this alliance, Hitler could now count on Italy's Regia Marina to fight a "parallel war" in the Mediterranean, which freed German forces to concentrate on operations in the North Atlantic.

One month after Germany and Italy joined forces, representatives from both nations' navies met in Friedrichshafen, Germany, to discuss maritime cooperation. During this conference, the Italian high command further agreed to support Germany's Atlantic Ocean campaign with its fleet of long-range submarines, once Italy entered the war. This arrangement, so simple in principle, led to many unforeseen consequences over the next few years.

One immediate complication concerned the fact that much of Italy's navy was designed for the shallow waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Only a small number of her ocean-going fleet submarines could be considered suitable for Atlantic operations. Among them were six new Marconi-class boats built from 1939 to 1940. Large, fast, and well-armed, these capable warships compared favorably with Germany's Type IXB U-boats then stalking Allied merchant shipping in the North Atlantic.

The fourth Marconi-class submarine to be built came down the ways at Odero-Terni-Orlando's yards in La Spezia on January 6, 1940. Named *Luigi Torelli* (after a 19th century Italian patriot), she was commissioned in the Regia Marina four months later. *Capitano di Fregata* (Commander) Aldo Cocchia became the boat's first captain.

P. Charpiat/Wikimedia

ABOVE: The German U-Boot-Bunker at Bordeaux, France. After the French collapse in 1940, the Regia Marina (Italian Navy) established a top-secret facility here, BETASOM (1940-1943), to improve access to the Atlantic Ocean. Germany, who had the largest submersible fleet in history (1,162 vessels) began building massive reinforced concrete submarine pens here in 1941, making it a major Axis U-boat hub. OPPOSITE: The Regia Marina's *Luigi Torelli* arrives at the BETASOM sub base in Bordeaux on February 4, 1941, after completing its first Atlantic patrol. She had begun her patrol on November 12, but had to return to base for electric motor repairs after 10 days. She set out again on January 9, 1941.

Measuring over 250 feet in length, the *Torelli* displaced 1,036 tons surfaced and 1,489 tons submerged. Equipped with two 3,600-horsepower C.R.D.A. diesel engines, she could make 17.75 knots on the surface, while a pair of Marelli electric motors rated at 1,240-horsepower drove her to a top underwater speed of 8.2 knots. The *Luigi Torelli* could dive to an operational depth of 300 feet, and her range exceeded 9,500 nautical miles.

Primary weapons consisted of four 21-inch torpedo tubes in the bow and four astern, with a total of 12 Fiume torpedoes on board. A 100-mm deck gun and two twin 13.2-mm Breda antiaircraft machine guns rounded out her armament. The *Torelli*'s crew complement included seven officers and 50 enlisted sailors.

When Italy declared war on France and the United Kingdom on July 10, 1940, the *Luigi Torelli* was undergoing sea trials in the Mediterranean. Following an uneventful reconnaissance mission in the Gulf of Genoa, Capitano Cocchia then received orders assigning his vessel to the Italian Navy's new submarine base at Bordeaux, France, codenamed BETASOM.

This top-secret facility got its designation by combining the Regia Marina's phonetic term for "B" (signifying Bordeaux) and *sommergibile*, the Italian word for submarine. BETASOM, together with several German U-boat bases, was established in the aftermath of France's unexpectedly sudden collapse during the summer of 1940. From these ports along the Bay of Biscay, Axis navies now had easy access to the Atlantic Ocean, dramatically extending the operational reach of their ocean-going submarines.

While Germany began constructing U-boat pens on the Atlantic coast at St. Nazaire, Lorient, and Brest, the Italian Navy selected Bordeaux—50 miles inland along the Gironde Estuary—for its new submarine base. This decision proved to be a wise one, as BETASOM was hit by Allied bombers far less than Germany's coastal installations.

Naval History and Heritage Command

Manned by more than 1,600 Italian naval personnel and French laborers, BETASOM had facilities for as many as 30 submarines.

Departing La Spezia on August 31, 1940, the *Luigi Torelli* slipped past British patrols in the Strait of Gibraltar to conduct anti-shipping operations off the Azores Islands. She then made her way along the French coast and up the treacherous Gironde Estuary to arrive at BETASOM on October 5. There the sub received both a new commander—Capitano Primo Longobardo—and assignment to the XI Submarine Group under *Contrammiraglo* (Rear Admiral) Angelo Parona.

Parona's orders were to join forces with the Kriegsmarine's U-boat fleet, then operating off the United Kingdom's Western Approaches. In charge of this effort was Admiral Karl Dönitz, the brilliant, charismatic naval leader charged by Hitler to choke off the flow of supplies that England needed to keep fighting. His small fleet of U-boats had been doing just that for more than a year, but remained too few in number to make a measurable impact on the British war effort.

Initially, Dönitz welcomed the Italians. Their modern vessels and well-trained crews essentially doubled his combat power, allowing the Axis to greatly increase patrol activity along the sea lanes surrounding England. Whatever the Regia Marina's sailors lacked in practical experience his officers could teach them, and soon Italian submarine commanders began accompanying U-boat skippers on wartime operations. Following indoctrination into Kriegsmarine tactics and procedures, the men of XI Submarine Group were judged ready by the end of autumn.

On November 12, the *Luigi Torelli* began her first Atlantic war patrol. Ten days later, though, she was forced to turn around due to problems with her electric motors. Following extensive repairs at BETASOM, *Torelli* set out again on January 9, 1941. This second cruise, conducted off the coast of Scotland, would prove far more productive.

At dusk on January 15, Longobardo sighted a small enemy convoy and moved in on the surface to attack. The first merchantman to feel *Torelli*'s wrath was the 4,079-ton *Brask*, a Norwegian-flagged freighter, which went down along with 12 of her 38 crewmen. *Torelli* struck again 28 minutes later, torpedoing *Nemea*, a 5,101-ton Greek vessel. On the following day, the *Luigi Torelli* used torpedoes and her deck gun to sink another Greek-registered cargo ship, the 3,111-ton *Nicolaos Filinis*.

With the destruction of the 5,198-ton British steamer *Urla*, she concluded her maiden patrol on January 28. Back at BETASOM on February 4, *Torelli* underwent routine maintenance as well as another change of commanders. *Tenente di Vascala* (Lieutenant) Antonio De Giacomo took over for Longobardo, who was reassigned to command another vessel.

Refitted and with a new skipper, the *Luigi Torelli* left port in April for a month-long cruise off Scotland that yielded no kills. Her third mission revealed much about how conditions in the Atlantic had changed. Operating off Gibraltar, *Torelli* twice attempted to approach Allied convoys but was driven off by escorting warships. Eventually, she found and sank the unescorted 8,913-ton Norwegian tanker *Ida Knudsen* on July 21.

Two subsequent Atlantic patrols under freshly-promoted *Capitano di Corvetta* (Lieutenant Commander) Di Giacomo netted the *Luigi Torelli* no new victories but did result in an unexpected honor after she aided in the rescue of 254 German sailors marooned by the destruction of the commerce raider *Atlantis*. Admiral Dönitz himself pinned the award of Iron Cross First Class to Di Giacomo's uniform in recognition of *Torelli*'s lifesaving efforts.

By early 1942, Italian submarines no

longer played a role in Dönitz' North Atlantic anti-shipping campaign. The Kriegsmarine now had on hand sufficient quantities of smaller, nimbler German Type VII boats; this meant XI Submarine Group could now send its large ocean-going vessels out to conduct operations against Mussolini's newest enemy, the United States. *Luigi Torelli* left for the Caribbean on February 2, to patrol a sector off the French island of Martinique.

En route to the West Indies, *Torelli* happened across and sank the British-flagged *Scottish Star*, a 7,224-ton freighter, on February 19. The submarine's largest and final victim went down six days later when the *Esso Copenhagen*, a 9,245-ton Panamanian tanker, succumbed to her torpedoes and deck gun 480 miles east of Trinidad.

Returning to BETASOM on March 31, *Luigi Torelli* underwent another command change when *Tenente di Vasello* (Ship-of-the-line lieutenant) Augusto Migliorini took over as skipper. Her next cruise proved to be short-lived, but auspicious. While transiting the Bay of Biscay during the night of June 3, she was caught on the surface by an RAF Vickers Wellington patrol bomber equipped with a powerful new device called the Leigh Light. Illuminating *Torelli*, the "Wimpy" then straddled her with a salvo of four 250-pound depth charges.

The submarine was badly damaged in this surprise aerial attack, as *Secondo Capo Mechanista* (Second Chief Mechanician) Carlo Pracchi recalled: "It sounds as if every gauge in the control room is shattering. All the valves are shut down. The glass of the depth gauge breaks. I can see drips on the heads of the rivets in the frames. I touch one with my finger and water runs down my arm. Then we get another depth charge and the drips start to run down themselves.

"The main relays shut down. The lights have just gone. We'll have to use the emergency lighting. I feel my leg cramp up, then the tingling starts, then shaking…The effect on my legs doesn't stop; I use my arms to try to suppress it, holding my knees. It makes no difference."

With its gyrocompass shattered, steering gear damaged, and batteries leaking poisonous fumes, the *Luigi Torelli* was in no condition to continue its mission. Heading for the French port of St. Jean de Luz, Migliorini became disoriented by fog and instead ran his boat on the rocks near Spain's Cape Peñas. It took several Spanish tugs all day to pull the *Torelli* clear and tow her to the small anchorage at Avilés.

Ulrich Mohr

After the sinking of the German commerce raider *Atlantis*, on November 22, 1941, some 254 German sailors were rescued by U-boats, who carried the men on deck and could not dive. In mid December off the coast of Africa, the *Luigi Torelli* and three other Italian subs joined four U-boats to take the *Atlantis* crew back to France. *Torelli* commander Capt. Antonio Di Giacomo received the Iron Cross First Class for the assistance.

Under international law combatant warships may remain in a neutral port for just 24 hours, after which time both boat and crew are liable to be interned. So the *Luigi Torelli* had no choice but to limp off for Bordeaux after nightfall on June 5, only to be spotted the next morning by two Royal Australian Air Force Short Sunderland flying boats. Absorbing accurate fire from the *Torelli*'s antiaircraft weapons, both Sunderlands pressed in with machine guns blazing to drop depth charges close alongside the luckless submarine. The explosions ripped a huge hole in her hull, wounding two men, including the captain, and killing a third.

While damage control parties worked frantically to contain the flooding, enginemen restarted *Luigi Torelli*'s diesels. The submarine was listing so badly that at one point all hands lined up on deck to counterbalance it. Somehow the crew managed to get the boat under way, eventually beaching her on a sandbank outside the small Spanish harbor of Santander.

Of course there was now no way the *Torelli* could be made seaworthy within a day, and she was duly interned by Spanish authorities. Local officials patched the boat up enough so it could be towed to a nearby naval base, enlisting her crew to work on technical systems unfamiliar to the Spaniards.

As a safety precaution, the Italian internees were at their stations aboard *Luigi Torelli* when, on July 14, a tugboat began towing the prize into Santander's inner basin for delivery to its new owners. Suddenly, from down inside the boat a diesel engine coughed into life. Then a sailor cast off the line connecting *Torelli* with her tug, and the battered submarine turned toward international waters and freedom. On the bridge, two shocked Spanish naval officers raised their voices in a loud but futile protest—when offered the choice of boarding a nearby fishing vessel or a one-way trip to Bordeaux, the two officers glumly chose the former.

The *Luigi Torelli* made it to BETASOM the next day, sparking a nasty international incident with neutral Spain. The diplomatic furor died down long before *Torelli* again became fit for service, but as 1943 dawned, it appeared her days as a commerce raider were numbered.

With Di Giacomo back in command, the submarine set out in February for a patrol off Belém, Brazil. On March 16, American Consolidated PBY Catalina flying boats attacked the vessel while she was surfaced, inflicting

considerable damage. Although her gunners managed to shoot down one Catalina, the *Luigi Torelli* had to return home early for repairs once again. Upon docking in Bordeaux, her crew learned of a new mission that would take them farther from home than anyone might have imagined.

For quite some time, Dönitz had been dissatisfied with the Regia Marina's lackluster record against Allied shipping compared with that of his U-boat fleet. Italian submarines dived too slowly, Dönitz claimed, while their mechanical reliability left much to be desired. The Italian boats' enormous superstructures, poor maneuverability, and slow surface speed also limited their effectiveness in night combat, the Kriegsmarine's preferred method of attack.

Furthermore, several battle-tested U-boat commanders said their Italian counterparts lacked the aggressive spirit needed to score victories against increasingly well protected Allied convoys.

"Despite the efforts to raise their performance through constant influence…they [Italian submarine captains] remain uniformly unsatisfactory," Dönitz wrote. "They see nothing, report nothing, or too late, their tactical ability is likewise nil."

Indeed, Italy's 32 Atlantic-based submarines could take credit for a mere 600,000 tons (109 ships) sunk in three years of war—less than the tonnage destroyed by a similar number of German U-boats during just two months in the summer of 1941. While design flaws, tactical blunders, and poor leadership help explain this disparity, it must also be remembered that the Kriegsmarine assigned its most lucrative patrol sectors to German U-boat commanders and not the Italians.

By early 1943, Germany had assumed a clear position of dominance both in terms of submarine production and tactical employment. In February of that year, 27 new U-boats were launched, nearly one per day. These lethal new undersea hunters required trained crews, however, and on February 20, Dönitz proposed to Hitler an innovative solution to the U-boat manning crisis.

Arguing that the Italian fleet submarines were no longer adequate for combat operations, Dönitz proposed 10 of them be repurposed as transports, specially modified to carry strategic war materiel to and from the

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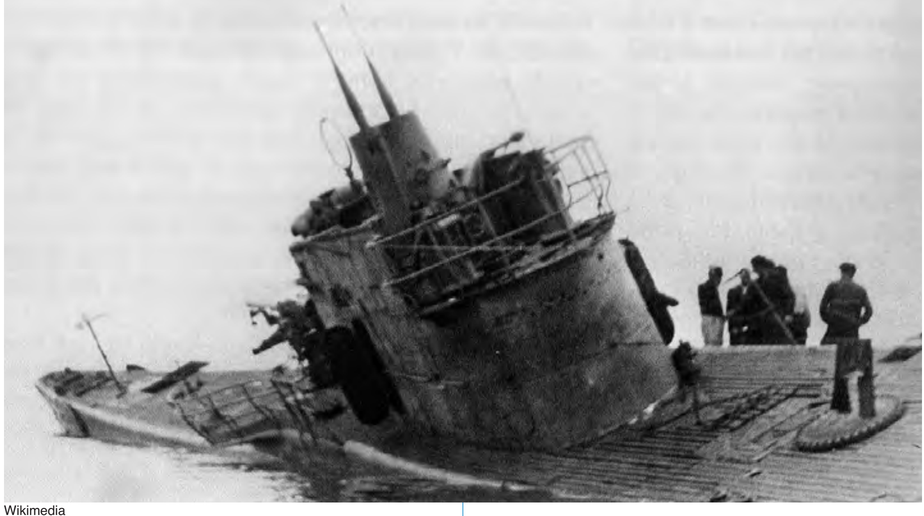
ABOVE: The Panamanian tanker *Esso Copenhagen*, carrying fuel from Aruba to Buenos Aires, is hit by a stern torpedo from the *Luigi Torelli* at close range at 1555 hours. The *Torelli*'s first torpedo had missed the *Esso* at 0045 on February 26, 1942. An hour later, the *Esso* was hit, but didn't sink. A second torpedo hit also failed to sink the tanker. At 1720, rounds fired from the *Torelli*'s stern gun sent the *Esso* to the bottom. BELOW: As the *Luigi Torelli* cruised on the surface of the Bay of Biscay in the early hours of June 4, 1942, it was discovered by an RAF Wellington bomber using a Leigh Light—a 22-million candlepower, 24-inch searchlight. The Wellington's attack with machine guns and depth charges caused *Torelli* to lose power, damaged its compass and steering and started a fire in the battery compartment. The sub was able to escape and Spanish tugs towed it to a harbor for temporary repairs.



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Far East. Since by this point Allied forces had either sunk or bottled up most of Germany's surface fleet, Dönitz' plan seemed viable. To sweeten the deal, Germany offered the Regia Marina 10 new Type VIIC U-boats as compensation for their Bordeaux-based vessels. Both parties profited from this exchange. Italy received the latest in submarine technology while Germany now had 10 boats in service which it did not need to man.

Hitler and Mussolini each approved the plan, which was called Operation Merkator. Although controlled by the Germans, all transport submarines would remain Italian-crewed. Outbound, their cargo included military technology such as new radar equipment and rapid-fire cannon intended for Japan's armed services. Returning, the boats were to carry rubber, quinine, and other raw materials desperately needed by the Axis powers in Europe. Specially trained technicians and exchange officers would also make the 11,400-mile journey between Bordeaux and Singapore.

The project, codenamed Aquila by the Italians, got off to a bad start when Allied forces sank three of the 10 submarines before modification could begin. The seven remaining boats, among them the *Luigi Torelli*, then went through a six-week conversion process which left them capable of carrying 150 tons of cargo. All armament except antiaircraft guns was stripped, while torpedo tubes were replaced by extra fuel tanks. To make more room for freight, a portion of each vessel's battery bank was also removed.

Now under the command of *Tenente di Vasello* Enrico Gropalli and re-named the *Aquila VI*, the former *Luigi Torelli* left Bordeaux for the Far East on June 14, 1943. Aboard were several German technicians, as well as Col. Kinze Sateke, a Japanese communications officer returning from radio school in Germany. The boat was loaded with 800 Mauser aircraft cannon, two "Würzburg" antiaircraft radar sets, and an unfused 500-kg aerial bomb.

The journey was eventful. On August 12, with oil bunkers almost dry, the *Aquila VI* met with *U-178* in the Indian Ocean to take on needed diesel fuel. Somehow she managed to avoid contact with Allied patrols for 73 days, arriving in Sabang, Sumatra, on August 26 and the German U-boat base at Penang, Malaya, three days later. August 31 saw *Aquila VI* put in at Singapore.

On September 8, Italy surrendered. In response, Axis forces seized the *Aquila VI* and two other Italian submarines then docked at Singapore's harbor. Commissioned as *UIT-25*, the former *Luigi Torelli* now flew Nazi Germany's naval ensign.

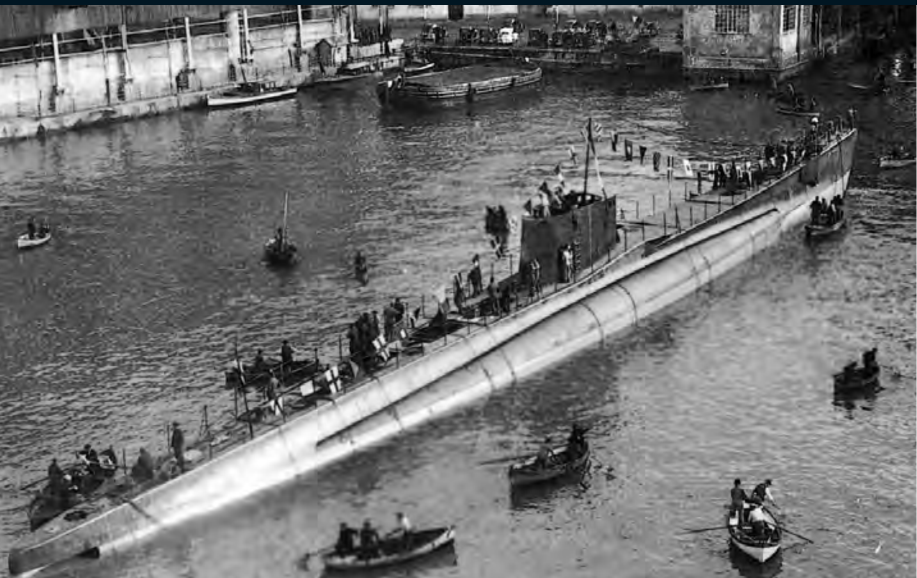
When Benito Mussolini formed the "Repubblica Sociale Italiana"on September 20, the former *Torelli* crew could walk out of their POW camps and continue fighting for the Axis merely by swearing allegiance to Il Duce's new puppet state. This also worked well for the *UIT-25*'s new commander, *Oberleutnant zur See* (Lieutenant Junior Grade) Werner Striegler. Personnel shortages in the Far East command meant a mixed company of Italians and Germans took *UIT-25* to Kobe, Japan, in February 1944.

In German service, the *UIT-25* made several successful supply runs between its base at Kobe and Axis outposts such as Penang, Surabaya, Java, and Singapore. A succession

of commanders skippered the sub, which underwent a major overhaul at Kobe during the spring of 1945. On March 17, American Boeing B-29 Superfortress bombers targeted the shipyard where *UIT-25* was laid up, killing one of her German crewmen.

Germany capitulated on May 10, prompting Japan to commission this frequently renamed vessel as *I-504*. Her sister ship, the ex-*Capellini*, was also appropriated, making them the only warships of World War II to have flown the flags of all three Axis navies.

Lieutenant Hirota Hideo was assigned as commander of the *I-504* on July 15, 1945. The crew included Japanese naval personnel and former Europeans now serving as "technical volunteers." Their task now was to provide early warning of the Allied invasion fleet, expected to arrive off Japan's home shores at any moment.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The former *Luigi Torelli*, converted in 1943 to a long-range supply vessel and renamed *Aquila VI*, was sent on a 10-week voyage to Japanese-occupied British Malaya. After the Italian capitulation, the sub was operated by Germany out of Penang as *UIT-25*. Under repairs in Japan when Germany surrendered, the sub became the Imperial Japanese Navy's *I-504*. Along with its sister ship, *Comandante Cappellini*, these two subs were the only two to fly all three flags of the principal Axis powers.

The last weeks of the war were confusing ones indeed for Lt. Hirota and his Italian-German-Japanese crew. Communication on board the *I-504* must have been a challenge, but this long-serving submarine was not quite done making history. At least one source credits *I-504* with downing a U.S Army Air Forces North American B-25 Mitchell bomber on August 30, 1945, possibly the last victory scored by an Axis warship before hostilities ceased.

Taken over by the U.S. Navy, the one-time *Luigi Torelli* was scuttled in the Kii Channel off Kobe on April 16, 1946. □

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Imperial War Museum

After intense naval artillery and air strikes on the Japanese-held island of Ramree, off the coast of Burma, the 71st Indian Infantry Brigade (26th Indian Division) wades ashore on January 21, 1945. INSET: Accounts of crocodile predation during the month-long battle for Burma's Ramree Island in 1945 have persisted for years. Historians today are not so sure.

What killed nearly 1,000 Japanese troops in the impenetrable swamps of Burma's Ramree Island in 1945?

The nights were "the most horrible ever experienced," Bruce S. Wright, a Royal Canadian Lieutenant Commander later wrote about his time in Burma in February 1945. "[It] made a cacophony of hell that has rarely been duplicated on earth."

He was there when nearly 1,000 Japanese soldiers, escaping a British attack on their positions, had slipped into a mangrove swamp on Burma's Ramree Island. Throughout the several nights that followed, Wright wrote that the British troops that encircled the swamp could hear "scattered rifle shots in the pitch-black swamp punctured by the screams of wounded men crushed in the jaws" of half-ton saltwater crocodiles.

"At dawn," he said, "the vultures arrived to clean up what the crocodiles had left."

Before the British were able to go into the swamp and end the carnage, almost half of the Japanese who had entered it were dead. The incident often is listed as the worst example of animal predation on humans in history.

But did it really happen as Wright suggested?

Eight years after what has been called "The Ramree Island Massacre," historians accept the heavy loss of Japanese life but doubt saltwater crocodiles were responsible.

Japan's main aims when she entered the war in December 1941 were to acquire raw materials, particularly oil, rubber, and tin,

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Three Consolidated Liberator B Mark VIs, a special version of the B-24 flown by the RAF, have just dropped their payloads over Japanese positions marked with smoke on Ramree Island, Burma, ahead of the beach landing by the 26th Indian Division on January 21, 1945. The Royal Navy battleship HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and light cruiser HMS *Phoebe* also fired thousands of artillery shells at the island.

and to create space for the population of her over-crowded home islands. The Japanese attack on the United States Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor had been planned with this in mind and with the idea that the attack would enable the Imperial Japanese army, air force, and navy to meet these ambitions before the western Allies could react.

The Pearl Harbor raid, however, had failed to sink America's aircraft carriers, a main objective of the attack. By chance, the U.S. carriers were out to sea on Dec, 7, 1941. On hearing the aircraft carriers had escaped destruction, the BBC even wrote that Japanese Adm. IsorokuYamamoto, commander-in-chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet and architect of the Pearl Harbor attack "knew that the war was already as good as lost."

Nonetheless, in January 1942, less than two months after the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese Fifteenth Army, commanded by Lt. Gen. Shōjirō Lida, invaded Burma from Thailand in hopes of gaining control of Burma's rubber plantations and then denying the United States the rubber they produced. The Japanese also hoped to cut the famed 717-mile Burma Road that was used by the Allies to funnel military supplies to the Chinese still fighting against Japan.

Japanese forces had already taken Hong Kong. Indochina had fallen, and British, Australian, and Indian troops had surrendered on the Malay peninsula and in Singapore. The Dutch East Indies fell in March 1942, and Japanese control of the western Pacific threatened even Australia.

Burma's primary defense force at the time was the 17th Indian Infantry Division, under Maj. Gen. Jackie Smyth, who in May 1915 had won a Victoria Cross during fighting near Richebourg L'Avoue in France and who would later serve as Conservative member of the British Parliament.

The Japanese forced the evacuation of Rangoon on March 7, 1942, which allowed them to close one end of the Burma Road. The fighting in Burma stalled after that until, March 1944, when the Japanese who were by then outnumbered in Burma grew alarmed at the growing British strength and attacked on two fronts.

As part of their efforts to meet the Japanese push in 1945, the Allies moved to take Ramree Island, about 12 miles off the coast of Burma (now known as the Republic of the Union of Myanmar). In 1942 the rapidly expansionist Imperial Japanese Army had captured the 521-square-mile island along with the rest of Southern Burma and used Ramree Island as a training facility. They also built an airfield at the island's northern tip. The use of the area for training also meant the Japanese knew exact distances to specific landmarks, a fact that would greatly help them zero in their artillery on any attacking British forces that also had to face Japanese mines on the beaches and gun emplacements at likely invasion spots. The Allies planned to take Ramree Island along with two other islands, Akyab to Ramree's north and Cheduba to the south, and use the three islands as sites for airbases that would be able to support the Burmese invasion and other operations being planned for Southeast Asia.

First Akyab was taken easily when the Allied landing force found the island unoccupied.

On January 21, 1945, the focus shifted to Ramree. An hour before the 26th Indian Division was to land, the 646-foot-long battleship HMS *Queen Elizabeth* opened fire with her main battery, the first time the ship had fired its guns in anger since they had bombarded the Dardanelles forts in 1915. The *Queen Elizabeth* had been unable to lower its 15-inch guns sufficiently from close range and had to move out and fire from

"below the horizon." Her bombardment, however, still did considerable damage to the rock caves on the island that housed Japanese artillery and to the Japanese beach defenses. The light cruiser HMS *Phoebe* also joined in the bombardment, and B-24 Liberators and P-47 Thunderbolts strafed and bombed the beaches. Troops then landed unopposed near the port of Kyaukpyu on the northern tip of the island and quickly secured the area.

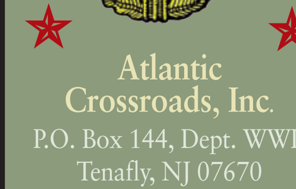
The original landing site had been changed to the site near Kyaukpyu after Combined Operations Pilotage Parties had reconnoitered the proposed beaches before the invasion and found them heavily mined with artillery in the rock caves waiting for their attack. The site change led to a tactical surprise according to an official British report.

Work to develop the nearby harbor as a suitable anchorage for Allied ships began almost immediately including work to remove mines that had been laid in the inner harbor. The harbor was declared safe on January 24, and the commander of the 26th Indian Division, Ma. Gen. C. E. N. Lomax came ashore. He took command of local military operations and established his headquarters in a broken-down house that had been used by the Japanese staff.

The British then began moving south along the island's coast pushing the Japanese before them and meeting only sporadic resistance until they were stopped by heavy fighting at a place called Yan Bauk Chaung. Meanwhile, on January 26, Royal Marines landed on the southern island of Cheduba to find it, like Akyab, unoccupied. On February 1, additional Royal Marines and other troops landed on the south side of Ramree under cover of another naval and air bombardment. There they were reinforced and ordered to move north and east flanking the Japanese force at Yan Bauk Chaung.

By February 7, the Japanese realized they were caught between the two British forces and moved inland pursued by the British. By then there were only remnants of the Japanese force left in the south.

In what has been called "a typical samurai decision," these remaining Japanese defenders tried to escape the British by crossing a large mangrove swamp in the center of the island. Their breakout was ordered for dusk on February 19, but as the Japanese moved



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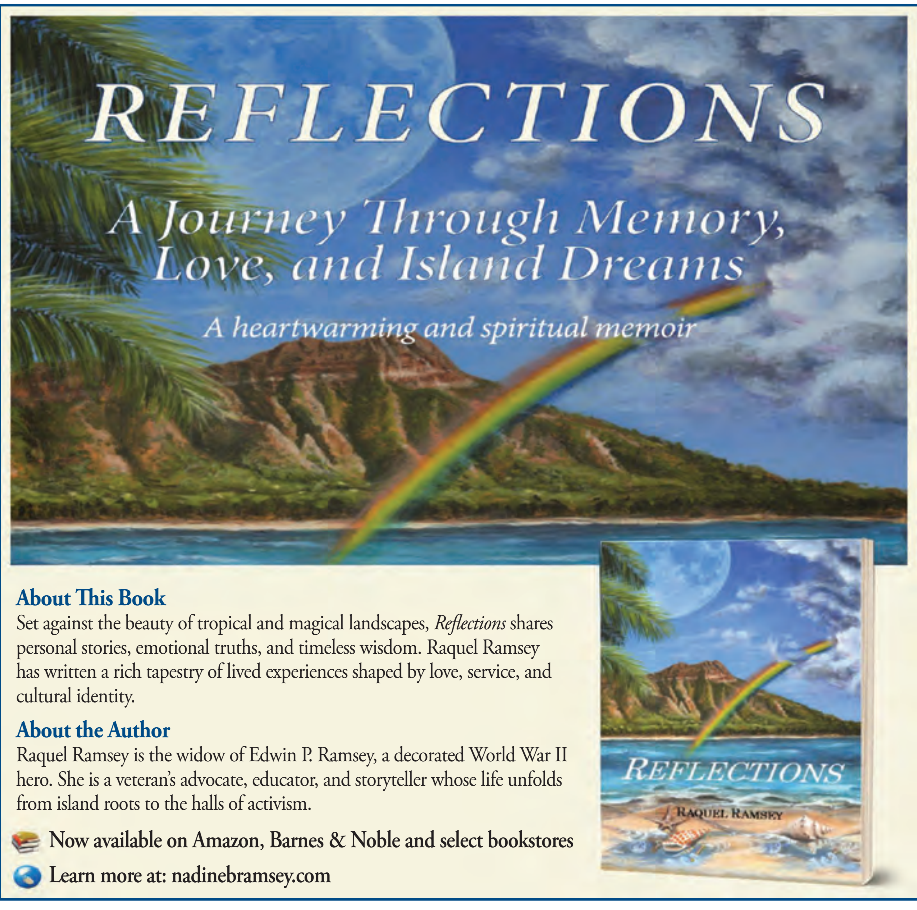

they were subjected to immediate and effective harassing fire from British air, ground, and sea units. Desperate to make their escape and suffering substantial casualties as they fled, the Japanese force slipped away on foot into the darkness of the mangrove swamp.

"It is hardly possible," an official British report says, "that in their decision ... the Japanese could be fully aware of the appalling conditions which prevailed."

The route they had chosen forced the Japanese to cross nine miles of the swamp, and as they struggled through the thick forests the British encircled the area by blocking the channels (locally known as "chaungs") leading out of the swamp. Any Japanese trying to escape the trap were shot. No food or drinking water could be obtained anywhere in the saltwater swamp, and the area was dark during the day as well as during the night. The swamp was filled with acres of thick and all-but-impenetrable forest, miles of deep black mud, mosquitoes, scorpions, snakes, and a myriad of insects. Sharks have also been known to enter the swamp from the ocean. There were also the saltwater crocodiles.

The saltwater crocodile is the largest of all living reptiles and has been called "the largest terrestrial and riparian predator in the world." An average adult male can weigh between 1,300 and 2,200 lbs. and reach a length of 13-18 ft. The saltwater crocodile is considered formidable and opportunistic and hunts by ambush. It is capable of taking almost any animal that enters its territory, including fish, crustaceans, reptiles, birds and mammals, other predators—and humans. The species is found across Northern Australia, along the eastern coast of India, and throughout Southeast Asia.

The Ramree Island mangrove swamp was filled with them, and the night that followed the Japanese flights were filled with what Wright would call the "cacophony of hell." Trapped in the deep mud-filled land, tropical diseases soon started afflicting the escaping Japanese soldiers, and in the course of several days, starvation and a lack of drinking water also became serious issues. All the while they were harassed by sporadic artillery fire from the British and bitten by snakes, stung by insects and scorpions, and attacked by the resident crocodiles.

Imperial War Museum

ABOVE: In January 1945 Indian troops wade ashore at Akyab—now Sittwe, Myanmar (formerly Burma)—an estuarial island created at the confluence of the Kaladan, Mayu, and Lay Mro rivers where they reach the Bay of Bengal. The landing was part of Operation Matador, whose goal was to capture Akyab and Ramree Island. BELOW: A modern digital illustration imagining an encounter by Japanese soldiers and a giant saltwater crocodile during their escape attempt through the swamps of Burma's Ramree Island in 1945. The myth of 1,000 Japanese soldiers being killed by crocodiles on Ramree Island—boosted by its appearance in some editions of *The Guinness Book of World Records* as the "highest number of fatalities in an animal attack"—has been dismissed by modern military historians and herpetologists.

Several times over the days that followed, the British called on the Japanese—citing their impossible position and urging these modern samurai to surrender. But those calls were met with silence. The Burma Star Association, a group of British Burma veterans, also records that a Japanese doctor "who had studied in Britain and the United States and spoke good English" could no longer stand the screams and other noises coming from the swamp "and fled floating down a chaung on a log away from the hell his compatriots were suffering. He offered to call on the others to follow his example, and although he spent all day in a motor-launch cruising up and down the chaungs calling on the Japanese to give themselves up, not a single Japanese appeared."

They had chosen to die.

When the British eventually were able to move into the swamp, they found that of the 900-1,000 Japanese troops that originally fled there, only around 20 seriously wounded

Continued on page 98

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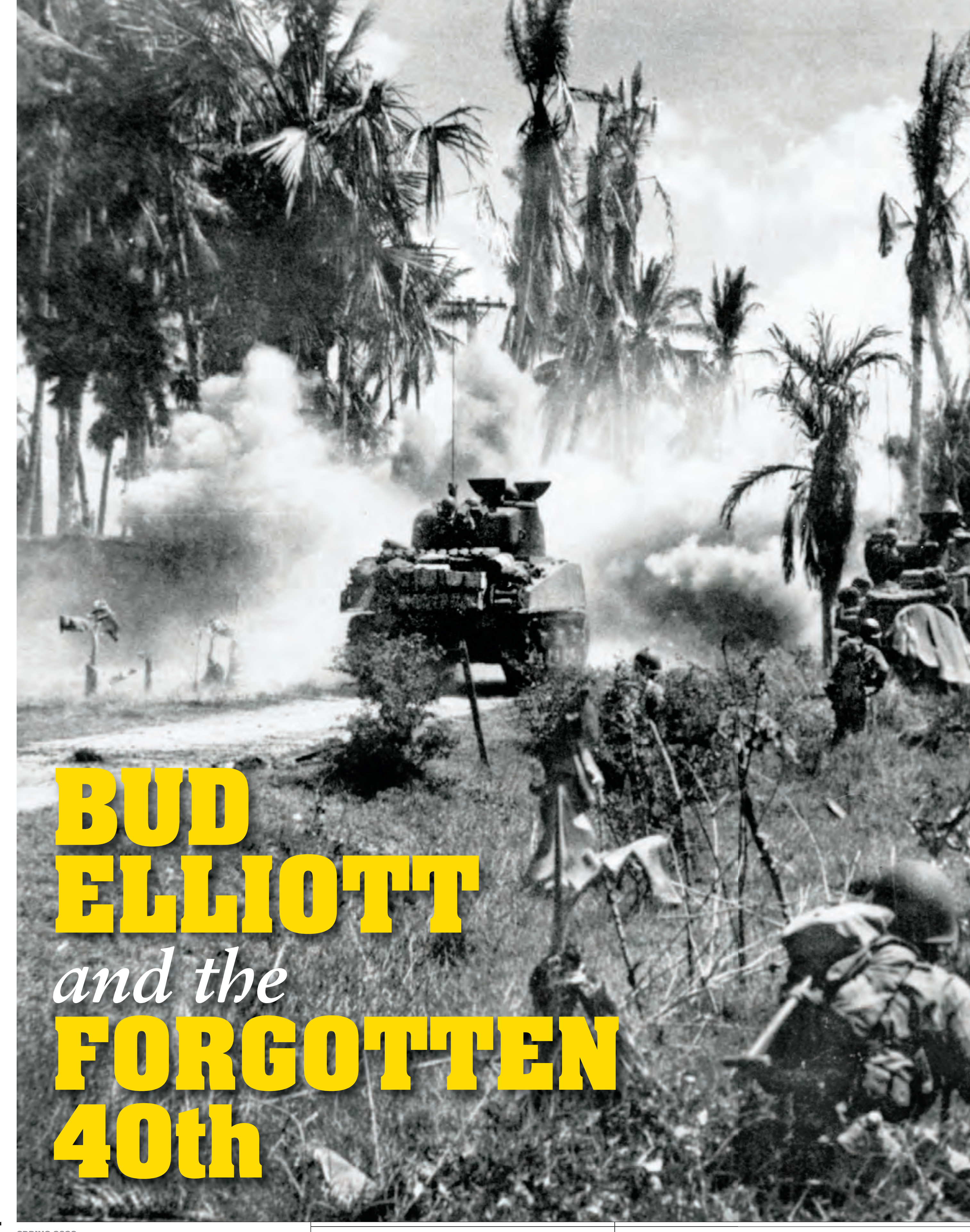

BUD ELLIOTT *and the* FORGOTTEN 40th

A son remembers his father's Pacific service with the Sunburst Division (40th), a federalized former California National Guard unit.

BY SCOTT ELLIOTT

Photo author's collection

The time had finally arrived. They would play second fiddle no more. An armada of American ships stretching as far as the eye could see entered Lingayen Gulf in Northwestern Luzon on the morning of January 9, 1945. Japanese planes attacked and damaged several of the ships, and a Kamikaze sank the aircraft carrier *Ommaney Bay*. But the several divisions of General Krueger's 6th army of American troops were more than ready to get off the ships and retake the island.

Among these divisions was the 40th, also known as "The Sunburst Division." They had been a California National Guard outfit stationed at San Luis Obispo, consisting of soldiers from California, Utah and Nevada. They

TOP: Sergeant Bud Ellliott with an unidentified girlfriend in February 1942. LEFT: Infantry from the 40th Division follows Sherman tanks advancing on Japanese positions on Panay Island, Philippines in March 1945. This photograph is one of four from the camera of Lt. Robert Fields who was killed by incoming Japanese fire shortly after this photo was taken.

National Archives

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were federalized in March of 1941, and men were drafted in to bulk up the division.

One of those men was my father, Lloyd R. Elliott, aka "Bud." Born in Nampa, Idaho, he grew up there and in Northern California. An excellent athlete, he was on the Sequoia High School wrestling and swimming teams, and played varsity football all four years, two of them at quarterback. After graduation, he worked as a carpenter and married his high school sweetheart, Charlot Loptree. They had a son, Lloyd R. Elliott III (Rick.)

However, the marriage did not last long and Elliot was trying to gain custody of his son when the draft notice arrived in April of 1941. The timing for him personally couldn't have been worse. The country was not at war, and he didn't feel it was right to be sent away at such a crucial time.

He reported to Fort Ord, California, in June for 13 weeks of basic training. It was a rigorous course in those days and not for the faint of heart. He told me they once had to run 30 miles in full gear. Whether he meant forced marching or actually running I don't know. He was often short and abrupt with his stories, sometimes just a single sentence.

He had been an exceptional shooter before the army and became one of the best marksmen in his unit. He said that instead of helmets, they wore smokeys back then. They had to improvise in training as well, as there was a shortage of military training gear before the war.

After basic, Private Elliott was stationed at San Luis Obispo for infantry training. He was assigned to the 160th Infantry Regiment of the 40th Division and became both a machine gunner and a mortar man. The men trained hard in the California woods and beaches, practicing tactics, concealment, and logistics. It wasn't until early December that he was able to go home to Palo Alto on leave for a well-earned rest.

But he would not be home for long. He and his father were listening to the radio on December 7 when the emergency broadcast was delivered about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. "We were just shaking our heads in disbelief," he said. Soon after, another broadcast came across ordering all military personnel to their bases. He put on his uniform and caught the next train back to San Luis Obispo.

The following day, December 8, the division got its first wartime mission. They were ordered to guard the California beaches against Japanese invasion. My father patrolled a three-mile stretch of Santa Barbara Beach. The first few weeks were tense for the division. There was shelling from an enemy submarine, sightings of Japanese planes, and many false alarms. But the war thus far was not so tough to keep the Red Cross girls from coming out to their positions with coffee, hot chocolate, and treats for the soldiers.

It was not until April that the beaches were deemed safe from Japanese invasion, at which time the division received orders to relocate to Ft. Lewis, Washington, in preparation for overseas assignment. They spent four months there, undergoing various forms of training, before reassembling in California to board ships for Hawaii. Their mission was another defensive one—to guard the Hawaiian Islands against the Japanese threat.

My father told me that when he arrived at Pearl Harbor, other than the ships at the bottom of the harbor, "The place was pretty well cleaned up!" It had been eight months since the attack and now the 160th Regiment was sent to the Big Island to set up defensive positions. Beaches were guarded by barbed wire and big guns. But after some time, like California, the

ABOVE: GIs from the 40th ID follow a tank along the base of a hillside toward a Japanese pillbox in January 1945. A dead American soldier lies face down to the right. RIGHT: Major General Rapp Brush, commander of the 40th Division. OPPOSITE: The 185th Infantry Regiment (40th ID) hits the beach in an LCVP [Landing Craft Vehicle, Personnel] during amphibious training on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in early March 1944.

Both: National Archives

threat subsided. Then they began intense amphibious and jungle warfare training.

They also had time for fun and frolic, attending luaus, going to town, and swimming in the ocean. My father was fond of diving for abalone. "Water so clear and blue it was hard to believe," he said. He also told me of a time he found a human skeleton in the water. He erected a pole on the beach and affixed the skeleton, "to scare someone," he laughed.

The division spent a total of 16 months in the Hawaiian Islands, probably their happiest time of the war. In December 1943 they went to Guadalcanal. The fight there was long over by then, and patrols searching for any Japanese stragglers proved fruitless. Instead, the fight was with windstorms, flooding, and falling coconuts. My father never mentioned Guadalcanal that I can recall. But I have read that American soldiers agreed that the meanest thing they could do to the Japanese was to give the island back to them.

In April 1944, they relieved the 1st Marine Division in the Brunswick archipelago off New Guinea. Again, the Marines didn't leave much for the 40th, and any enemy action was quickly subdued by patrol-sized units. But, once again, living in the jungle was the main fight. My father was at Cape Gloucester, but was involved in patrolling other parts of the island as well.

My father told me he met a native boy in the jungle once who was hungry and looking for food for his village. It was not clear if my father was alone with the boy, but the story made it sound so. He shot two large birds and helped carry the fowl back to the boy's village. After he had delivered the food, the tribal leader wanted my father to stay. "He kept saying, 'Sing Sing!' and put an ax into a stump. Oh, no thank you I said and left right away, remembering that many of these tribes were cannibals," my father explained.

The division spent eight months there. Near the end they were relieved by the Australians so they could train for the liberation of the Philippines. They set sail on the last day of 1944. The first few days were a quiet and uneventful voyage. But as they approached the Philippines, sporadic attacks by Japanese planes ensued. "A Jap plane tried to bomb our ship," my father mentioned once, "but he missed us by a couple hundred yards."

And now the time had finally arrived. The 40th would be among the first in on the invasion of Luzon.

The 40th Division consisted of the 160th, 185th and 108th Infantry Regiments. They were backed by numerous artillery and tank battalions. The division commander was Maj. Gen. Rapp Brush, who was no stranger to this area. He had lived here in the early 1900's when his father, Brig. Gen. Daniel Brush, had been the Military District Com-

National Archives

mander of Lingayen Gulf. He returned to the Philippines as a young infantry officer and fought in the Battle of Bud Bagsak in 1913. He was back, 32 years later, with an entire division at his command.

As the men approached the beach in their landing craft, they had never heard of places like Snake Hill or Storm King Mountain, where they would fight horrific battles in the coming weeks. They had already done plenty of jungle living but not while facing fortified Japanese positions.

The 40th hit the beach as the right flank of the invasion force, with the 37th Division on its left. "Lingayen Gulf!" my father would say cheerfully, the last cheerful mention of anything to come after. By this time, he was a staff sergeant with an 18-man mortar team under him. He also doubled as a Reconnaissance NCO.

There was little opposition on the beach as the Japanese, in typical fashion, had burned what they could and retreated inland to fight the Americans in the harsh terrain of the mountains. By noon they had secured the town of Lingayen and advanced six miles to the Agno River with only minimal resistance by the Japanese rear guard. At first, the hardest obstacle was getting across the many rivers.

The division advanced 70 miles along the central plain toward Manila in 16 days, with few casualties. Here, they entered the burned town of Bamban under sniper fire and shelling from a Japanese 120-mm gun. They took the town and its airfield after a day-long battle and continued toward Clark Field and Fort Stotsenburg. To the west were thousands of Imperial Japanese soldiers waiting on strategic high ground of the Bamban Hills and Zambales Mountains overlooking the plain. These soldiers were part of the 30,000-man Kembu Group led by Rikichi Tsukada. And the bitter fighting began.

Initially, only the 160th assaulted the hills, but soon other units joined in as the Japanese were found to be entrenched in a clever network of caves and tunnels. Not even bombers could get to them. "B-24's came and bombed the hell out of those hills," my father griped, "Ten minutes later the japs were back out running all over the place."

Flamethrowers, hand grenades, and other hand thrown explosives had to be used to silence or seal caves. In addition to this, the Americans were fighting uphill. The enemy, dominating the landscape, threw everything they had at them, including antitank guns, artillery, and even naval guns taken off damaged ships. This, joined with heavy machine guns, slowed the advance of the 40th to a crawl. Men attempted to scratch out the slightest recess with their hands as enemy rounds cracked inches overhead. As the 40th kept the Kembu Group busy in the mountains to the west, the 37th Division overran Clark Air Base and Fort Stotsenburg.

It took four days for the division to effectively defeat the Japanese in the foothills, only to bring them to the base of Storm King Mountain, where the next line of Japanese defenses awaited. But at the outset of this next battle the Japanese attacked with multiple Banzai charges. All the attackers were killed.

Different units had different ways of defending against the Banzai charges. My father

described one method:

"Once we had three banzai charges in one night. We didn't shoot at them, so they did not know exactly where we were. Instead, we hid behind trees and threw grenades at them. The ones that got through we stuck with our bayonets."

Storm King Mountain would prove to be 10 days of hellish combat. Even after a prolonged and effective artillery assault, the thickly wooded and menacing mountain would cost the 40th more casualties than the battle before. The only suitable approach up the mountain was a slender jungle-covered neck of land 300 feet long and only 75 feet wide at its widest point. Entrenched within this narrow avenue were a 70-mm field piece, three 90-mm mortars, 10 knee mortars, 10 heavy machine guns, 17 light machine guns and 150 rifle pits. The troops of the 160th received crossfires from all weapons.

Finally, by February 6, the mountain was secured. But this only provided a view of the next battle to come, which was Snake Hill, and then Scattered Trees Ridge. Following these came the battle for Seven Hills, Sacobia Ridge and The Top of The World. Every hard fought and exhausting victory would lead to the threshold of the next dimension of hell.

By this time the living conditions of the men had deteriorated. They were able to bathe and shave from a helmet once a week. "One time we had a lot of japs shooting at our hole," my father began, "I had to apologize to the guy next to me because I had just shaved and I think my shiny face was attracting the fire."

Disease was also creeping in and there were many casualties from heat exhaustion. At one point the 160th was down to half strength. Morale took a dive when it was announced that the 40th Division would not accompany other divisions to the battle for Manila. Instead, they would continue to fight the Kembu Group to keep them from marching to Manila to aid in defense of the city.

There were other incidents as well. Sometimes after a hard-won fight, an area was declared clear, but this was not always accurate. My father remembered:

"We thought we were in a cleared area. There were three of us standing there with binoculars, observing and discussing a distant hill. I was in the middle. Suddenly, a jap with a machine gun opened up from the bushes in front of us. The sergeant on one side of me was killed instantly and the lieutenant on the other side of me was hit in the legs. I didn't get a scratch. Me and some others killed the jap. The lieutenant was back in six weeks."

During the fighting for these hills several company-sized units were cut off from the division, leaving them isolated and without food or supplies. The only thing saving them from being overrun by the enemy was water and ammunition dropped from a couple of cub planes.

The 40th Division, after a month on Luzon, was battle-hardened and determined. But so were the Japanese. Fighting for hill after hill seemed never-ending, inching across nearly impassable terrain through crossfires and engrained enemy positions. One hill alone counted 304 enemy dead, eight twin 20-mm guns destroyed, five single 20-mm guns destroyed, three 120-mm D/P naval guns destroyed, and one medium tank destroyed.

Though my father was never seriously injured he did remember a bullet nicking the bridge of his nose just enough to make it bleed as he turned his head to yell something to the nearest man in a heavy firefight. Close calls like this—along with men dying on either side of him on a regular basis—was his reason to tell me he was living on borrowed time.

Sometimes they would come across critical Japanese intelligence documents and it was through these that it was learned that the Japanese Army had developed a healthy respect for the 40th Division.

Mopping up after an assault was largely done by rigging improvised explosives to destroy or seal caves and tunnels where enemy troops were staging a final fight. In some cases, drums of gas were lowered from a bluff to cave openings and electrically detonated. At this point, some of the Japanese, seeing the futility of their circumstance, committed suicide by holding hand grenades to their chest.

National Archives

ABOVE: Members of the 40th ID man the "Super Rabbit," a self-propelled M7 Priest armed with a 105-mm howitzer. The crew is firing at Japanese positions in the mountains of Luzon, Philippines, in February 1945. OPPOSITE: The 185th Infantry Regiment plants the American flag on top of Gusi Hill (Hill 1700) on February 25, 1945. The 40th ID took part in some of the fiercest fighting in the Philippines in the month-long fight for the Bamban Hills, a strategic area for the Imperial Japanese Navy as the headquarters for the 1st Combined Air Fleet.

Still, counter attacks, night raids, hand-to-hand combat, and small arms fire hindered every advance. Even “carrying parties” hauling supplies and water were pelted with enemy mortar fire and repeatedly subject to infiltration attacks.

It took until February 27 for the Japanese resistance in these mountains to be broken and contained to isolated pockets of mostly tired, hungry and sick soldiers. This did not make the mopping up any easier, but it did provide a glimpse at the end of enemy dominance of the Zambales Mountains. General Tsukada eluded capture and escaped, reemerging from hiding only after the Japanese surrender in August. The Clark Field-Stotsenburg plain was now safe from enemy assault from the west.

More than 6,000 enemy troops had been killed in these battles, as opposed to several hundred Americans. The 40th Division held the area until March 2, at which time they were relieved by the 43rd Division. The 40th had been in continuous combat for 53 days. They headed back to the Lingayen Gulf area for some much-needed Rest and Recuperation (R&R).

This consisted of medical care, haircuts, swimming in the ocean, an occasional hot meal, religious services, sports, various activities and maybe even a movie night. It also included preparation for what was to come next. It was soon realized that after fighting in all these bloody battles, it had been only the first mission of several. All in all, the much sought after R&R was a mere two weeks before they boarded ships and sailed to invade the next island.

Operation VICTOR I was part of MacArthur’s plan to capture the Visayan Islands in the Southern Philippines. The 40th Division was tasked with the solo mission of taking Panay Island, an important staging and supply center for the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. It was also a primary hospital and rehabilitation base.

Much of this island was controlled by the Filipino resistance fighters. Thousands of these guerillas had been fighting against the Japanese since they had invaded and occupied the islands at the outset of the war. They became invaluable to assisting the American efforts, not only as fighters, but as guides and as eyes-on intelligence.

The 40th waded ashore on March 18. The beach where they landed was controlled by the guerrillas, several miles from the Japanese-held city of Iloilo. Col. Macario Paralta’s men, in parade formation, greeted the American amphibious landing. “They were all in a row at attention, welcoming us,” my father said.

In addition to the strong Guerrilla presence, many Japanese troops stationed on Panay had been sent to the battlefields in Leyte and Luzon, further weakening their hold on this central island. Units of the 40th moved inland with only small pockets of resistance. On the second day several key positions were taken after some short but furious fights, including Mandurrio airfield and Molo, where 500 civilians imprisoned in a church were freed. That night, large fires could be seen in the cities of Iloilo and Jaro. The Japanese were burning what they could, including their own vehicles, and attempting to block the roads to hamper the American advance as they retreated north where they were able to fight through the Guerrilla lines and take to the hills.

Both: National Archives

ABOVE: Guerrillas that worked closely with the 40th Division parade through Iloilo, Panay, after the city was liberated from the Japanese in March 1945. The Filipino resistance was invaluable to the Americans as fighters, guides and sources of first-hand intelligence. TOP: Photo of fighting on Panay taken in March 1945 by Howard Klawitter, who accompanied Alpha Company, 185 Infantry with Lt. Robert Fields, the photographer of the first photo in this article. Within minutes of each other, Klawitter and Fields were hit by Japanese fire, the latter fatally.

The 40th took control of both Iloilo and Jara on March 20. The people of the partially destroyed urban areas greeted the arriving Americans with eggs, fruits, and candy. Dock and warehouse facilities received only minor damage and were still usable. The retreating enemy was cut off by reconnaissance units and whittled down. My father was leading a long-range reconnaissance team and found an enemy unit, "just marching up the road," he said. He positioned his men into an ambush as the Japanese approached. On his command they opened fire on the retreating soldiers and completely wiped them out without taking any casualties.

"After it was over we went down to have a look." My father went on, "There was one guy still alive. His arm was blown off and he was moaning and groaning. I shot him in the head."

Many retreating Japanese units divided into smaller groups to avoid further detection. By March 22, Santa Barbara airfield was taken and mopping up operations were initiated. Nearly 2,000 of the Japanese survivors would remain living in the mountains until the end of the war.

My father told me that as Panay was being secured, an amphibious patrol of the 160th Regiment landed on Guimaras Island, a few miles off the southwest coast of Panay. The small garrison of Japanese had fled into the nearby hills. But they left behind a gruesome find, as they had killed 28 civilians, many of them tied together and bayoneted to death. I don't know if my father was on this mission, but he talked as if he had been in several landings. He told me, "Sometimes we would be dumped far from shore, wading in with water to our chest, other times we would jump off the boat without even getting our feet wet."

Back on Panay, a military hospital of 50 bedridden Japanese soldiers was another hideous scene. They had been sedated and the hospital burned to the ground before the Americans could arrive. This was not the only instance on Panay where the Japanese killed their own.

Toshimi Kumai, an officer stationed in Iloilo during the Japanese occupation, published a book on his experiences in 1977. An English translation of this book, *Blood and Mud in the Philippines: The Worst Guerrilla War in the Pacific War*, details a moment in the Japanese retreat to the hills when a group of about 40 *Hôjin* (resident Japanese civilians) from a school led by principal Isao Kayamori, decided they were too much of a burden on the soldiers.

"They sang their farewell song in unison—*Umi Yukaba* (If I Go to Sea)—and bowed in the direction of the Imperial Palace. Some killed themselves with pistols and hand grenades," Kumai wrote. "Failing to kill themselves, some mothers in agony sought the

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ABOVE: Soldiers from the U.S. 40th Division patrol a street in capital city of Bacolod on Negros in April 1945. An important air staging base for supplies, Negros had been bombed until its airfields were unserviceable before the 40th landed at the end of March. OPPOSITE: Artillery of the 155th Infantry, 40th Division prepare to shell Japanese positions on Negros Island in April 1945. Resistance on Negros was light at first, but then hardened into some of the worst the 40th faced in the Philippines. The battle for Hill 3155, later renamed Dolan Hill in tribute to 1st Lt. John W. Dolan, the first officer to be killed in the attack, lasted a week—on the final four days P-38s, F4Us and A-20 bombers struck the hill repeatedly. Between bombing runs, division artillery concentrated on the area to devastating effect.

help of passing straggling and wounded soldiers who used bayonets or hand grenades."

In only 10 days all organized resistance had been broken on Panay. However, this was only one island in the Visayas that the division was selected to attack. Neighboring Negros, the 4th largest of the Philippine Islands, was next on the list. Negros had been an important air staging base. By this time, however, the airfields had been bombed until they were unserviceable, and the island was cut off from food and supplies for the Japanese occupiers.

The majority of the division departed Panay for the west coast of Negros on March 28 and 29. The landings were unopposed, but some of the worst fighting for the Philippines would ensue. The initial push was for the western towns and cities, including the island capital of Bacolod. Resistance was light and sporadic until they reached the Magsungay River, where they encountered heavy machine guns, 90-mm mortars and a network of pillboxes. After a bitter fight the river was crossed, but that night the Americans were targeted in a series of infiltration attacks.

They were able to fight their way to the outskirts of Bacolod, at which time the enemy burned the business district and evacuated, leaving behind a plentiful number of snipers and booby traps to make the American entry as costly as possible. By the sixth day, Bacolod, Talisay and other objectives on the west coast were secured.

The division fought a series of smaller engagements before moving on to the main battle of the island, Dolan Hill, which would be a week's long affair. Dolan Hill commanded approaches to the west and was the left flank of the enemy's defensive line. Portions of several Japanese units were dug in here, including Colonel Yamaguchi's 172nd Infantry Battalion.

Two days of aerial and artillery attacks preceded the advance up the northwest slopes of the hill. It was a hard climb, grasping at branches and roots while under fire. Blocks of dynamite, grenades and pole charges were thrust into the American's perimeter, forcing them to withdraw the next day. In the following days there were several failed attempts to reach the crest, each followed by American artillery barrages to, hopefully, soften up the enemy. With heavy rains and fog, a cleverly entrenched enemy, and a lack of supplies reaching the men, the effort to take the hill slowed to a standstill.

With little other option, division command ordered a withdrawal from the area and called in all air power possible. For four days P-38s, F4Us and A-20 bombers struck the hill on mission after mission. When the planes weren't bombing, the division artillery concentrated on the area to devastating effect. The troops went back up Dolan hill to find nothing left but tree stumps, destroyed pill boxes and hundreds of bodies. The core defense of the island was broken and mopping up began.

A starving and sickly enemy scattered and began foraging for food. Groups of surrendering Japanese became more frequent. Others committed suicide. It was not uncommon to come

across a small group, or even single stragglers walking dazed through the jungle. My father was walking point when he ran into one:

"I was up front and this Japanese soldier walks around the bend right at me. He was all worn out, too tired to know what was happening. He didn't raise his rifle; probably never knew I was there only a few feet in front of him. I shot him twice in the head before he hit the ground. We were still under orders to take no prisoners."

In addition to the Negros campaign there were selected units from the division that went on special missions to Leyte, Masbate, and Mindanao. Most of these operations were to cut off retreating enemy forces. This would continue until June when all of the units of the division headed back for Panay. The movement was completed by July and the 40th entered a hard-earned period of R&R.

They had endured six months of continuous combat, broken only by two weeks in which they had prepared for the Visayan campaign. Now, at last, they received a true rest. The 40th Division had killed 6,145 Japanese soldiers on Luzon and another 4,732 on Panay and Negros. The cost to the division during the Philippines campaign was 715 killed in action, 2,407 wounded and 5 missing in action.

Despite all this, the army had more war plans for the battle-hardened 40th. The OLYMPIC Operation was in the planning phase and was to be the invasion of Japan. The 40th Division was selected to be the first in, invading and capturing five Islands just off Kyushu in southern Japan days before the main effort of the OLYMPIC Operation. Through July and early August, the plans were drawn up, called Field Order No. 19, and prepared for 6th Army Headquarters.

Of course, this never happened. Even if it had, my father would not have been a part of it. Upon his return to Panay, a bout with malaria got so bad they put him on a ship and sent him home. He departed on July 6 and arrived at Camp Beale, California, on the 27th. He was honorably discharged from there on July 31, with the reason for separation listed as "Convenience of the government" (demobilization). He left the army as a staff sergeant with an American Defense Service Medal, Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal, Good Conduct Medal, Philippine Liberation Ribbon with one bronze Star, and $9.10 travel pay.

He returned home to Palo Alto. He had not been there for over three years. His father was working in New Mexico, and his brother was in Germany. Recovering from his illness, he learned of the ending of the war the same way he had learned of its beginning 45 months before—at home on the radio.

He told his sisters that he could hardly believe he had survived so many brushes with death. How men all around him were killed or maimed and he was uninjured. How a position he was in only seconds before was hit with mortar or artillery. How, on many occasions, he had bullets cracking inches to either side of him and over his head, killing the man next to him but leaving him unscathed.

Back on Panay the 40th Division accepted the surrender of all remaining Japanese troops on that island. With the war over the division would go on to be occupation forces in Korea for seven months before returning to the U.S. and deactivation.

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THE SURVIVOR *of the* Sinking of U-451

After Fairey Swordfish torpedo-bombers attacked it off the coast of Spain, the sole survivor from the submarine *U-451* found himself at the center of a tale of luck, survival, and friendship. | **BY JACK ADAMSON**

Oberleutnant zur See Walter Köhler floated alone in the freezing Atlantic in the predawn hours of December 21, 1941. He had been treading water for what seemed like hours since the bridge of *U-451* had descended into the depths beneath his feet. As the adrenaline of recent events wore off, he felt the cold settling in and knew hypothermia could not be far away. It didn't take long to succumb to death by exposure in the open ocean in winter. However, Köhler slowly became aware of a droning overhead and noticed an aircraft circling the area. The plane dropped a flare and as the curtain of night was being disseminated by twilight of dawn, the lines of a ship steaming toward him came into focus.

Walter Köhler was born in Lubeck on July 14, 1916. He and his older brother Ludwig grew into manhood during the time Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party were coming to power in Germany. Walter joined the *Kriegsmarine* in 1935, a year after his brother. Following nearly three years of training, he was assigned as an officer aboard the geriatric pre-dreadnought *Schleswig-Holstein*. But by September 1, 1939, when the ship fired the first shots of the war on the Polish port of Danzig, Köhler was no longer aboard. Earlier in the year he had been assigned to the new battleship/battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* as a "plank owner"—crew members serving aboard a new ship when it is commissioned. The *Scharnhorst* saw several successful operations early in the war that included sinking the auxiliary cruiser HMS *Rawalpindi* and the British aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious*. *Scharnhorst* was ultimately damaged by an air raid and was laid up for six months for repairs during which time Köhler, who had received the Iron Cross Second Class for the action against the *Glorious*, transferred to the U-Boat arm.

Following his submarine training, Köhler was assigned as *Erster Wachoffizier* (First Watch

ABOVE: Walter Köhler aboard the battleship *Scharnhorst*, where he served from its 1939 launch until it was damaged by an Allied air raid in 1941 and he was transferred to the U-Boat arm. OPPOSITE: From left, on the bridge of the *U-451*, with sailfish mascot visible on the side of the conning tower, are Second Watch Officer Rocker and the submarine's commander, Captain Lieutenant Eberhard Hoffmann.

Both photos/courtesy Jack Adamson

Officer, IWO) to the new Type VIIC U-Boat *U-451* under the command of 29-year-oldE-berhard Hoffman, known affectionately as "Lushke" to his friends. Hoffmann was a devoted family man who was smitten with his wife, Hanna, and adored his two children: daughter Sigrid born in 1939 and son Peter born in November 1941.

He was close friends with Reinhard Hardegan who would go on to be a successful U-Boat ace, sinking numerous ships off the eastern coast of the United States in early 1942. Like Hardengan, Hoffmann began his career in the Coastal Aerial Reconnaissance before transferring to the U-Boat arm in November 1939. He served first aboard *U-51* and later on Günther Prien's *U-47* (the commander and U-Boat famous for sinking the British battleship *Royal Oak* in Scapa Flow) during Prien's 7th patrol for which Hoffmann was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class before going to command school to take over his own boat, *U-451*. He oversaw the last of the submarine's construction at the Deutsche Werke shipyard at Kiel. "[He] was an extremely popular commander," Köhler later recalled, "very understanding towards the individual and always full of humor. The harmony on the boat couldn't have been better."

U-451 was commissioned in May 1941 and based in Norway to patrol Arctic waters following its sea trials. The average age of the 44-man crew was 22, though some were as young as 18 or as old as 32. *U-451* engaged the enemy several times over the course of two Arctic patrols and succeeded in sinking the Russian destroyer *Zhemchug*. After that second patrol, it was decided to send *U-451* into the Battle of the Atlantic and the boat was sent back to Kiel for an overhaul. Köhler was slotted to leave the boat during this refit period to attend a command course after which he would be captain of his own submarine, but the course was already well underway when they arrived at Kiel and so Köhler would be in limbo until the next course began on January 5. Instead, Köhler requested and was granted permission to stay aboard *U-451* to gain more combat experience in the boat's coming Atlantic patrol. He was replaced as IWO by the previous *Zweiter Wachoffizier* (Second Watch Officer-IIWO) and he stayed aboard as a command student there to observe and learn, but not take bridge watch on a regular basis as an official member of the crew.

The overhaul in Kiel was fortuitous for Hoffmann as he was able to go on leave and be home when his son Peter was born on November 11, 1941. The third patrol into the Atlantic was short and mostly uneventful. Hoffmann was promoted to *Korvettenkapitän* (Commander-KKpt) while at sea December 1, 1941 and *U-451* missed a steamer with a single torpedo on the 7th. The boat was ordered to Lorient for immediate refueling shortly after this and arrived on the 12th. The freshly overhauled *U-451* was one of a handful of submarines chosen to move into the Mediterranean. Hoffmann was able to make a phone call home and speak to his family and send several letters during this time. Dated December 14, his last letter home before departing is full of wistful affection: "My dear little wife and mother! I am happy to know that you are all well and cheerful. Have you already done some Christmas shopping? And already got a tree? [...] Whether Sigrid already knows anything about the Christ child? [...] I wish you, my dearest little wife, a really, really merry Christmas. I long for you so very much, my dears. I hope to see you again soon in a few weeks. Many warm greetings again and especially warm kisses to you! Your Ebi and your daddy."

On December 15, *U-451* departed for the Mediterranean on its fourth patrol. Their first task would be to traverse the Strait of Gibraltar, only seven nautical miles across. The British

Photo courtesy/Jack Adamson

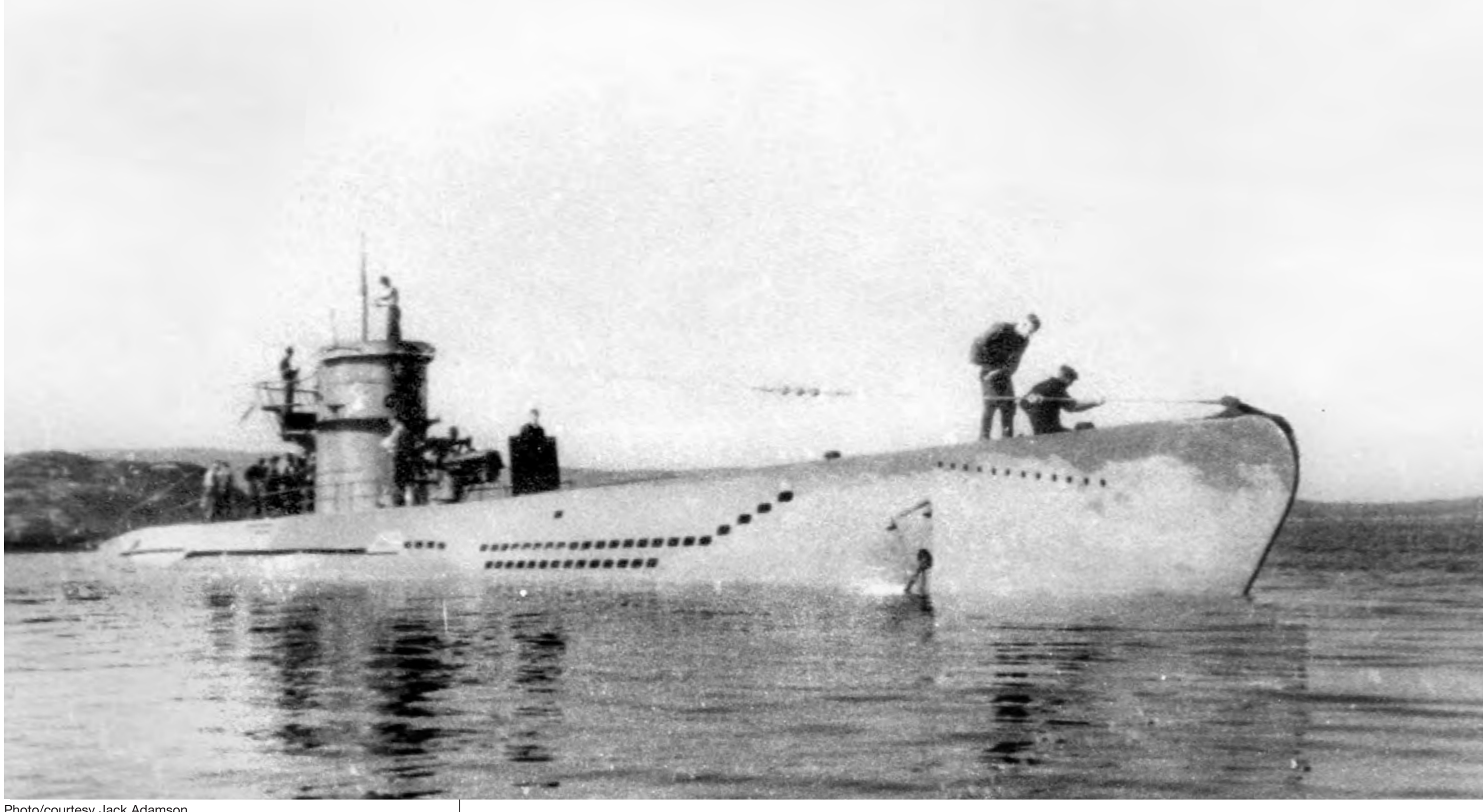
Photo courtesy/Jack Adamson

An unidentified U-boat of the same Type VII-C as the *U-451*, surrendered at the end of the war—a Royal Navy officer stands at center on the bridge, with the Royal Navy ensign flying from the elevated gun platform on the rear of the conning tower. OPPOSITE: Photograph of the commissioning of the *U-451*. On the bottom row are Kapitäleutnant Eberhard Hoffmann, center, and Oberleutnant zur See Walter Köhler, far right.

had possessed a fortress there at the tip of Europe since the 18th century for the purpose of controlling this maritime chokepoint. By 1941 these defenses consisted of a large garrison of troops, a substantial naval facility and an airfield. Overlooking the strait and honeycombed with artillery and antiaircraft batteries was the Rock of Gibraltar, an imposing monolith of limestone jutting abruptly into the sky some 1,400 feet above the sea. The waters below it were constantly and heavily patrolled by Royal Navy warships on the surface and Fleet Air Arm aircraft from above. The Strait of Gibraltar was at this time, arguably, the most fortified and heavily defended stretch of water in history.

The aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal* had been sunk in the Mediterranean on November 13/14 by *U-81*. Its complement of Fairey Swordfish biplanes belonging to Fleet Air Arm 812 Squadron were orphaned and shifted to operating from Gibraltar's airfield. The Fairey Swordfish was a single-engine medium-sized biplane designed in the early 1930s. It was slow but nimble and versatile, able to launch torpedoes, drop depth charges, or bombs. While its slow speed was a handicap—one that had often allowed enemy ships and subs to escape—its attacks were very accurate when a payload was delivered. A Fairey Swordfish of 812 Squadron took off into the darkness for an anti-submarine patrol on the Atlantic side of Gibraltar on the night of December 20/21, 1941. Manned by a pilot and rear gunner, it was armed with aerial depth charges, and equipped with a newly installed Air-to-Surface Radar—allowing them to locate U-Boats on the surface long before they could be seen with the naked eye at night. They didn't know it yet, but they were soon to gain some retribution for the loss of their carrier five weeks to the day after it sank.

Hoffmann's plan for *U-451*'s break into the Mediterranean was to cruise on the surface as close as possible to the Strait of Gibraltar under the cover of darkness before diving at 0400 to push through the narrows around dawn. Throughout the night *U-451* cruised toward the Strait, charging its batteries with the diesel engines. Köhler stepped in for another officer and took over the bridge watch at around midnight on Sunday December 21, 1941. Joining him on the conning tower was Chief Helmsman Kaak, a midshipman and a corporal sailor with all four watching their individual quadrants for the enemy. Below, a skeleton crew was awake operating the boat but everyone else (includ-



Photo/courtesy Jack Adamson

ABOVE: The German submarine, *U-451*, with its flying fish mascot visible on the conning tower in this undated photo. OPPOSITE, TOP: Oberleutnant zur See Walter Köhler, left, most likely on the deck of the *U-451*, as the boat's flying fish mascot is visible on the side of the enlisted men's caps. OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: An undated photograph of crewmen on watch duty aboard the *U-451*.

ing Hoffmann) was supposed to be asleep so that they would all be well rested and at their best when they made the run past "The Rock." The tension of the task to come most likely kept a few of these men awake. The diesels were running at half speed and the weather was clear, with a light breeze. The lights of Spain to the north and Morocco to the south could be seen in the extreme distance. The sea was short and choppy, but the boat phosphoresced rather strongly in the clear night as it glided through the water.

At about 3:40 a.m., the starboard-aft bridge watch suddenly shouted "PLANE ASTERN!" Köhler (who was opposite at the port-forward watch) turned around to see the reported aircraft as Kaak simultaneously shouted "ALARM! GET BELOW" and the three other crew of the bridge watch instinctually jumped into the hatch and down the 10-meter ladder to the control room in an instant. Köhler's split-second analysis, however, kept him from following suit. The enemy biplane was bearing down on them from directly astern and already approximately 30 meters away and 30 meters off the water. Crash diving and/or evasive maneuvers were impossible. They were either sunk already, or would have to engage the aircraft with their anti-aircraft gun.

"ALL MEN UP!" he screamed down the hatch while glancing up just in time to see two depth charges drop from the wings of the 812 Squadron Swordfish and land 5-8 meters in front of the boat. Köhler opened the air bottle of his life preserver inflating it and just as a crewman's head appeared in the hatch coming out, a deafening explosion obliterated the quiet night. The two depth charges, each set to explode at 25 feet, had detonated directly under *U-451*, nearly amidships. Köhler was thrown against the conning tower wall, but the padding on his life preserver absorbed a good amount of the impact, likely keeping him from becoming incapacitated. The crewman in the hatchway disappeared back below in the violence of the explosion and the deluge of water now engulfing the bridge from above. The boat seemed to Köhler have a broken keel as he and the bridge sank rapidly while the stern and bow rose acutely. *U-451* plummeted toward the bottom, rapidly disappearing from the surface. The suction dragged Köhler down a considerable depth before releasing him to rise again. His life jacket had saved him again..

When Köhler broke the surface, he saw no debris or oil, and none of his shipmates. The plane circling above was dropping flares, turning the night into day, and even then he saw nothing but water. It was as if *U-451* had simply performed a standard dive leaving no trace behind but himself. Köhler was alone and, miraculously, uninjured. He got rid of all objects he had on him that might weigh him down and started swimming toward the Spanish coast. The silhouette of a ship slowly lurked out of the darkness and turned on its searchlights. Somehow, in the vastness of the open ocean, they spotted the single man floating alone. Salvation! The ship, which he was soon to find out was the corvette HMS *Myosotis* (K-65), glided in close and hauled him out of the water. Köhler was met by an armed guard and a British officer who extended his arm in a handshake saying in respectful, warm tone "Welcome aboard. We've been waiting for you for almost two days." That officer was the ship's captain, Lt. Com. Gerald Peter Shiers Lowe, RNVR. After the handshake and introduction, Köhler gave his name and rank and was taken below to the officers' mess.

Peter Lowe, 30, was one of three brothers serving in the Royal Navy. He had joined the

Both photos/courtesy Jack Adamson

Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) in the mid-1930s and was an honorable man instilled with the values of the Royal Navy to the core. Lowe was short by modern norms standing just 5'8," with a discolored front tooth and missing a finger on one hand as the result of an equestrian accident. He loved the ocean, sailing, and the work ethic and discipline of a military ship. Lowe was a natural leader who was approachable and paternal toward those under him, making his ship professional and efficient, but also happy.

Myosotis combed the waters for other survivors, but found none. Two large oil slicks were observed confirming the death of *U-451* and all 44 crew aboard, including Hoffmann. Köhler was allowed to dry off and found himself treated surprisingly well by Lowe and his crew. He was never interrogated about the sinking but rather was viewed as a fellow sailor they had rescued, albeit with some reservation as, of course, he was still the enemy. Lowe and Köhler, who spoke excellent English, even shared a drink in the captain's cabin at one point. *Myosotis* sailed into Gibraltar the following day and Köhler officially entered captivity as a POW.

At Gibraltar, Köhler recalled he "had a short but unpleasant stay in terms of treatment. There I stayed in solitary confinement under what seemed to me to be an exceptionally strong guard. After a few days there, when I was taken to the courtyard, I saw numerous submarine officers I knew." The battle of convoy HG-76 had just concluded and there was a plethora of captured Kriegsmarine sailors as a result. Köhler and the other POWs departed Gibraltar via steamer around December 30 during which time he had a brief opportunity to speak with fellow POWs KKpt Arend Baumann (*U-131*) and Kapitänleutnant Wolfgang Heyda (*U-434*). When they arrived in England, Köhler was cycled through Trent Park interrogation center for several weeks and then sent to Shap Wells POW Camp for officers, 95 miles north of Manchester, England. He was then transferred to Canada in late March 1942 where he ended up at Camp 30 a.k.a. Bowmanville.

The town of Bowmanville was on Lake Ontario, about 50 miles east of Toronto. Köhler, Baumann, and Heyda were interned

Imperial War Museum

here with several thousand enlisted men and some 880 high-ranking German officers including one of Germany's most famous U-Boat aces, the so-called "Tonnage-King" KKpt Otto Kretschmer (*U-99*). From the perspective of a POW, life at Bowmanville was idyllic, with sports and theater, interluded with work parties and the like. Although Bowmanville had the high fences, watch towers, and armed guards typical of a prison, the allies didn't have the same level of POW escape concerns that their counterparts did; after all, if a prisoner succeeded in escaping he was in Canada and unlikely to swim the Atlantic back to Germany to rejoin the war effort. Nevertheless, there were escape attempts with the most notorious being OPERATION KIEBITZ.

KIEBITZ was developed by the Kriegsmarine for the purpose of retrieving four of the top U-Boat officers from captivity at Bowmanville, especially Kretschmer. The plan was orchestrated through coded messages sent by POW mail via the Red Cross. The German officers would escape through a tunnel that had been previously dug, make their way to the coast, and be picked up by a U-Boat on a certain day. All went to plan until shortly before their scheduled escape, when the tunnel was discovered. There was no way to get word to Germany and the incoming U-Boat that the operation had failed and so

Naval History and Heritage Command

ABOVE: Training photo of a Fairey *Swordfish*, nicknamed "stringbag" after reusable mesh shopping bags popular in Britain, for its versatility in carrying a 1,610-lb. torpedo, anti-ship mines, bombs, flares, or depth charges. These anachronistic biplanes sank an estimated million tons of Axis shipping, more than any other Allied aircraft. TOP: The HMS *Myosotis*, a Royal Navy *Flower*-class corvette that could be built quickly and cheaply in small shipyards for convoy escort.

Heyda was chosen to make an escape individually, get to the rendezvous, and inform the Kriegsmarine of the situation. Heyda made his break from the camp the night of September 24, 1943, riding over the perimeter fence on the powerlines via a rigged trolley. He successfully made his way to the rendezvous point on the coast of Chaleur Bay, New Brunswick, but was ultimately captured before making contact with the U-Boat sent to retrieve them. Heyda returned to captivity, KIEBITZ failed, the war played out to its end with Heyda, Kretschmer, Köhler, and the rest of the POWs firmly behind barbed wire.

There is no direct evidence of Köhler's participation in KIEBITZ, but he had close connections with all the aforementioned Kriegsmarine officers at Bowmanville (and several even before) and it so it can be assumed that he was aware of the plan and most likely participated in preparations in some way or another, perhaps even planning to join in the escape himself.

All photos/courtesy Jack Adamson

ABOVE: An undated photo of Camp 30 near Toronto, where Walter Köhle was transferred in March 1942. TOP: Aerial view of POW Camp 30 in Bowmanville, Ontario. RIGHT: Eberhard Hoffmann with his wife, Hanna, and daughter, Sigrid, in a photograph possibly taken on his last leave in November 1941. He died the following month when the *U-451* was sunk by Fairey Swordfish torpedo bombers.

The POWs were repatriated to Germany in the months and years after the war. Heyda was released in April 1947. He and his young wife repeated their vows at church wedding in late April, but the bliss was short-lived as Heyda contracted polio and died just three months later on August 21, 1947. Kretschmer was repatriated in December 1947, rejoined the West German Navy and eventually achieved the rank of Flottillenadmiral. He died in 1998 at the age of 86.

Köhler returned home on December 24, 1946, five years and three days after the sinking of *U-451*. He immediately looked up Hoffmann's widow, Hanna, and visited her and her mother to pay his respects and give a detailed account of Hoffmann's death. It is a testament to Hoffmann's character that Köhler did this a half decade after the fact. Köhler married and ultimately immigrated with his family to the United States where he got into hotel management first in West Virginia and then in Florida, ultimately managing the eloquent La Coquille in Palm Beach. His favorite television program was, naturally, *Hogan's Heroes*.

Sometime in the mid-1960s, two men, one British one German, involved in the establishment of a Volkswagen factory in the United Kingdom were sitting next to one another exchanging formalities. "Köhler…were you on a submarine that was sunk in the war?," the British man inquired. "No, but my brother Walter was," came the reply. "I think my brother rescued your brother." The two men were Walter's brother, Ludwig, and Peter Lowe's brother, Joe. Peter Lowe had survived the war and moved with his family

to Rhodesia where he ran a business and was involved in both the local and national government. After their brothers' chance meeting, Peter and Walter were put in touch, first exchanging letters back and forth, and ultimately meeting with their wives for a face-to-face. The two became close friends and visited one another regularly over the proceeding years. Walter Köhler died in 1987, while Peter Lowe lived until 1998. □

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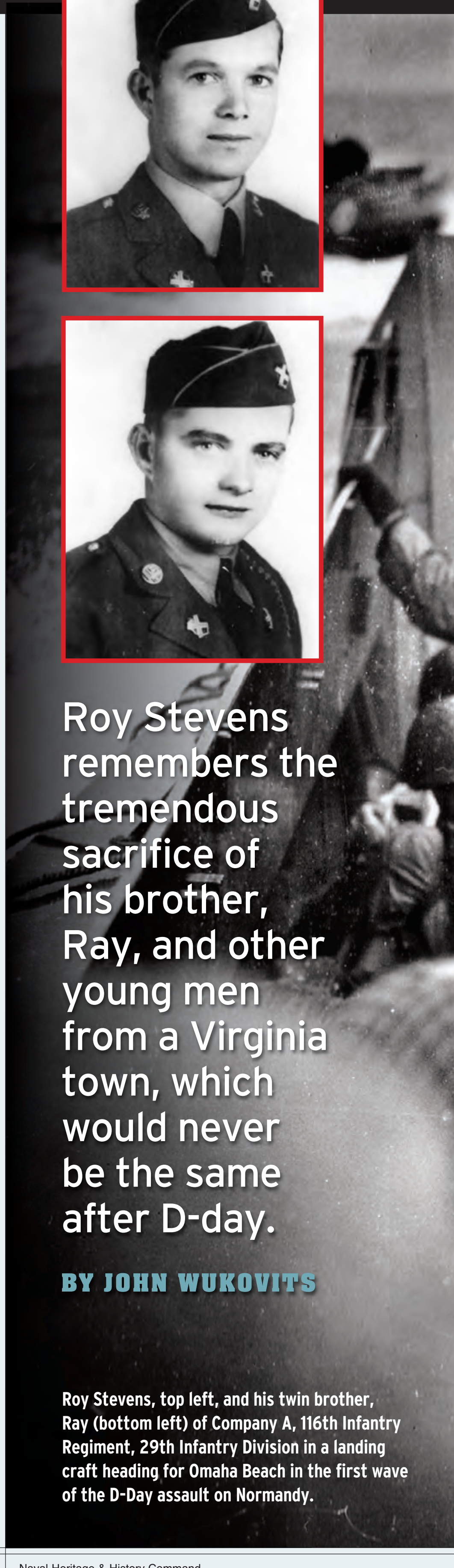
A Bedford Boy at OMAHA BEACH



Roy Stevens, top left, and his twin brother, Ray (bottom left) of Company A, 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Infantry Division in a landing craft heading for Omaha Beach in the first wave of the D-Day assault on Normandy.

Roy Stevens remembers the tremendous sacrifice of his brother, Ray, and other young men from a Virginia town, which would never be the same after D-day.

BY JOHN WUKOVITS

Twenty-one-year-old Elizabeth Teass walked into the Western Union office in the small town of Bedford, Virginia, early on the morning of July 17, 1944, fully expecting a normal day as the teletype operator. After all, what more could Bedford expect than a telegram from an out-of-town relative announcing he or she would soon visit, or a request for help from a family member in another part of the country? Of course, with the war in the Pacific and in Italy raging, she had come to expect periodic notices from the government informing a local family that their son or father or husband was either missing in action or killed, but these were the exception.

Teass settled into her chair, turned on the machine, and awaited any overnight telegrams that might have accumulated for the Bedford area in the main office. The first words rushing from the teletype wrenched Teass out of her complacency as an outpouring of messages littered her desk. "The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret," read the opening words, and suddenly Teass's stomach knotted as she waited to see which Bedford family's day would be touched with sorrow.

To her amazement, before the ticker ceased, news of the deaths of nine Bedford boys, young men that everyone in town knew, lay on her desk. With a heavy heart, Teass set about informing Bedford's mothers and fathers that the grieving process for Bedford's sons was about to begin.

Barely more than 3,200 people inhabited Bedford in 1944, but the town would soon earn the distinction of sacrificing what some historians claim is a higher per capita loss of young men than any other town in the United States in the June 6, 1944, D-day invasion. Of Bedford's 35 soldiers that headed toward Omaha Beach's deadly sands, 19 died in the first 15 minutes and two more died later in the day. Historians from Cornelius Ryan to Stephen Ambrose have recorded the town's casualties, while author Alex Kershaw devoted an entire book, *The Bedford Boys*, to the story.

When these interviews were conducted only two Bedford survivors remained in the quiet community, whose peacefulness is sometimes disturbed by visitors who travel to see the National D-day Memorial, appropriately constructed at the site of a town that gave so much in World War II. Ray Nance prefered anonymity by then, explaining that he had said all he could about the men with whom he entered battle and whose bodies remained on Normandy's beaches. His friend, 84-year-old Roy Stevens, continued to share his story,

a tale fraught with emotion, love, and duty. In two interviews conducted in December 2003 and February 2004, Stevens talked about his town, his family, his fellow soldiers, and a legacy that is always with him.

Born August 12, 1919, in Bedford, a tiny community 25 miles east of Roanoke, Roy Stevens quickly became accustomed to life with crowds. He and his twin brother, Ray, were but two of the family's 14 children, and while times became rough in the Great Depression of the 1930s, Stevens never considered his family poor.

"The Depression had an effect on our family," said Stevens, the son of a sharecropper, "but we were young and didn't realize what was going on. I got to the seventh grade in school and then had to drop out to help out on the farm."

Stevens loved life in small-town Bedford, a Norman Rockwellesque community where everyone knew everyone else. "You could not get in trouble without everybody else knowing about it. I went to a one-room schoolhouse, but you didn't think about all the different age groups together in one room. We used to go to the picture show for 10 cents, but the thing about it was, it was hard to get that 10 cents. We'd play baseball. Bedford was a good town in which to grow up." He and Ray especially loved participating in activities together.

As the 1930s unfolded and Stevens grew to manhood, like many other boys from Bedford he turned to the military as a potential means of improving his situation. The 18-year-old and his twin brother signed on in 1938. "I joined the National Guard, in part, for money," explains Stevens, "but mainly because I liked the uniforms." Stevens felt confident that once he was back in Bedford wearing the shiny military uniform, the town's girls would swoon for him. Unfortunately, "I didn't have much luck impressing the girls."

Brother Ray and many of the other young Bedford men joined Roy to form what eventually became the nucleus of Company A, 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Division, U.S. Army. The Army kept the men from Bedford together in the same unit because they believed that the presence of familiar faces would make them better soldiers and less likely to drop out of training.

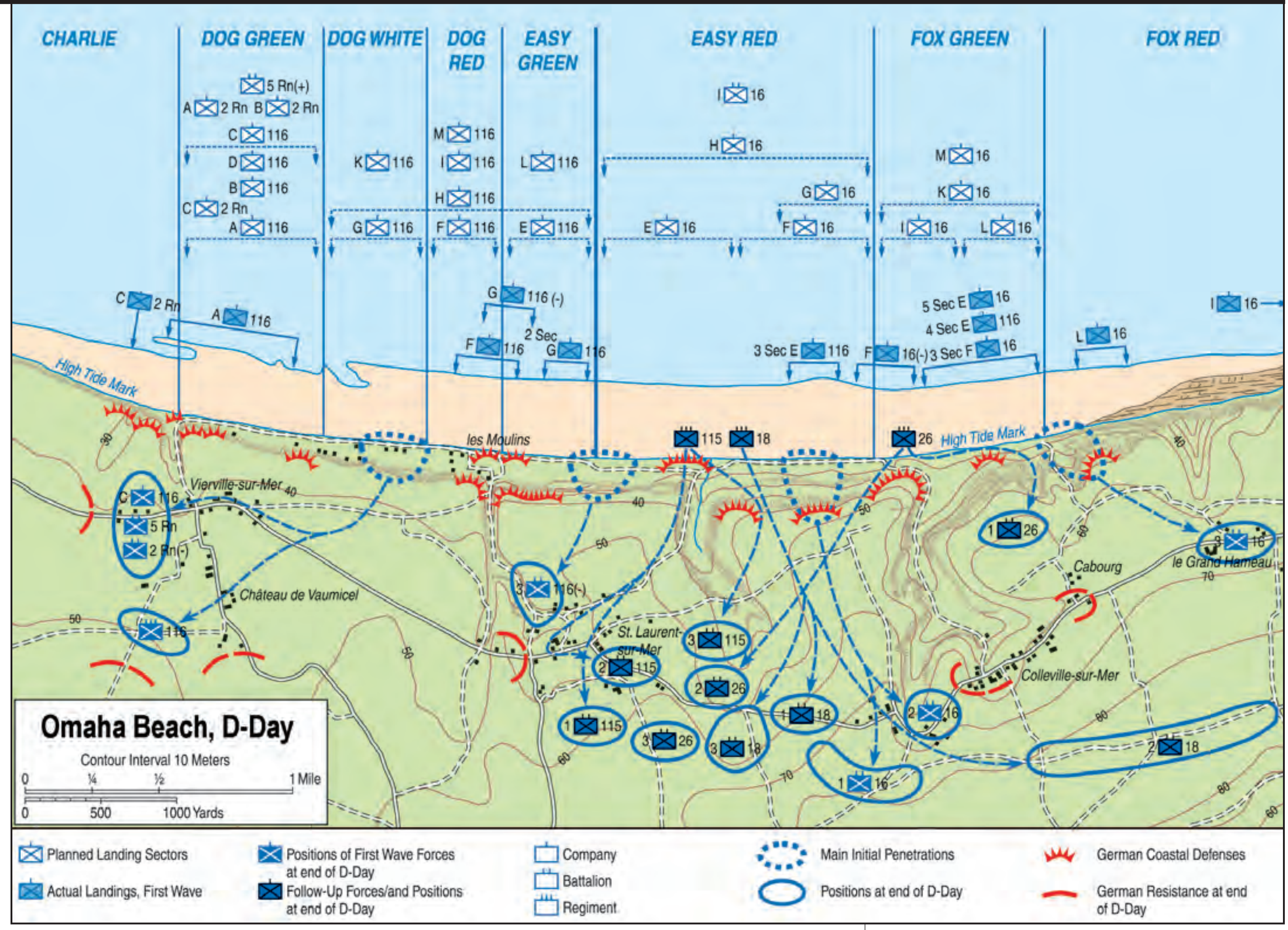
While many men found the rigorous training and discipline of the military hard to take, Stevens adapted easily. "The military didn't surprise me too much because we had to be disciplined with our large family. I liked being in the National Guard. If I hadn't joined, I probably would have been in the war later anyway.

"A lot of our buddies went in with us. The way it happened, one guy joined, then the others started joining, too. We liked the training. Sometimes we got disgusted with it and wanted to go home, but we were right proud to be in that outfit. We were proud of our company, which had other men than just Bedford men."

Both/National Archives

ABOVE: The U.S. Army's 29th Division stages a mock landing at the village of Slapton Sands on England's Channel coast. Roy Stevens and the Bedford Boys trained constantly from the time they arrived in England in October 1942 until May 1944, the longest of any U.S. infantrymen in WWII. TOP: The 29th Division arrives at Fort Meade, Maryland, in February 1940. Among them are the National Guard infantry unit, Company A of the 116th Infantry Regiment—"The Bedford Boys"—with 35 men from Bedford, Virginia, population 3,200.

Map ©2026 Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis, MN



Map of the D-Day landing plan for Omaha Beach for Operation Overlord, the Battle of Normandy, launched June 6, 1944. Roy Stevens and Company A of the 116th Infantry Regiment landed at the west end of the beach (far left).

Some of those other men came from northern cities like Philadelphia and New York, and the two groups gently teased each other about their roots. "Some guys gave us a hard time because there were so many Bedford boys in the unit. We also fought the Civil War a lot with some of the Northern guys, but it was all in fun. They called us the Bedford Rebs."

At first, rattlings from Adolf Hitler in Europe and the Japanese in the Pacific, who threatened war to gain their objectives, hardly intruded. Stevens and his mates pocketed the extra money and enjoyed swaggering about town in their National Guard uniforms; to them, war was nothing but a distant concern, nothing to occupy more than a fleeting thought. But soon, events across the oceans disrupted their tranquil existence.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized the dangers far before much of his nation. Although the prevailing attitude of isolationism prevented him from taking every step he wished, Roosevelt diverted whatever efforts he could into strengthening an alarmingly weak military. One October 1940 move affected Stevens and his Bedford pals when their National Guard unit was mobilized into the U.S. Army, supposedly for only one year. Stevens and the others thus packed their belongings and headed to training camp, now part of the full-time Army rather than part-time National Guardsmen.

Like his friends, Stevens still rarely thought about the possibility of being in a war. He trained harder, and weekend passes were a luxury, but mostly he drilled, participated in field maneuvers, then headed to a local bar whenever possible. He even wondered why, later in 1941, the government extended their stint in the Army. Like many others, he was eager to return home.

On December 7, 1941, Stevens headed to a local theater near their North Carolina camp. "I was in a little town. We were watching a Gene Autry movie, I think, when they flashed on the screen that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was. We left and went back to the base. We all got to talking, and we took the Japs that night! We knew we would take these guys with no problem."

"Most of us were glad to be in the war. We looked forward to it because we had trained so much and so hard. We wanted to get this over with and get back home. You had the ignorance of war," Stevens said of the naïve, yet typical, attitude that most soldiers adopted on December 7.

That December day changed Stevens' life. From then on, a rapid string of events yanked him out of a world of shiny uniforms and starry-eyed girls and into a dangerous realm

Soldiers pass through a roll call tent before boarding ships for the D-Day landing. Roy Stevens and his twin brother, Ray, would be on separate boats. Convinced he would not survive, Ray wanted to shake hands, but Roy refused, saying they would "shake hands on shore, when we got to Vierville. I wish now I had shaken his hand." Of the 35 Bedford Boys that landed on D-Day, 21 died the first day, 19 of them within the first 15 minutes.

that ended on European battlefields.

The first event involved his training. Instead of the more leisurely pace, the men now embarked on a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week schedule. Officers barked orders more loudly, and men marched more crisply, for to do otherwise might one day mean injury or death. Stevens endured the rigors along with everyone else and was nagged by his twin brother's statement that he, Ray, would not live to see the war's ending. "I don't know why he had that feeling," says Stevens. "It didn't dawn on me until later. I never thought about death much."

This hectic pace continued unabated until September 1942, when Stevens and Company A boarded the liner *Queen Mary* for shipment across the Atlantic to England. There they would form part of the advance team and commence training for the long-awaited invasion of Hitler's Europe.

Formerly one of the world's classiest luxury liners, the *Queen Mary* now served as a troop transport, one that would take Stevens outside the United States for the first time in his life.

On September 26, 1942, Stevens lined up with his company on the docks of New York City to board the liner. The small-town boy was impressed with what he witnessed, especially when he steamed past the ultimate national symbol representing the ideals for which the United States stands.

"Sailing by the Statue of Liberty was an experience. This was the first time I had seen it. The ship left New York City, and it was still an adventure to us. We were young, and we wanted to see what England and Ireland looked like."

The voyage to England went smoothly for much of the way across. Stevens spent most of his time lying in his bunk next to Ray, watching the seemingly hundreds of card games, or attending the mandatory lectures warning the Americans of what to expect in England and how they should treat the British civilians. "There were plenty of poker games going around. I didn't have many duties. My bunk was even with the water line so I could look out the porthole and see the water. It was a decent spot, not too hot. We had to get used to that British food! Cabbage, potatoes, things like that, but they did the best they could."

However, the trip contained reminders that they were far from being on a luxury cruise. "The ship zig-zagged because of U-boats," Stevens recalled, referring to the constant threat from U-boats.

As they neared the coast of Britain an incident occurred that brought the realities of war closer to Stevens. The ship entered the Irish Sea on October 1, where a group of destroyers and the British cruiser *Curacoa* joined to escort the *Queen Mary* through the submarine-infested waters to Scotland. On October 2 Stevens was standing below decks when he felt a tremendous shudder, as if an immense object had rammed the ship.

"I went up on deck to see what happened, and this ship was sinking." Stevens looked on in horror as the *Curacoa*, which had accidentally steamed too close to the *Queen Mary*, was sliced in half by the leviathan and quickly sank. "We started throwing life preservers off the *Queen Mary*," but there was little they could do to assist the men already in the water.

"Seeing the ship cut in half and those men drowning, that was the first act of war I had

Naval Heritage & History Command

Landing craft approaching Omaha Beach on the coast of Normandy in the opening minutes of D-Day. After the craft carrying Roy Stevens sank 500 yards offshore, he managed to shed his gear and stay afloat for 2.5 hours before he was picked up. Back on Omaha on June 11, he found his brother Ray's grave and dog tags.

seen," Stevens said. "Some of the adventure was gone." Of the cruiser's 439 men, 338 perished in this accident.

The *Queen Mary* made it safely to port, despite the hole from the collision. Stevens, however, had been changed. Before stepping onto British soil, he had witnessed some of the casualties of a conflict that would soon engulf him.

From October 1942 until June 1944, Stevens engaged in a constant string of drills and maneuvers designed to prepare Company A and the other units for the Allies' re-entry onto the European continent, the monumental cross-Channel invasion against Hitler's formidable military. No one knew exactly when it would occur, of course, but little other reason existed for the rapidly growing American presence in the British Isles. The hectic pace of training the men had begun in the United States accelerated once they arrived in England.

"We'd go on long hikes. It was kind of rough training, and that's why we lost so many people. They couldn't take the training and transferred out. We always seemed to be wet, and it was always cool over there. We didn't know for sure what we were training for, but you heard rumors."

For the next 20 months the men trained seven days a week. Once a month they received 48-hour passes, which most used to head to London. Stevens briefly dated a British girl. He recalls, "We got along with the British people. I have good memories of England." The Southern-born Stevens remembers one thing he did not appreciate. "The English called all of us Americans 'Yanks.' I didn't go for that! That was almost an insult!"

Inevitably, Company A grew weary of the monotonous schedule. It seemed they would waste the entire war training, when what they really yearned for was a shot at the action.

Stevens noticed a change in the training in March 1944, when the men of Company A were grouped into six boat teams of 30 men apiece. To develop cohesiveness, the 30 men lived together, ate together, and slept together, and the training focused on the singular responsibility each man bore once he stepped into battle. Each boat team had two officers, along with mortar men, machine gunners, demolition men, riflemen, and Bangalore torpedo men. Instead of training only on land, the men now embarked on the boats and practiced beach assaults, especially at a location known as Slapton Sands.

"The thought that we were going to attack a beach frightened us," says Stevens, who as a technical sergeant was second in command of Boat No. 5. "You thought about it, you really did. I was certain I was going to make it for some reason. The training was getting more serious now. It was a grind. I know of two guys who were killed during training, one was blown up and the other shot. That affected us. Some of the guys, including me, got homesick, but there was a lot of water between us and home."

Stevens said the men in Company A wanted to be the first unit onto whatever beach they had to assault. Benefiting from the ignorance that shields all first-timers to combat, Stevens and the other Bedford soldiers believed it would be an honor recognizing their efficiency during their training overseas, and they celebrated when superiors designated them to be in the first wave in the coming assault. "We were right proud to be in that outfit and

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chosen to go in first on D-day," recalled Stevens. They would soon learn that for most, those long months in England would quickly end on a beach called Omaha.

One week before D-day, Stevens and other NCOs and officers gathered in a building for a briefing. For the first time, he glimpsed Company A's objective, for spread out on a table was a sand drawing of the coast of France, including Omaha Beach. Stevens learned that Company A was to slosh ashore against the western edge of Omaha Beach, one of five beaches assigned to the vast Allied invasion forces, and seize a ravine cut through the cliffs that led to the village of Vierville-sur-Mer.

Stevens left the briefing, informed the men of Boat No. 5, then started preparations for heading to France. One thing did give him pause and underscored the seriousness of his undertaking. "It was weird when I signed up for the $10,000 life insurance policy. I named my mother as beneficiary, and it made us think a bit."

Stevens boarded a troop transport with the other men in early June, realizing that this time fighting waited at the other end. The thought did not yet bother the men, who had tired of their long routine. "We had trained so much, we'd been training and training, that we hoped this was the real thing, so we could go over, get it over with, get home, and start our business again. Everyone was anxious to get going. You get to a point where you just want to get into it. I told the men they had been doing a nice job, and said, 'Now, let's go in and get it over with.'"

Stevens felt so confident the landing would unfold smoothly that he rejected a final handshake from his twin brother, Ray. His brother still maintained that he would not make it out alive, and he told Roy to take care of the family farm when he returned to Bedford, but just before they stepped aboard their respective ships, Roy declined to shake Ray's hand. "I said that we would shake hands on shore, when we got to Vierville. I wish now I had shaken his hand."

Rough weather delayed the crossing for a few days, during which the men remained aboard their ships, but soon the invasion armada headed out of British ports and started its inexorable way across the English Channel. With each mile that brought them closer to the French coast, the men thought more and more about what awaited them.

"On the ship, we didn't expect to get much fire from the Germans. We knew something was going to happen once we landed, but we didn't know what. We thought we would take our objective easily. We thought the beach would have been bombarded hard."

Heavy winds and rain churned the English Channel and made the men feel as if they sat on a roller coaster. Most men became seasick, and everyone shivered from the cold and mist. The miserable conditions did not help maintain the positive attitude most had when they first stepped aboard.

"Some of the men looked frightened," Stevens remembered. "They had this look on their faces, like danger was approaching. I felt the same way, that this was something I had never done before. I had never been in battle. Everyone was afraid. Roosevelt said you have 'nothing to fear but fear itself,' but I don't know about that!"

At 4 a.m. on June 6, when the troop transport bearing Stevens and the 30 men of Boat No. 5 drew within 12 miles of the French coast, the laborious transfer into the smaller landing boats began. For most men, that meant carefully stepping down ropes into landing craft bobbing and weaving in the heavy seas, but Stevens enjoyed a better fate. "We were pretty lucky. We didn't have to scale down the ropes, which was rough! Cables lifted our boat and put it directly into the water. Our craft then turned away and headed out."

The boat was to take Stevens' group to shore 12 miles distant, but because the craft took a diagonal course it had to travel 20 miles. The seas that felt rough aboard the transport magnified once the men stood in the smaller landing craft. "It was bumpy, rough," recalled Stevens. Once more, he saw a look of fear blanket the faces of many. "Riding into the beach, some of the boys just knew they weren't going to make it. You could see it in their faces. I never had any doubt, that's how stupid I was, but I never thought that I would never make it out alive."

As Boat No. 5 neared Omaha Beach, American battleships opened a pre-invasion bombardment that draped the boat in noise. Stevens could recall nothing as loud as what he heard that morning, and like most of the men steadily advancing toward the Normandy invasion sites, he believed that little would remain of the German defenses after such a bombardment.

Stevens never had a chance to find out. When his boat closed to 500 yards from shore, it smacked into one of the thousands of underwater obstacles sprinkled along Normandy's coastline to prevent enemy craft from reaching the beach. He and his group spent 20 minutes trying to bail out water that gushed through a gaping hole in the boat's bottom, but their efforts failed.

"My boat hit one of those obstacles, but there was no explosion because it didn't have a mine attached. We didn't have to jump out of the boat. It just sank from underneath us. I could hear the German gunfire, and I could see what I thought were flamethrowers going off onshore, but there was too much going on for me to notice much. We lost one boy, and I've often wondered what happened to him."

Stevens now found himself struggling against another threat—his own gear dragging him under in seas that alone posed a large enough danger. He battled to remove his assault jacket, shoes, and other pieces of equipment that endangered his life, and nearly lost his struggle. "I fought to stay afloat, but I almost gave up; it was so hard because of all the gear. I couldn't swim, and my whole life came before me. The first thing I thought of was my home, then Mother and Dad, then some of the things I did in life. I thought it was curtains. Finally, I grabbed hold of a bangalore that had a Mae West on it and that kept me up. I was in the water for almost two-and-a-half hours."

While Stevens battled weariness and the elements 500 yards from shore, the boats carrying the other Bedford men headed into what became a debacle. Instead of beaches that had been softened from naval and air bombardment and bombings, the men at Omaha Beach stepped directly into a slaughter. A cloud cover forced Air Corps bombers to drop bombs farther inland than intended, lest they drop short and decimate their own forces. As a result, most of the German targets remained untouched. Then, rockets from ships offshore intended to create craters on the beach in which the invading troops could seek shelter, mostly fell short and splashed harmlessly into the water. Finally, instead of facing raw troops, Company A ran straight into the crack German 352nd Division, a veteran unit that had only recently been transferred to the beach.

As a result, the men from Bedford landed on a beach with no cover, against fortifications manned by skilled troops that had hardly been touched by the pre-invasion bombardment. The results were predictably lethal. Of the 170 men from Company A who hit the beach at 6:30, 91 died and another 64 were wounded. Nineteen Bedford soldiers died in the first 15 minutes. One boat disintegrated from a direct hit, which killed all 32 occupants.

Lieutenant Ray Nance scrambled ashore, advanced a few yards, then looked around to see how many men had followed him onto the beach. To his horror, he spotted no one else on the beach near him. When he turned back toward the water, he understood why. So many floating bodies clogged the landing

National Archives

ABOVE: Survivors of the D-Day landing at Omaha Beach, including at least two men from the 29th Division on the far right, gather at the base of the cliffs for shelter. OPPOSITE: Still in the early stages of the invasiion this aerial view of the Vierville-sur-Mer section of Omaha Beach where Company A of the 116th Infantry Regiment landed. Though difficult to discern from this height, several landing craft are visible, including several partially submerged, and the beach appears to be littered with men and beach obstacles.

area that they bumped into each other.

Stevens had little idea that, while he strove to stay above water, his brother and friends, as well as hundreds of other Americans, had already died on Omaha. "You could hear the planes going overhead and see some of what was going on," explained Stevens, "but I was too busy trying to live to worry about what was happening ashore. I didn't know how bad it was until later."

For Stevens, later meant June 11. For now, though, he had to worry about survival. Fortunately, a small boat carrying rockets stopped, helped Stevens and the other men into the craft, took off their jackets, and took the men back to ships that returned them to England. "I didn't have my rifle or any other gear, and that's why they returned me to England. I stayed there four days, then headed back to France on June 11. I was anxious to get back and rejoin my men."

Stevens was also eager to learn what happened to his brother. When he returned to Omaha Beach, he headed over to a makeshift cemetery that graves registration personnel had started just off the beaches and quickly found an answer that, for a time, he tried to reject.

"I went to a cemetery, and that's where I found Ray's grave. His was the first one I came to. There was a little white cross covered with dirt, and when I moved the dirt I saw Ray's dogtag on it. They were still burying men there. Then I walked around to look for other guys, and I started finding all the other Bedford men. I didn't know how bad it was for them until I returned to the beach, walked to the high ground, and turned back to see what those guys had to land against. The Germans were really set for us. I don't know how any boat got in. Those boys didn't even have a chance. They just riddled them."

Stevens could hardly believe what he discovered. There, in a rough French cemetery, lay many of the friends with whom he had grown up in Bedford, and one man who was as much a part of him as his left or right arm. For a time, Stevens refused to accept that his brother had died and told himself that graves registration had made a mistake, that all he had to do was reach the front and he would find his brother. He also tried to ignore the feelings of guilt he felt over not shaking his brother's hand on D-day morning.

Both/National Archives

The cemetery at Omaha Beach where Roy Stevens' brother Ray and many others from Bedford, Virginia, were buried after the D-Day assault. After his boat sank before the landing, Roy spent more than two hours in the water before he was rescued and taken back to England to get re-outfitted. When he returned on June 11, he found his brother's grave here.

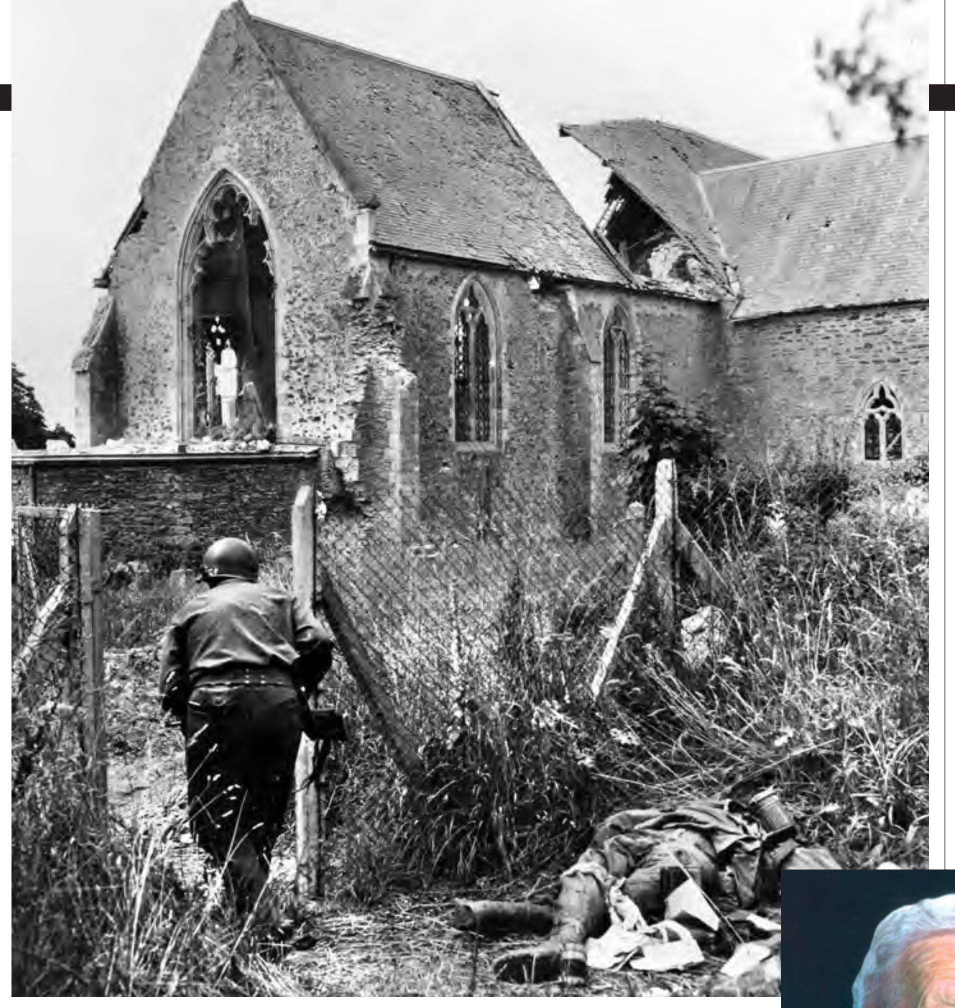
Stevens entered the fighting that same day, all the time believing that he would yet meet his brother. Until that day, he vowed to exact revenge on the enemy for the harm they had inflicted on Bedford. "I wanted to get back at the Germans for my brother and the other guys. I wanted to kill one German for each guy [from Bedford]. Most of the times I'd go out on my own looking for Germans. It was silly, but I had to. I would expose myself to draw fire, and then go after wherever the fire came from."

Stevens's superior officer, Colonel Charles Canham, finally put a stop to Stevens's recklessness by telling the grieving soldier that it would take everyone's effort to win the war, not just his, and that he was to cease the almost suicidal actions.

Stevens hardly had to worry about trying to get killed, for the fighting in which he engaged was some of the roughest. He entered the hedgerow country, fields boxed in by high, thick rows of bushes that concealed enemy positions. "All the hedgerows were booby-trapped, and we were so green and didn't know our way around them. I was in a lot of skirmishes. One time we went over the hedgerow to bring back a prisoner for information, and when we got over, these Germans came in behind us and set up their guns."

A furious firefight ensued. Rifles answered machine gun blasts and grenades illuminated the night. One man near Stevens fell from a bullet, his eyeball lying on his cheek.

Stevens learned that men responded to the fighting in different ways. He used it to cleanse the anger building inside, while others attempted to avoid fighting altogether. Stevens empathizes with those individuals. "One time five guys shot themselves in the foot, and Colonel Canham asked me if I thought they did it on purpose. I'm pretty sure he would have had them shot right



ABOVE: A 29th Division GI passes a dead German near a bombed-out Norman church. After his brother's death, Roy Stevens sought revenge in killing Germans, until an officer advised him the effort was suicidal. RIGHT: Roy Stevens, near the time of this interview, said the war was never far from his thoughts and that he always regretted not shaking the hand of his twin brother, Ray, before they set off across the English Channel in June of 1944.

there, so I lied and said no. He probably knew I was lying, but I wanted to save their lives. The body can only take so much. There was another soldier, a kid, who one day went back, dug a hole, and shot himself."

On June 30, as Stevens climbed a hedgerow, a Bouncing Betty land mine ended his fighting. The man directly in front of him tripped the wire, took the full blast, and died instantly, while Stevens went down with neck and shoulder wounds. Blood gushed from the upper part of his body and Stevens kept spitting blood, but he had enough strength to stumble to an aid station, where they cleaned out his wounds and sent him back to a field hospital.

"They put me in a place with boys who were really hurt, who were much worse than me and were going to die. I thought, 'This is no place for me!' so I grabbed a nurse and, even though I couldn't talk very well, told her to move me."

The nurse checked Stevens' wounds, then arranged for him to be operated on. The doctor removed most of the shrapnel, although some still remains in Stevens' neck, then sent him back to England for rehabilitation. After three months of recovery, Stevens returned to the Continent, where he again visited his brother's grave, hoping that by then the Army would have corrected its mistake and he would learn that Ray was fighting somewhere along the front. When he saw his brother's grave, though, still in the same cemetery, his hopes plunged.

Stevens was too badly injured to rejoin the fighting, but he reported to a camp in France where he trained other men headed for battle. During this time, though Stevens wrote home, he refrained from telling his mother what happened to Ray. "I didn't know how to deal with that. I still kept telling myself that maybe he was in a hospital somewhere. My mother got a telegram sometime in August about what had happened. Even after I got home after the war, I wondered if maybe Ray would be in a hospital in West Virginia or something."

While most men raucously celebrated the war's end, Stevens, though pleased, dreaded returning to Bedford, where he would have to face his mother and talk about Ray. His fears quickly dissipated. "She just looked at me and said, 'At least one of you got back.'"

Stevens settled in, met a girl named Helen at the county fair, and married in 1946. The couple recently celebrated their 58th wedding anniversary, surrounded with the love that children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren bring.

On June 6, 2001, President George W. Bush visited Bedford to dedicate the National D-day Memorial, a beautiful sculpture honoring the men lost on D-day. He referred to Bedford's uniqueness in warfare and hoped that Americans took the time to visit.

Despite the joy he feels from family, Stevens never forgets about the war. His injuries bother him at times, especially when the weather sours, but a sense of loss hovers over the Bedford survivor. "I dream about Ray a lot. The others that got killed on D-day, I dream about them a lot, too. Returning to Normandy for the 50th anniversary of the battle was quite an emotional thing. I'm glad I went back."

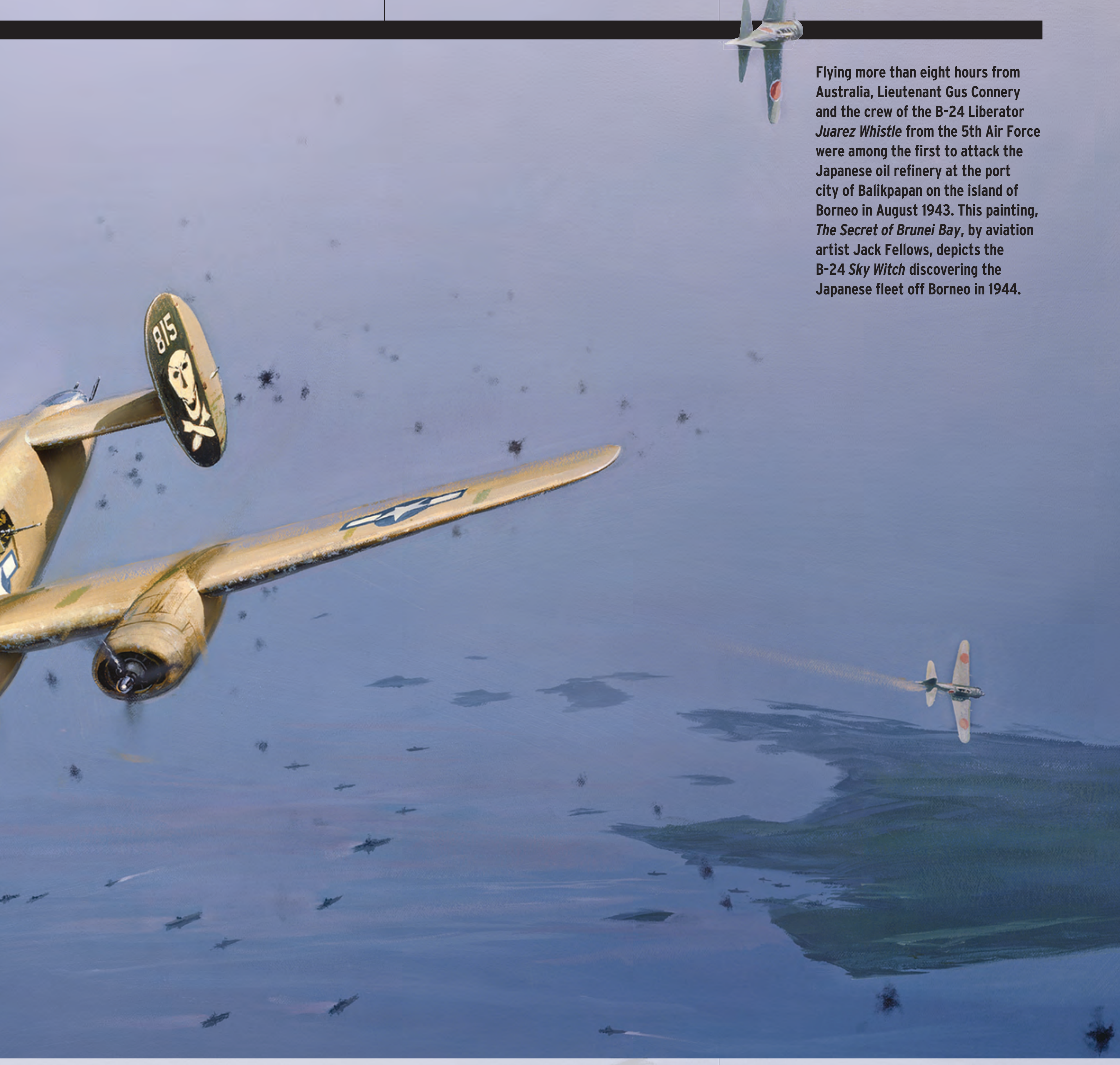
Roy O. Stevens died on January 1, 2007, at the age of 87. The last of the Bedford Boys, Elisha "Ray" Nance, died at the age of 94 on April 19, 2009. □

John Wukovits is the author of Lost at Sea: Eddie Rickenbacker's Twenty-Four Days Adrift on the Pacific—A World War II Tale of Courage and Faith. *His previous books include* Pacific Alamo, the story of the heroic defense of Wake Island *and* Devotion To Duty, a biography of Admiral Clifton A.F. Sprague, hero of the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

Bombs Over Balikpapan

BY PATRICK J. CHAISSON

Hitting Imperial Japan where it hurt, Consolidated B-24D Liberators made daring long-distance raids on major oil refineries in Borneo.



Flying more than eight hours from Australia, Lieutenant Gus Connery and the crew of the B-24 Liberator *Juarez Whistle* from the 5th Air Force were among the first to attack the Japanese oil refinery at the port city of Balikpapan on the island of Borneo in August 1943. This painting, *The Secret of Brunei Bay*, by aviation artist Jack Fellows, depicts the B-24 *Sky Witch* discovering the Japanese fleet off Borneo in 1944.

Lieutenant Gus Connery and the crew of *Juarez Whistle*, a Consolidated B-24D Liberator heavy bomber, first spotted their target around midnight. Called Pandansari, this oil refinery complex was located outside the port city of Balikpapan on Borneo's eastern coast. Connery's airmen had flown 1,350 miles to attack it.

In the nose of the plane, bombardier Lieutenant. Jim Wright could not believe the scene unfolding below him. To his amazement, the sprawling Pandansari facility was as brightly lit as if it were peacetime. The Japanese troops responsible for defending this key installation clearly believed it stood beyond the range of American bombers.

For that error in judgement, Connery and his crew were about to deliver an expensive lesson in preparedness. Climbing to 5,000 feet, the Liberator shuddered as six 500-lb. demolition bombs fell from their shackles. Wright had done his job well—other American aviators later reported "exploding oil tanks and huge fires raging" all across Pandansari.

The crew of *Juarez Whistle* now readied themselves for a harrowing 8.5-hour flight back to their base in Australia. While most

Painting © 2026, Jack Fellows/www.jackfellows.com

of the men on board kept alert for enemy interceptors, Connery and his flight engineer, Technical Sergeant Telly Koumarelos, constantly monitored the B-24's fuel gauges. Would they have enough to reach the runway at Darwin?

No one knew, because the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) had never flown a combat mission this far into enemy territory. Aboard the *Juarez Whistle*, about all the men could do was cross their fingers and pray the fuel held out.

Connelly's bomber was one of nine Liberators on the successful Balikpapan raid the night of August 13-14, 1943. Another group of B-24s would return four nights later to strike the freighters and oil tankers at anchor there, causing significant damage despite encountering a now-awakened Japanese defensive presence.

The Balikpapan missions stand out as examples of ingenuity, courage and airmanship during a period in World War II when American bomber crewmen struggled to deliver even small-scale blows to the enemy's warmaking infrastructure. The success of the raids was the culmination of nine months' preparation, beginning with the formation of the 380th Bombardment Group (BG) on October 28, 1942, at Davis-Monthan Field near Tucson, Arizona. Cadres from the 39th BG formed the unit's nucleus, while Maj. William A. Miller, a former commercial airline pilot, took over as the 380th's first commanding officer.

The outfit's time in Tucson was short. By December the 380th BG had moved on to Biggs Army Airfield outside El Paso, Texas, where it continued to fill its ranks with men—several hundred newly-trained flight crewmen and ground support technicians from training bases all across the country reported for duty that month. It was the job of freshly-promoted Lieutenant Colonel Miller to prepare these recruits for air combat.

The 380th consisted of four sub-units, the 528th, 529th, 530th, and 531st Bombardment Squadrons (BS). Supervising their operations was a group headquarters that also handled intelligence, air weather, supply, and personnel matters. In addition, the 380th BG had a robust maintenance section to keep its bombers in airworthy condition.

Equipping the flying squadrons were 38 factory-new B-24D Liberators built by Consolidated Aircraft in San Diego. With a wingspan of 110 feet, overall length of 66 feet, four inches, and a height of 18 feet, the D-model was powered by four Pratt & Whitney R-1830-43 engines, each rated at 1,200 horsepower. The bomber's empty weight was 32,505 pounds, with a maximum loaded weight of 60,000 pounds.

Capable of reaching 301 mph at top speed and boasting a service ceiling of 32,000 feet, the Liberator had a maximum range of 2,850 miles. It rarely flew with its 8,000-lb. maximum bomb payload in order to carry the additional fuel needed to reach distant targets.

Each B-24 was manned by a crew of 10: pilot, copilot, navigator, bombardier, flight engineer, radio operator, and four gunners. For self-defense, the D-model carried 10 or 11 Browning .50-caliber machine guns. Electrically-operated top, ball, and tail turrets sported two guns each, while a single flexible weapon was mounted in both the right and left waist positions. The "greenhouse" nose section contained three flexible .50-caliber machine guns—one mounted in a socket above the bombsight and two more in cheek positions.

Later, all 380th BG aircraft were modified to remove the ball turret in an attempt to save weight. This apparatus was replaced by a pair of machine guns mounted on a Scarff ring in the same location. Some bombers also received a modification in which part of the glazed nose was replaced by a Consolidated A6A power turret that contained two Brownings.

Now that the 380th had warplanes and crews with which to fly them, training began in earnest. A unit historian described how, under Miller's tutelage at Biggs Field during the winter of 1942-1943, novice airmen underwent both basic and advanced phases of air combat

George Silk/National Archives

ABOVE: The crew of the Consolidated B-24D Liberator heavy bomber *Juarez Whistle* at Fenton Field, Australia, sometime after their mission to Balikpapan on Borneo. OPPOSITE: B-24D Liberators from the 380th Bomb Group, often with their ball turrets removed to reduce weight, fly over Balikpapan sometime after the first raid. The raids on the oil refinery continued in preparation of the Allied Borneo campaign, which took place from May 1 to August 30, 1945.

National Archives

training on "tough, grueling flights in all types of weather, night and day."

First, crews needed to learn their aircraft and function flawlessly as a team—no easy task as the Liberator was regarded by most as a difficult plane to master. Then, as their skills improved, airmen went on to practice more complicated training requirements such as formation flying and long-distance navigation. Inevitably, a combination of inexperienced pilots and "hot" aircraft resulted in accidents. In February, two separate crashes killed several 380th BG aircrewmen. Though tragic, these fatalities were but a taste of what the unit would later experience.

On February 28, 1943, Miller received orders to move his command to Lowry Army Airfield near Denver, Colorado. Now entering its third and final phase of pre-deployment training, the 380th, started conducting operational patrols along the West Coast. On these missions, all bombers were fully loaded with fuel, ammunition, and special anti-submarine munitions.

In April, evaluators from Second Air Force certified the unit as ready for combat duty. During a parade held at Lowry Field, Brig. Gen. Eugene L. Eubank (Air Corps Director of Bombardment) inspected the crews prior to their departure for the war zone. Busy with other tasks, the 380th's airmen had little time to rehearse their role in this function. Nevertheless, upon Eubank's arrival, a sergeant called his honor guard to attention and then commanded them to "open ranks…march."

"The guard was baffled by the order but used their own judgement…and scattered from hell to breakfast," according to the unit history recorded. Eubank, shaking his head in disgust, remarked, "My God, it's a flying circus." Henceforth the 380th BG became known as the "Flying Circus."

Putting their poor ceremonial performance behind them, the men of Miller's outfit began making preparations for overseas movement. Splitting into an air and a ground echelon, the Flying Circus completed a multitude of tasks designed to ready its men and aircraft for deployment into the combat zone. But which one? Rumors abounded regarding the 380th's destination, which was finally confirmed on April 14 when the unit received orders assigning it to V Bomber Command, Fifth Air Force. They were headed for Australia.

The unit's air echelon started out a day later when one by one its B-24s left the continental U.S. on an epic 9,300-mile flight. Their route took them to California, Hawaii, Christmas Island, the Fiji Islands, New Caledonia, and finally to Amberly Field, Queensland, Australia. One bomber, commanded by Lt. Clarence Corpening, went missing somewhere between Hawaii and Christmas Island.

Meanwhile, the unit's ground echelon and its organizational equipment moved by train from Denver to Camp Stoneman, a staging base near San Francisco in the East Bay region. On May 5 they boarded the S.S. *Mt. Vernon*, a converted luxury liner serving as a troopship, for the two-week voyage to Sydney.

In Australia, Miller learned from officials at V Bomber Command that his outfit was to receive a special assignment. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) had long been advocating for U.S. heavy bombers to operate out of that nation's remote Northern Territory; stationing a Liberator group near Darwin (the territorial capital) would, RAAF commanders believed, serve to threaten Japanese shipping and shore facilities all across Southeast Asia.

The Flying Circus, Miller discovered, was to be detached from Fifth Air Force and put under the RAAF's operational control. This

National Archives

Engines burning, a Japanese L2D "Tabby" transport plane (a version of the Douglas DC-3) plummets toward the sea after being hit by .50-caliber rounds from the top turret gunner of B-24D *Juarez Whistle* on a mission to bomb a nickel mining operation at Pomelaa, on Celebes (now Sulawesi) in 1943. The Japanese crew survived and were rescued.

meant the 380th BG now took orders from Air Vice Marshal Adrian Cole, Air Officer Commanding RAAF North-Western Area Command. As Darwin was 1,000 miles from the nearest railhead (and twice that from any American supply bases), logistical support would be shared between Cole's Australians and the USAAF.

While the 380th's ground echelon made its way by Liberty Ship to Darwin, the air echelon kept busy preparing for combat. Upon arrival in Australia, all of the unit's B-24s went in for field modification at a USAAF air depot in Chartres Towers. This was where the Liberators' ball turrets were removed and some planes fitted with electrically-operated nose turrets. A number of smaller updates were also made to reduce the bombers' weight and increase their range.

To gain combat experience, 14 crews from the 530th BS and 531st BS flew up to Jackson Field at Port Moresby, New Guinea, in late April of 1943. Flying with the battle-wise 43rd and 90th BGs, they conducted 35 combat missions—mostly over the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul—with the loss of one bomber (Lt. Theron A. Dreier's *The Leila Belle*) shot down. The detachment redeployed to Australia in late June.

In the meantime, Miller led a small two-plane strike on June 3 against what Intelligence said was a large merchant vessel moored in the harbor at Lautem, Timor. Bombing at 10,000 feet, Miller and his wingman, Capt. Zed Smith of the 528th BS, were ambushed by four experienced, eager enemy pilots who—at the cost of one Mitsubishi Zero—riddled both B-24s. No casualties were reported, but "Zedro" Smith had to crash-land at RAAF Darwin after he discovered his main landing gear had been shredded by Japanese bullets.

The Flying Circus' first large-scale mission took place on June 11 when 15 unescorted Liberators struck the port at Koepang, Timor. The foe met them with heavy anti-aircraft fire and as many as 12 fighter-interceptors that brought down *Careless*, a bomber flown by Capt. Jimmy Dienelt of the 531st BS. The Americans claimed three "Zeke" fighters in return.

In late June, with its New Guinea detachment returned and the ground echelon finally disembarked at Darwin, the Flying Circus entered a new phase of operations. As the RAAF base there was both dangerously overcrowded and exposed to Japanese air attack, the 380th needed to relocate. Group HQ, together with the 528th and 530th BSs, took up residence at Fenton, 100 miles south of the city along a dirt track optimistically called the "North-South Road." The 529th and 531st BSs were based at Manbulloo, another 100 miles south.

Conditions in this part of Australia were extreme. The unit history describes it as "The Never-Never," a land of furnace-like heat, 12-foot-tall anthills, wallabies, snakes, lizards, and several million insects. Another member of the Flying Circus described the Outback as "an unpeopled mass of trees and bush," that would receive no rain for eight months and then get "more than 100 inches…during the brief tropical 'wet.'"

The men of the 380th were not in Australia to admire the scenery, however, and quickly set up operations. They established maintenance areas, workshops, ordnance dumps, and,

Both: National Archives

ABOVE: Bombs from 17 B-24 Liberators of the 380th Bombardment Group, "The Flying Circus," fall on the port of Makassar on the Indonesian island of Celebes (now Sulawesi). The planes flew 1,000 miles each way from Darwin, Australia, striking at Japanese naval facilities and ships, including light cruisers. TOP: The crew of the B-24 *Little Joe* after their mission to Balikpapan in August 1943. Lt. Col. William A. Miller, sitting behind the wheel, was the pilot on the mission—the longest single, non-stop round trip bombing run of WWII, covering 2,700 miles over 17 hours.

when time permitted, clubhouses for officers, NCOs, and junior enlisted soldiers. The Aussies provided regular rations of beer, whiskey, and that most precious commodity of all—ice.

The Flying Circus continued with combat missions even as it changed bases. On June 15, eight B-24s departed Fenton on a night raid over Kendari airdrome in the Celebes. A week later, 14 380th BG bombers (accompanied by several Liberators from the 319th BS) made the 1,000-mile flight from Darwin to pummel harbor facilities at Makassar on the Celebes' west coast. Capt. Willard Nichols, the group's lead bombardier, reportedly put one 2,000-lb. warhead directly on top of a Japanese cruiser docked there.

As June gave way to July, these long-distance missions became almost routine occurrences. Flying unescorted against experienced, aggressive enemy interceptors, the "young crews were learning in a hard school," one airman remembered, "where people played for keeps."

The weather could also be a deadly foe. The Americans' area of operations included a region known as the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone, where equatorial heat and wind currents often spawned massive thunderstorms. Capt. Jim Planck of the 530th BS claimed these conditions were the worst he'd encountered in 30 years of flying.

"We were headed north, moving toward a very dark, ominous horizon ... [and] the dark clouds engulfed us," Planck recalled. "We were flying at 8,000 feet at the time, and no sooner made our penetration when a strong updraft caught our heavily loaded bomber. Up and up we went in huge, buffeting surges....The water on our canopy could not have been any heavier if you had taken a fire hose to it. Ice and hail intermittently pounded our plane while brilliant flashes of lightning moved across the sky. The noise was incredible, frequently drowning the sound of our engines."

Planck said his bomber burst out of the storm at 20,000 feet "into a beautiful South Pacific scene. Blue skies, white fluffy clouds, smooth air and a crystalline sea greeted us. The experience staggered the mind."

At least five aircraft from the 380th BG

were lost due to weather during its time in the Southwest Pacific Area of Operations.

That summer, the men of the Flying Circus devised a number of stratagems designed to keep their adversary on his toes. Japanese "Zeke" and "Oscar" interceptors performed poorly at night; therefore, nocturnal strikes became the norm. To increase its bombering range, the 380th BG also started staging from a forward airstrip called Corunna Downs, located 800 miles closer than Darwin to the petroleum refineries at Soerabaja, Java.

On July 20th, Miller led six B-24s from the 528th and 530th BSs on their first visit to Corunna Downs. Located deep in the great Australian desert, this lonely outpost was, according to one G.I., "chiefly inhabited by flies." Flight crews labored alongside ground personnel to refuel and ready the bombers for their 2,400-mile round-trip visit to Soerabaja that next evening. All six planes struck port facilities and the Wonokromo Oil Refinery with excellent results, suffering no losses.

The 380th's flight crews had demonstrated that they could, by staging out of forward bases, fly well over a 1,000 miles through treacherous tropical weather to find and attack strategic targets under the cover of darkness. In August, the Flying Circus turned its sights on the oil refineries and harbor complex of Balikpapan, Borneo.

The group intelligence section struggled to collect updated information on this lucrative, but mysterious target. Dutch technicians who escaped the Japanese invasion of January 1942 provided some information—that Pandansari, the Standard Oil Company refining center at Balikpapan, was the largest such facility in the Netherlands East Indies and the second largest in all of Southeast Asia. As such, the petroleum production sites there were likely to be heavily defended by anti-aircraft guns and fighter-interceptors.

Balikpapan's port complex also required careful study. The oil refined at Pandansari was of no use to Japanese forces unless it could be transported elsewhere by ship. Taking out the harbor's storage facilities or, better yet, some of Japan's vulnerable oil tankers could cripple the enemy's war effort in a meaningful way.

The risky mission called for 12 bombers to stage at Darwin, then depart in late afternoon on a 17-hour overnight flight to Balikpapan and back. Each Liberator was to carry six 500-lb. demolition bombs and 3,500 gal of aviation fuel—a load that at 66,000 lbs. grossly exceeded the aircraft's maximum weight allowance.

National Archives

The round-trip mileage totaled 2,700 miles, a distance that no USAAF aircraft had ever attempted in combat. Other factors such as bad weather, enemy interceptors, or unfavorable winds could very well result in total disaster.

Yet both Miller at Fenton and his superior officer, Cole in Darwin, felt it could be done. Accordingly, mission orders were drawn up assigning aircraft from all four squadrons to participate in the raid, now set for Friday, the 13th day of August, 1943.

The strike package of 12 B-24s moved forward that afternoon to RAAF Darwin, where flight crews received a final briefing while hard-working ground crews topped off their fuel tanks and loaded the bombs. At 1700, the heavily-laden Liberators began taking off at five-minute intervals from Darwin's main runway.

As it had smashed its tail skid on landing, the 528th BS's *Beautiful Betsy* (commanded by Lt. Joseph P. Roth) did not join the raid. Two other aircraft (*She'asta* and *80 Days Major*) turned back due to weather, leaving nine bombers to plow through a series of vicious storm fronts en route to Balikpapan.

Sooper Drooper, a 531st BS plane with Squadron CO Captain Forrest L. Brissey in the aircraft commander's seat, opened the attack sometime around midnight. His bombardier, 2nd Lt. Jack Gearhart, dropped their bombs from medium altitude on a large merchant vessel anchored in the bay; post-strike photos showed a direct hit.

Flying at mast-level, the 528th's CO Captain "Zedro" Smith brought *The Golden Goose*

B-24D Liberator pilots fly training exercises over New Mexico before going overseas. With Salina, Kansas, and Ephrata, Washington, the Clovis Army Air Base (now Cannon) in New Mexico was one of three "super aerodromes" established for the training of B-24, B-17 and, later, B-29 bomber pilots and crews.

into a skip-bombing approach against a 10,000-ton freighter *Katori Maru*, which was also confirmed as destroyed.

Starting with Connery's *Juarez Whistle*, six more bomber crews turned their attention to the Pandansari complex. When Miller, at the controls of a 530th BS Liberator named *Little Joe*, arrived over Balikpapan, the intense heat and flame caused by previous raiders forced him to bomb from an altitude of 7,000 feet.

The strike resulted in significant damage to oil refining facilities at Pandansari as well as to several cargo ships moored in Balikpapan Bay. There was no Japanese response until later when, on its way home, a 528th BS ship named *Shady Lady* came under attack by Zeros over Timor. No one on board was injured in this running gun-battle, but aircraft commander Lt. Doug Craig elected to force-land his B-24 along a strip of sand near Drysdale Mission, Australia, when it became clear he lacked the fuel to reach Darwin.

Post-mission crew debriefs convinced Allied leadership that the Balikpapan mission achieved near-total surprise, yet photographs were needed to properly assess the damage and plan follow-on attacks. Unfortunately for the Flying Circus, their Liberators were the only aircraft on hand capable of completing such a mission. And this "recce" job had to be flown in broad daylight.

Accordingly, at 0200 on August 15 two camera-equipped B-24s, each of which was loaded with 3,700 gal of fuel and three 500-lb. bombs, lifted off from RAAF Darwin and set a course for their target. At the controls of *Miss Giving*, a 528th BS bird, was 1st Lt. Jack R. Banks. His wingman, 1st Lt. Howard G. Hahn of the 531st BS, took *She'asta* up on the long, dangerous journey.

The enemy was waiting for Banks and Hahn as they started their photo runs high over Balikpapan Bay. Heavy anti-aircraft fire and a swarm of Zeros tormented the two bombers. Japanese records show these Mitsubishi A6M2 fighters as belonging to 202 Kōkūtai (202 Air Group) of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN). Lt. Com. Minoru Suzuki, 202 Ku's commanding officer, flew one of the seven Zeros to see action that morning. Suzuki's men claimed both bombers shot down for the loss of one IJN pilot.

The Americans told a different version of this story. After successfully hitting a freighter with their three bombs, the crew of *Miss Giving* endured as many as 15 separate attacks

Both: National Archives

ABOVE: Consolidated B-24 Liberators from the 528th Bomb Squadron target Japanese ships on December 26, 1944, near Boeroe in the Dutch East Indies (now Buru Island, Indonesia). OPPOSITE: Repeated bombing of the oil facilities at Balikapan on Borneo by long-range B-24Ds and other aircraft from the 5th and 13th Army Air Forces flying from Darwin in Australia's Northern Territory, paved the way for an Allied invasion in July 1945.

by Suzuki's relentless interceptors. Enemy gunfire put the bomber's Number 4 engine out of commission, but somehow *Miss Giving* made its escape. Banks' gunners claimed four Zeros, but in truth downed just one, a fighter flown by NAP1/C Takeshi Takahashi.

She'asta also came under attack by 202 Ku's Zeros, but emerged with only minor damage. Both Liberators then limped home to Fenton, having successfully photographed the Balikpapan region. The images they brought back provided evidence of substantial destruction at Pandansari, as well as the wreckage of two vessels sunk during August 13th's raid. Significantly, Allied photo interpreters also detected a pair of large transports and eight smaller freighters riding at anchor in Balikpapan Bay, choice targets for another anti-shipping raid.

Group Headquarters generated a field order on August 16 that called for "all available aircraft" to attack Balikpapan one night later. Enemy cargo vessels were the preferred target, and bomb runs would be conducted at masthead height. On this mission, the bombers were to stage from Fenton.

The Flying Circus managed to put 11 B-24s in the air on the night of August 17-18. One plane, *Gus's Bus* (flown by the 531st BS's Capt. Richard M. Craig), turned back with a fuel leak, while Lt. Marvin E. Baker in *The Golden Goose* (528th BS) chose to bomb an alternate target at Makassar. Nine Liberators continued on through stormy skies to their primary objective.

Captain Bob Horn's *SNAFU* (529th BS) emerged from the cloudbank first, dropping down to attack a big cargo vessel spotted by the bombardier, Lt. Armond T. Ferrante.

"Suddenly the bay lighted up with a terrific cross fire of light antiaircraft [shells]," the unit history records, "a pyrotechnic gauntlet through which the B-24 lumbered." One bullet shattered the cockpit canopy, missing co-pilot Lt. Andy Wagner by inches. In the nose Ferrante hollered "Bombs Away," and the freighter was destroyed.

The 529th BS crew flying *Pug* had just put three 500-pounders into a merchantman when acrid smoke began to fill the bomb bay. Aircraft Commander Lt. Jim Soderberg coolly ordered his navigator and a gunner to put out the flames using portable extinguishers. Upon their return to Fenton, the Americans saw how lucky they had been—what they thought was a bomb bay fire actually started in a bullet-riddled fuel tank.

Not every flight crew enjoyed such good fortune. Lieutenant Elvin Mellinger Jr., the bombardier in Lt. Bob Fleming's 531st BS ship *Prince Valiant*, was wounded by 20-mm shell fragments as his Liberator bore down on a tanker. Maintaining focus despite his injuries, Mellinger dropped all six warheads on top of the fat target and set it afire.

But *Prince Valiant* had been badly hit in the attack and on the long ride home, an engine lost oil pressure and had to be shut down. Aircrewmen trained in first aid treated Mellinger

with sulfa powder and morphine while Fleming and his co-pilot, 2nd Lt. Donald E. Winters, kept their battered bomber aloft to safely reach Australia.

Dauntless Dottie, a 528th BS ship commanded by Lt. Bill Shek, came home with three wounded crew members, all of whom survived to fly again. Notably, every Liberator that participated in this second Balikpapan raid suffered some damage from the intense antiaircraft fire put up by Japanese gunners. It would take mechanics several days to patch the planes and make them ready again for combat service.

Intelligence later confirmed that the 380th had knocked Pandansari's oil refineries out of commission for at least two weeks. The Americans also sank seven freighters and tankers, further crippling the enemy's war effort in Southeast Asia. And several Japanese front-line fighter squadrons would be pulled back to protect Balikpapan's vulnerable petroleum processing plants and harbor facilities, a measure that prevented their use elsewhere in the region.

General Douglas MacArthur, who commanded the Southwest Pacific Area, expressed his pleasure upon learning of the Flying Circus's success by calling it "A Magnificent Performance." Additional recognition came in the form of a Presidential Unit Citation—the first of two earned by the 380th BG during World War II—that recognized the valor of all those who flew the Balikpapan raids. This citation also credited the technical skill and devotion shown by the outfit's ground personnel who tirelessly maintained their aircraft.

Pundits immediately characterized these operations as "The Ploesti of the Pacific" in reference to another long-distance mission flown that August by USAAF bombers halfway across the globe over Romania. On the surface, both actions seemed similar. Ploesti and Balikpapan each involved B-24 Liberators flying thousands of miles to strike enemy oil refineries at low level.

But the similarities end there. Ploesti was a much bigger mission, utilizing 178 bombers and 1,751 crew members. Casualties over Ploesti were greater, too, with 53 aircraft and 500 airmen lost on that bloody day. Only 18 bombers reached Balikpapan during the August raids, but all of them returned safely, some with wounded men on board.

The 380th BG protected MacArthur's southern flank from air bases near Darwin, Australia, until February of 1945. The Flying Circus then picked up its tents and moved to Mindoro, the Philippines, where it joined other Far East Air Force units on long-distance strikes across Formosa, French Indochina, and Hong Kong. The unit was inactivated at Clark Field, Luzon, on February 20, 1946.

Today, the 380th Bombardment Group's raids to Balikpapan in August of 1943 stand on record as the longest distance operational missions flown by USAAF B-24 Liberators during World War II. The aviators who participated in them also set personal records for courage and determination—qualities the United States and its Allies would rely upon until final victory over Japan was won in 1945. □

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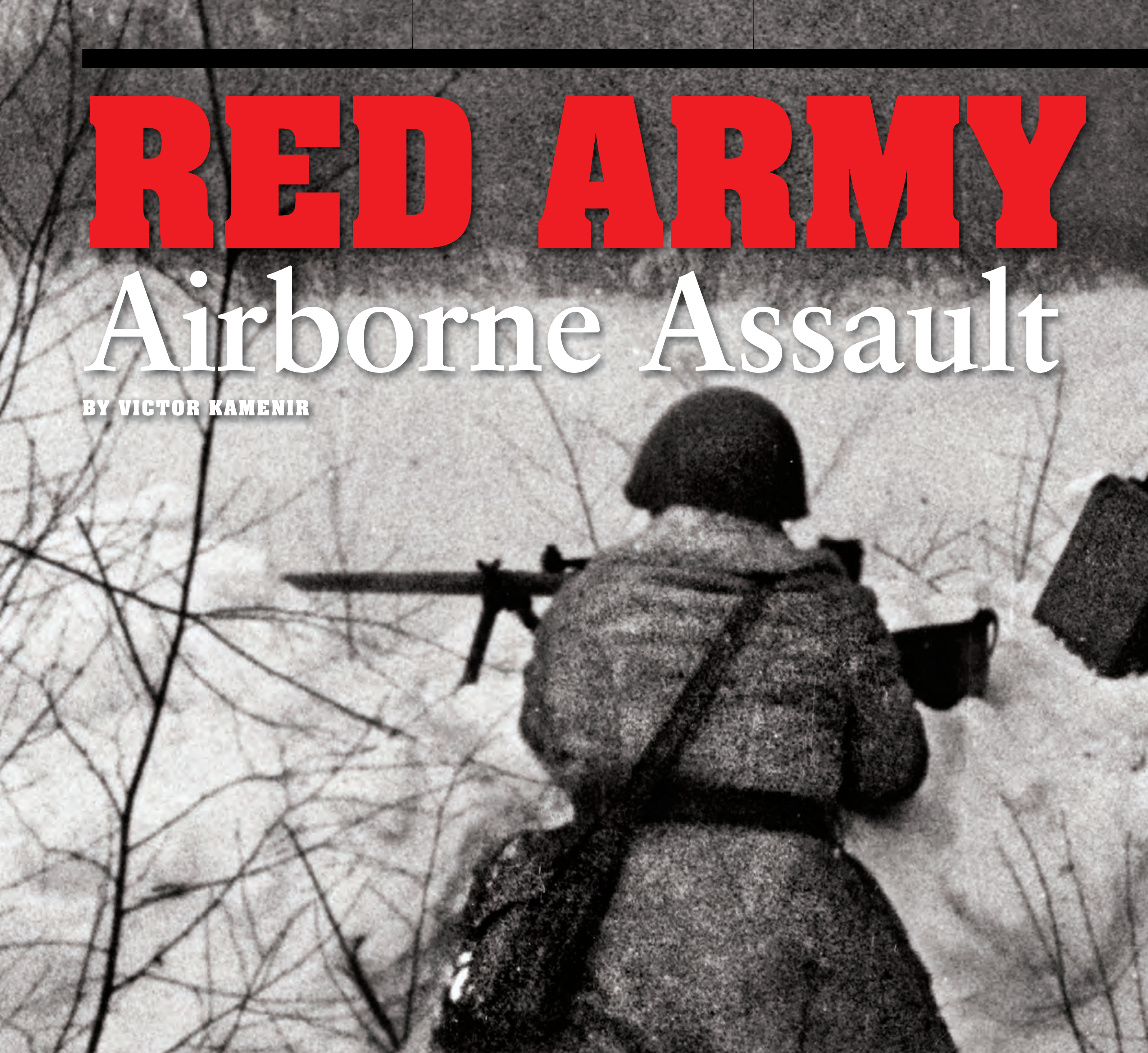
RED ARMY Airborne Assault

BY VICTOR KAMENIR



During the Battles of Rzhev, in early 1942, the Soviet Vyazma Airborne Operation dropped paratroopers behind German lines to cut off and destroy Army Group Center.

Operation Typhoon, Germany's final effort to capture Moscow, ground to a halt within sight of the Soviet capital as the temperatures hovered between -30°F and -40°F in early December 1941. Judging the timing just right, the Soviet Supreme Command launched a massive counteroffensive on December 5 with painstakingly gathered reserves. By the 28th, when Führer and Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler issued a categoric "no retreat" order, the Red Army pushed the German Army Group Center up to 200 miles from Moscow.

Soviet troops holding off Germans on the outskirts of Moscow during Operation Typhoon, Hitler's final push for the Russian capital in early December 1941. The Red Army counterattacked and drove Germany's Army Group Center back some 200 miles, but Stalin demanded a plan to encircle and destroy the Germans—leading to the Vyazma Airborne Operation.

Alamy

ABOVE: A group of Soviet paratroopers photographed some time in 1941. On January 27, 1942, the 4th Airborne Corps began dropping near the village of Ozerechnya. Due to a shortage of transport planes, it took many trips to make the drop. With little fighter cover for the Russians, German fighters shot down many transport planes and seven Tupolev TB-3s were destroyed by airfield bombing. The attacks and the worsening weather forced the Soviets to suspend the rest of the drops. OPPOSITE: A StuG III and other vehicles accompany German infantry on the march to Moscow. Stopped within sight of the Russian Capital in early December of 1941, the Soviet counterattack would push the Germans back some 200 miles by the end of the month. Though this effort left the Red Army spent, Stalin insisted that they try to encircle and destroy the retreating enemy. The Vyazma Airborne Operation—dropping paratroopers behind German lines was meant to accomplish this and, though it had some initial success, the operation suffered more than a few setbacks.

Despite the counterattack faltering in the face of significant casualties and hampered by heavy snowfall, poor roads, and overextended supply lines, Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin wanted the offensive to continue. "Now is the most opportune moment to launch a general offensive," Gen. Georgy Zhukov recalled Stalin's words at the January 5, 1942, meeting in the Kremlin, "The enemy expects to delay our offensive until spring, so that in the spring, having gathered forces, he will again begin active operations. Our task is not to give the Germans this respite, to push them westward without stopping, to force them to use up their reserves before spring."

However, after stabilizing the situation in the north and south, the German High Command rushed men and materiel to reinforce the Army Group Center. The Germans established formidable defenses on approaches to Rzhev and Vyazma with company and battalion-sized defensive sectors at population centers and road junctions up to five miles in depth. Artillery and machine guns covered areas not directly occupied by troops. Overlapping flanking sectors of fire kept the unoccupied spaces under control.

At Stalin's insistence, the Soviet General Staff rapidly developed a plan for a general offensive to encircle and destroy the Army Group Center. Two Soviet army groups, the Western and Kalinin Front, would attack from the north, east, and southeast to close the pincers west of Vyazma and Rzhev to finish the operation in 18 days. The Western Front, the primary Soviet strike force, numbered nine armies and one cavalry corps task force, and the Kalinin Front included four armies and one cavalry corps. Two airborne corps from the Supreme Command Reserves were available to support as needed.

The Red Army held a slight numerical superiority, with 723,000 troops and 528 tanks facing 624,000 Germans with 354 tanks, while the artillery was at parity at almost 11,000 pieces per side. Operationally, a Soviet army was numerically roughly equivalent to one–and–a–half German corps, while a German field army was comparable to half or a full Soviet front.

The Kalinin Front under General Ivan Konev went on the offensive with the 29th and 39th Armies on January 8 from the north with explicit orders to take Rzhev no later than January 12. The attack breached the German lines, permitting the 22nd Army and the 11th Cavalry Corps to enter the gap. By the end of the week, the cavalry corps had advanced up to 60 miles to the south to reach the vicinity of Sychevka, creating a critical situation on the left

flank of the German 9th Field Army. However, despite the best efforts of the 29th Army, Konev's forces could not capture Rzhev.

"Leading enemy units conducting an enveloping operation reached the area northwest of Vyazma," recorded Gen. Kurt von Tippelskirch, Chief of Staff of the German 4th Army, "The 9th Field and 4th Tank Armies were almost surrounded. They were supplied by the Smolensk-Vyazma-Rzhev-Olenino railway, which was also threatened by the enemy from the south. If this railway had been cut between Smolensk and Vyazma, then the fate of both armies would have been decided."

Zhukov's Western Front went into action on January 10 with its main efforts on the left wing. Its armies received the mission of destroying the Ykhnov-Medyn German group of forces and continuing northwest to link up with the Kalinin Front southwest of Vyazma, a crucial railroad and highway nexus tying the Army Group Center with the rear. The plans called for all-arms armies to create a breach in German lines to allow Lt.Gen. Pavel Belov's maneuver group to exploit the breakthrough and conduct a deep raid northwest, trapping the bulk of Army Group Center.

In addition to the five cavalry divisions of his 1st Guards Cavalry Corps, Belov received two rifle divisions, a tank brigade, and five ski battalions. With less than 20 armored vehicles, the tank brigade was a brigade in name only. Nonetheless, the total strength under Belov's command numbered 20,000 soldiers.

The lack of tanks and artillery ammunition reduced Soviet efforts on the Western Front to bloody frontal attacks through deep snow that produced only minor gaps in the German defenses. Zhukov, a former Czarist NCO who was not above punching an offender in the face, relentlessly drove his forces forward regardless of casualties.

The Soviet Supreme Command decided to conduct two airborne landings behind German lines to assist the ground forces. Zhukov tasked one airborne task force to insert on January 18 near Znamenka-Zhelanya, roughly halfway between Vyazma and the Warsaw Highway (modern A-130 Highway). The airborne force would then break into two groups, with one element assisting Belov in breaching the German lines along the Warsaw Highway to break into operational maneuver space northwest toward Vyazma. The second element would help the 33rd Army under Lt. Gen. Mikhail Yefremov, attacking frontally from the east, to encircle and destroy German forces around Yukhnov.

The Headquarters of the Western Front Air Force and the Headquarters of the Airborne Forces developed a three-stage operation at Znamenka-Zhelanya. In the first stage, a parachute landing force would seize an airfield at Znamenka, followed two-and-half hours later by a command-and-control group to prepare the airfield to receive the airmobile force in the third stage. Twenty-one PS-84 civilian aircraft, an American Douglas DC-3 produced under license in the Soviet Union, and three Tupolev TB-3 heavy bombers hurriedly modified to transport

Polish National Archives

45-mm antitank guns staged at the Vnukovo Airport near Moscow.

Two battalions from the 201st Airborne Brigade and the 250th Airmobile Regiment, both from the 5th Airborne Corps, received the mission. From the beginning of the invasion, German airborne units had mainly fought as regular infantry, suffering heavy casualties. The 201st Airborne Brigade was a veteran unit but severely understrength due to losses, and many of its replacements had limited or no airborne training. The 250th Airmobile Regiment, referred to in various documents as an airborne or a rifle regiment, was a recently converted regular rifle unit and not airborne-qualified.

A lack of aircraft was a limiting factor. The planned parachute group numbered 452 soldiers armed with 38 machine guns, 11 mortars, and 6 antitank rifles. The 250th Airmobile Regiment numbered over 1,200 troops armed with 68 machine guns and two 45-mm antitank guns. Each TB-3 could accommodate 30-35 fully armed and equipped soldiers, while a PS-84 could carry 20. It would require nearly 100 flights to deliver the full allocated force, along with its equipment and supplies.

At 3:30 a.m. on January 18, the first flights began taking off from the Vnukovo Airport. As they neared the designated drop zones, heavy antiaircraft fire forced the pilots to gain altitude before giving the green light to drop. High altitude and strong winds scattered the paratroopers from Capt. Ivan Surzhik's 1st Battalion and Capt. Nikolai Kalashnikov's 2nd Battalion over a wide area. Those soldiers who reached their designated rally points often found no one there to direct them further. As groups formed, they moved off in different directions without coordination.

By the morning of January 19, fewer than half of the men from the two battalions had assembled at the drop zone near Znamenka. Captain Surzhik assumed command of both units and made contact with local partisans, who attempted to find and bring in scattered paratroopers.

Without waiting for all his men to gather, Surzhik attacked the Znamenka airfield, but failed to take it in the face of heavy German resistance.

As the attack on Znamenka faltered, Surzhik was informed by partisans of an inactive airstrip nearby. Assisted by partisans and local residents, the paratroopers cleared the snow from the runway, and on the evening of January 19, four PS-84 aircraft landed with 65 men from the airfield command-and-control element. Without snow skis, however, all four aircraft became stuck in the deep snow and were destroyed by German air attacks the next day. Under continued German pressure, the command-and-control element abandoned the airstrip and linked up with Surzhik's main force.

Again with the help of partisans and local residents, the paratroopers prepared a makeshift airstrip two miles west of Zhelanya. Within hours, aircraft carrying the men from Maj. Nikolai Soldatov's 250th Airmobile Regiment began to arrive. Despite sporadic German shelling and air attacks, by the end of January 22, some 1,011 men with two 45-mm antitank guns, 24 mortars, 71 machine guns, and six antitank rifles had been delivered.

Soldatov, as the senior officer present, assumed command of both the airborne and airmobile elements. Before Soldatov's command was fully assembled, he received orders by radio on January 20 from Zhukov to send a detachment to Liudkovo, 20 miles southwest of Ukhnov, to help Belov's task force break through the Warsaw Highway.

Instead of sending Belov into an existing gap to exploit operational maneuver space, Zhukov committed Belov's formation to the front lines to create a breach of his own. With

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ABOVE: Soviet troops on skis, a necessity in Russia's brutal winter. During the first airborne jump in late January 1942, the Red Army lost most of the 34 tons of equipment it dropped for the men—including 500 pairs of skis, 400 sleds, 8,000 mortar bombs, 21,000 hand grenades, and 300,000 rounds of ammunition dropped. The Germans recovered some of the gear and set up ambushes for paratroopers trying to retrieve it. On January 19, four PS-84 aircraft landed on a cleared runway with 65 men from the airfield command-and-control element. Without skis, though, all four planes got stuck in the deep snow and were destroyed by German air attacks the next day. OPPOSITE: Soviet paratroopers execute perfectly in assault training in mild weather, during daylight. Their jumps during the Vyazma Airborne Operation were done at night, in subzero temperatures. In addition to a shortage of transport aircraft, communications were poor and fighter support almost non-existent. German aircraft and flak forced many planes to drop their paratroopers from 1,000 feet or more, often nowhere near the target drop zone.

no ammunition for heavier artillery and his few tanks unable to maneuver in deep snow, Belov was forced to commit his infantry and dismounted cavalrymen to frontal attacks. To ensure success, Zhukov sent his deputy, Lt. Gen. Georgy Zakharov, who promptly executed five battalion and regimental commanders who failed to achieve their objectives.

With no assistance from Surzhik, who halted eight miles north of Liudkovo, Belov achieved the first breakthrough across the Warsaw Highway on January 26. Every time a sizable cavalry force made it across, the Germans attacked with tanks along the highway, closing the gap. On January 30, the Germans closed the gap permanently, cutting off Belov's rear echelons, heavy artillery, the tank brigade, and the two rifle divisions. Belov went into the raid with only five depleted cavalry divisions and five ski battalions, barely numbering 7,000 men, few mortars, and 76-mm regimental guns with limited ammunition.

The cavalry reconnaissance patrols found Surzhik on January 28. Guided by Surzhik's men, Belov finally linked up with Soldatov on January 31 and assumed command of both the airborne and cavalry elements.

In the meantime, Soldatov continued hit-and-run attacks against smaller German garrisons and sabotaging railways and roads, causing severe disruptions in German resupply efforts. Heavy snowfall frequently prevented trucks from moving on the roads, and the Germans increasingly relied on horse-drawn transport. "Only two days and the army will start starving to death," recorded commander of the 4th Field Army Gen. Gotthard Heinrici in his diary.

The second airborne task force, Major General Aleksei Levashov's 4th Airborne Corps would drop in the area of Ozerechnya, 25 miles southwest of Vyazma, with the mission of cutting the Vyazma-Smolensk railway and highway and assisting in the capture of Vyazma. On January 17, Levashov, who had been promoted to major-general and corps command just two months prior, received orders to move his corps to three airfields near Kaluga for deployment on January 21.

As the trains carrying paratroopers reached the town of Aleksin 30 miles east of Kaluga on the Oka River, Levashov discovered the bridge over the river destroyed. Levashov's men and equipment had to disembark on the east side of the river, cross to the west bank over ice, and re-board the trains for the trip's final leg. The delay postponed the operation until January 27.

As the 33rd Army's renewed offensive on Vyzama began on January 26, aircraft allocated for deployment of the 4th Airborne Corps staged at three airfields near Kaluga. The aircraft group numbered 22 TB-3s, 39 PS-84s, and 19 fighters. Insufficient shelter to accommodate all the men and equipment forced the paratroopers to pack their parachutes and equipment containers on the snow in the open air.

The increased activity did not go unnoticed by German air reconnaissance, which had

operated from Kaluga airfields just a month before. In the late afternoon of January 26, German aircraft conducted three attacks on one of the airfields, destroying nine TB-3s and two fighters and damaging five more TB-3s.

In the afternoon of January 27, seven reconnaissance groups of 20-30 men parachuted two hours before the first flights carrying the leading elements of the 8th Airborne Brigade.

The 2nd Battalion under Captain Mikhail Karnaukhov dropped first to prepare a landing zone for the rest of the brigade. Many aircraft crews lost direction and the battalion dropped near the Tabory village, 10 miles south of Ozerechnya. High winds scattered paratroopers over a wide area. Karnaukhov, the sixth man to leave his aircraft, landed in a deep snow bank. After freeing himself from his parachute, the captain fired a red flare, signaling his men to rally on him.

By the morning of January 28, Karnaukhov had gathered almost 300 men from the 648 who dropped with him and set off toward Ozerechnya. As the men struggled through the deep snow, sounds of more plane engines and antiaircraft fire sounded from the direction of the village. In the second echelon, leading elements of the 3rd Battalion under Major Kobetz descended directly over German-occupied Ozerechnya, and many paratroopers were shot in the air or immediately upon hitting the ground. Several men who landed in the Ozerechnya were hung by the Germans using the men's parachute suspension lines. Searching for paratroopers, the Germans burned down several villages to deny them shelter and evicted the hapless civilians out in the snow.

Nadezhda Ilina, from the Panasye village three miles east of Ozerechnya, was 14 at the time. "There was a cemetery next to Panasye," she remembered, "In this cemetery, there were centuries-old fir trees—huge ones. A German sniper was sitting in these trees… The paratroopers—I don't know how, on skis or on foot … one by one, they climbed the hill, and so the sniper mowed them all down. Twelve people. We saw them later; they lay in the snow as they walked—in a row."

High winds and navigation errors scattered the majority of the 3rd Battalion paratroopers much farther to the west, to be either wiped out or join the partisans. After gathering around 300 of his men, Kobetz linked up with Karnaukhov. The combined detachment located a suitable drop zone for the follow-on echelons and lit signal fires in a pre-arranged pattern. While more paratroopers dropped over the following day, many aircraft returned without delivering their loads, unable to spot signal fires due to bad weather.

Radioman Private Vasiliy Gramma, carrying a shortwave radio station "Sever" (North), found Karnaukhov several hours after landing. However, Gramma's signal platoon commander Lt. Vlasov—who carried the code books—was missing. "Karnaukhov ordered the immediate establishment of contact with the [corps headquarters]," Gramma remembered, "We explained that we did not have all the codes, that we only knew the frequency and call sign. However, we tried to establish contact and received a response. However, we could

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ABOVE: A Soviet propaganda poster of heroic cossacks charging against the invading Germans. Formed in August 1941, a cavalry unit commanded by Maj. Gen. Lev Dovator fought in the defense of Moscow. Early in the war, numerous Red Army cavalry divisions acted independently—even mounting sabre charges, despite their vulnerability to machine guns and artillery. Later, these units became part of Cavalry Mechanized Groups equipped with tanks, artillery, and other motorized equipment in addition to their horses. OPPOSITE: A German mortar crew loads their tube in the bitter cold of Vyazma, Russia, in late 1941 or early 1942. With no winter camouflage, some of the men have resorted to painting their helmets white.

not provide authentication when [corps headquarters] requested it. We continued trying for the next two days, but the [corps headquarters] stopped answering. Only on the third day, when Lieutenant Vlasov, who landed the farthest, arrived, it was possible to establish contact." Communications improved further when the brigade command group headed by Col. Aleksandr Onufriev dropped on January 31.

Constant German attacks against Kaluga airfields and technical difficulties left only two TB-3s and 10 PS-84s still operational, further delaying the deployment of paratroopers. Of the 3,062 men from three of the four battalions from the 8th Airborne Brigade who dropped behind German lines, only 2,323 soldiers gathered around Karnaukhov and Kobetz.

Likewise, of more than 34 tons of equipment, including 500 pairs of skis, 400 sleds, 8,000 mortar bombs, 21,000 hand grenades, and 300,000 rounds of ammunition dropped, only a small portion was recovered. It was vital for lightly armed paratroopers to find their airdropped supply containers with equipment and ammunition. However, the Germans also actively hunted for them and, in some instances, set up ambushes near discovered containers, inflicting heavy casualties on paratroopers attempting to retrieve them.

Between February 1 and 3, the 11th Cavalry Corps, the 33rd Army, and Task Force Belov made uncoordinated and unsupported attacks on Vyazma, failing to come closer than eight miles to the city. Soviet armies, having exhausted all their offensive capabilities, went on the defensive. Zhukov, now in command of the Western Direction, composed of Kalinin, Western, and Bryansk Fronts, retaining personal control of the Western Front, canceled further deployment of the 4th Airborne Corps.

The German 9th Army's successful counterattacks closed the breech west of Rzhev, trapping the bulk of Kalinin Front's 29th and 39th Armies and the 11th Cavalry Corps. A similar counterattack by the 4th Panzer Army cut off and encircled four leading divisions of the 33rd Army in two pockets, with three divisions trapped with the army commander Yefremov and one division, the 329th Rifle, with the Army's Chief-of-Staff General Aleksei Kondratyev.

Slackening pressure from the front permitted the German command to concentrate on destroying Soviet forces cut off in the rear of the Army Group Center. The situation of the surrounded Soviet forces was desperate, with food and ammunition running out and the number of wounded increasing. During the heavy fighting in the fall of 1941, destroyed Red Army units abandoned large numbers of weapons and equipment in the fields and surrounded woods, and trapped units searched for serviceable weapons and ammunition.

Zhukov maintained close radio contact with trapped units, issuing minute directions without knowing the situation on the

Local Russian partisans on the attack in early 1942. These groups helped find and bring in scattered airborne soldiers and proved effective fighters with the paratroopers and cavalry against German infrastructure and smaller units.

Archives of Moscow

ground. On one occasion, after advising Zhukov post-fact about a routine relocation of his headquarters, Belov received a sharp rebuke: "Who gave you the authority to make independent decisions?"

On February 6, Zukhov subordinated the 8th Airborne Brigade to Belov, but a strong German presence between the two forces did not permit the link-up until February 15. Two hundred paratroopers, which Belov gathered as his task force moved behind the enemy lines, significantly bolstered the airborne brigade, which was down to 380 men by this time. Belov and Yefremov, commander of the 33rd Army, maintained close radio contact, but Zhukov did not permit them to link up, considering it unnecessary.

Often in conjunction with partisans, the paratroopers and the cavalrymen attacked German infrastructure and small units and carried out ambushes and acts of sabotage. Movement was possible mainly at night, hiding in forests during the day from German aviation. When the situation permitted, a rough landing strip would be laid out in the woods, allowing light U-2 aircraft to land in the occupied territory, bringing in meager supplies and instructions and taking out small numbers of wounded.

On February 12, Belov requested and received permission to recruit locally, and soon, his command gathered 2,417 local residents and soldiers from previously destroyed units hiding among the locals. However, there were barely enough weapons to arm half of them.

The Germans, steadily breaking up and eliminating small Red Army units, burned local villages to deny the soldiers provisions and support. In one such action on February 11, the Germans surrounded and wiped out a detachment under the 8th Airborne Brigade's chief of staff, Lt. Col. Nikolai Sagaidachyi, in the village of Kurdyumovo. After the paratroopers lay dead, the Germans gathered and shot most of the villagers and burned the village to the ground. It was never rebuilt.

During another fight, Lieutenant Vladimir Shaulin fell wounded, and one of his men dragged him into nearby bushes. "Sometime later I woke up—silence," remembered Shaulin, "Only sporadic, 'bang, bang.' I see the Germans walking across the field, finishing off our seriously wounded. The 2nd Battalion, one and a half kilometers away, was in trouble, our battalion went to their aid, but the wounded were left behind… while you carry away one wounded man, dozens will die..."

Even with the local recruits, the five cavalry divisions of Belov's corps by mid-February numbered less than 6,000 men and he consolidated the corps into two divisions. In the 8th Airborne Brigade, in contact with Belov and under his nominal command, barely 1,300 remained under arms.

Between February 17-23, the Soviet Supreme Command launched an operation to rescue the surrounded forces. The 43rd Army attempted and failed to breach the German lines to reach the dying 33rd Army. The remnants of the 250th Airmobile Regiment, whittled down to less than 150 effectives, merged with the 329th Rifle Division.

The remainder of the 4th Airborne Corps, the 9th and 214th Airborne Brigades, and the fourth battalion of the 8th Airborne Brigade parachuted in the area of Zhelanye, east of Ugra railroad station. During the night of February 17, the first group of 20 TB-3s carried a battalion from the 214th Airborne Brigade. Nineteen aircraft could not find the drop zone

ABOVE: Colonel Aleksandr Kazankin, the 4th Airborne Corps Chief of Staff, center, assumed command after Maj. Gen. Levashov was killed by a German fighter attacking his PS-84 transport plane on February 23. Some 7,373 paratroopers dropped that day, but fewer than half of them rallied at the drop zones. TOP: Soviet paratroopers in front of a TB-3 bomber transport. Though they had more on paper, there were only 39 PS-84 transport planes and 22 TB-3 bomber transports—and only 19 fighters—available for the January 27 jump. German aircraft attacks on planes and airfields, as well as technical difficulties, left only two TB-3s and 10 PS-84s still operational by January 31, further delaying the deployment of paratroopers.

and returned. One plane dropped its stick of paratroopers, but the men never linked up with the battalion and were never heard from again.

On February 23, a German fighter strafed the PS-84 carrying the 4th Airborne Corps command element, killing Maj. Gen. Levashov. The corps' Chief-of-Staff, Col. Aleksandr Kazankin, assumed command. By the end of the day some 7,373 men had dropped, along with 1,524 containers of equipment. As earlier, less than half of them rallied at the drop zones, with the rest scattered over a wide area. Dozens of women in each airborne brigade, mainly doctors, nurses, and radio operators, jumped into combat alongside the men and shared all the dangers with them.

"On February 25, the Hitlerites launched a determined offensive," remembered Belov, "Their tanks and infantry dealt strong blows to the right and left flanks of our troops... I had no free reserves." A German attack cut off the 41st Cavalry Division from the 11th Cavalry Corps, and the bulk of the 8th Airborne Brigade and Belov issued orders to their commanders to break out on their own.

On February 27, Belov's leading battalions captured the Kyuchi village 10 kilometers north of the Warsaw highway and reached the area designated to link up with the 50th Army the next day. However, the attack of the 50th Army had stalled several miles south of the highway.

By mid-March, 400 survivors from the 329th Rifle Division and the 250th Airmobile Regiment broke out of the encirclement. The division's commander, Col. Kornei Andrusenko, unjustly accused of "division's inactivity," was sentenced to a firing squad. However, the sentence was reduced to 10 years of imprisonment with a reduction in rank to major and return to active duty. By the end of the war, Andrusenko regained the rank of a colonel, never having to serve his sentence, but his career was ruined. Major Soldatov received command of the reconstituted 329th Rifle Division. He retired in 1964 with the rank of Lieutenant-General.

As the Army Group Center launched Operation Hanover to eliminate the threat to its rear areas, the situation of the surrounded troops continued deteriorating

through April and May. Starving soldiers would rush under fire toward fallen Germans, hoping to find food in their backpacks or pockets. Without fodder, cavalry horses turned into skin-covered skeletons. When soldiers butchered a dying horse, they frequently were forced to eat the meat raw because cooking fires would bring German artillery and mortars.

The trapped divisions of the 33rd Army ceased to exist as an organized force. Caught in an ambush on April 19, the division's commander, Lt. Gen. Mikhail Yefremov, was seriously wounded and committed suicide rather than being taken prisoner. The Germans recovered the general's body and buried him with full honors. Fewer than 900 survivors from the four surrounded divisions of the 33rd Army made it back to their own lines.

Nonetheless, the Soviet troops caused major disruptions behind the enemy lines. "The only transportation route is under imminent threat by the enemy on a width of 20 km. Airborne troops, skiing battalions and masses of partisans are in the Army's rear… enemy airplanes are flying every night over our houses and reinforce their Army in our rear…," Heinrici wrote to his wife on March 9, "...With difficulties our vehicles secure the villages that are between the enemy and our transportation routes. This is no longer just a little nuisance but a new army composed of airborne officers, partisans, former prisoners, and commissars from the population."

By the end of May, when Zhukov subordinated the 4th Airborne Corps to Belov, of the 2,000 remaining paratroopers, only slightly more than 1,500 were combat-capable, and the strength of the 1st Guards Cavalry Corps was roughly the same. As the weather improved, the tempo of German efforts to eliminate the surrounded forces increased.

The Soviet Supreme Command made another attempt to assist the breakout, and between May 29 and June 3, more than 4,000 men from the 23rd and 211th Airborne Brigades from the 5th Airborne Corps parachuted behind German lines.

The paratroopers descended into hell. "We didn't even have time to collect parachutes when machine guns opened fire on us from

Bundesarchiv Bild 183-B18095; Photo: Geller

every side, and the paratroopers standing next to me fell, struck by bullets," remembered Lt. Mikhail Bogatskiy, "We dropped our parachutes and rushed into the nearest forest, and at that time mortar shelling also began at our drop zone… We had only walked about half a kilometer when we were ambushed; cannons and mortars fired at us, and machine guns hit us from a distance of some 100 meters. We entered into a firefight and, with losses, retreated into the forest."

With the weather improving, German spotter aircraft searched for groups of paratroopers to call in artillery fire and vector on ground forces. Groups large enough to defend themselves couldn't be hidden. Smaller groups could hide, but lacked the numbers to fight effectively. Units lost all the cohesion, and the Germans methodically pursued and finished off isolated groups. Like drops of mercury, groups would merge, wander the forests, and shatter again under German attacks, "…there was always someone being killed nearby." When Bogatsky ran out of ammunition for his PPSh submachine gun, he picked up a rifle on a battlefield. He continued carrying the empty PPSh for fear that if and when he reached their own lines, he would be shot for losing his assigned weapon.

In early June, Belov gathered some 2,500 survivors in the woods north of the Warsaw Highway. Paratroopers from the 5th Airborne Corps, the last to deploy, spearheaded the breakout on June 14. "We were fired upon from all sides, we shot at the Germans point-blank with our last rounds of ammunition, stabbed them with bayonets, we could hear screams and swearing all around us," remembered Bogatskiy, "A comrade was running next to me, a bullet hit him

Russian soldiers marching into German captivity in March 1942. Other Soviets who fought on in the salient along the Kalinin Front—includng all the 39th Army and the 11th Cavalry Corps, as well as parts of five divisions and one tank brigade from the 22nd and 41st Armies—were surrounded and largely destroyed southwest of Rzhev by July 5.

in the chest, he only managed to say: 'Mama'... and fell dead to the ground... And we continued forward, without stopping, without picking up the seriously wounded, everyone was shouting, swearing, and shooting, until we realized that we had broken through."

Small groups and in ones and twos, the survivors continued straggling into the Soviet lines until the end of June. Belov was promoted to command the 61st Army while the 1st Guard Cavalry Corps was reconstituted from survivors, rear echelons which did not participate in the raid, and three cavalry divisions assigned while the corps operated behind the German lines. The qualified surviving parachutists of the 4th Airborne Corps were reassigned to other airborne formations while the corps itself was reconstituted as the 38th Guards Rifle Division.

With the nuisance of the paratroopers and Belov's cavalry eliminated, on July 2, the 9th Field Army launched Operation Seydlitz to liquidate the salient held by the forces of the Kalinin Front. By July 5, all of the 39th Army and the 11th Cavalry Corps, as well as parts of five divisions and one tank brigade from the 22nd and 41st Armies, were surrounded and largely destroyed southwest of Rzhev in Operation Hanover II. As the result of Operations Hanover and Hanover II, partisan detachments in the areas of Rzhev-Vyazma were decimated and their activities had minimal impact behind the German lines until the next spring.

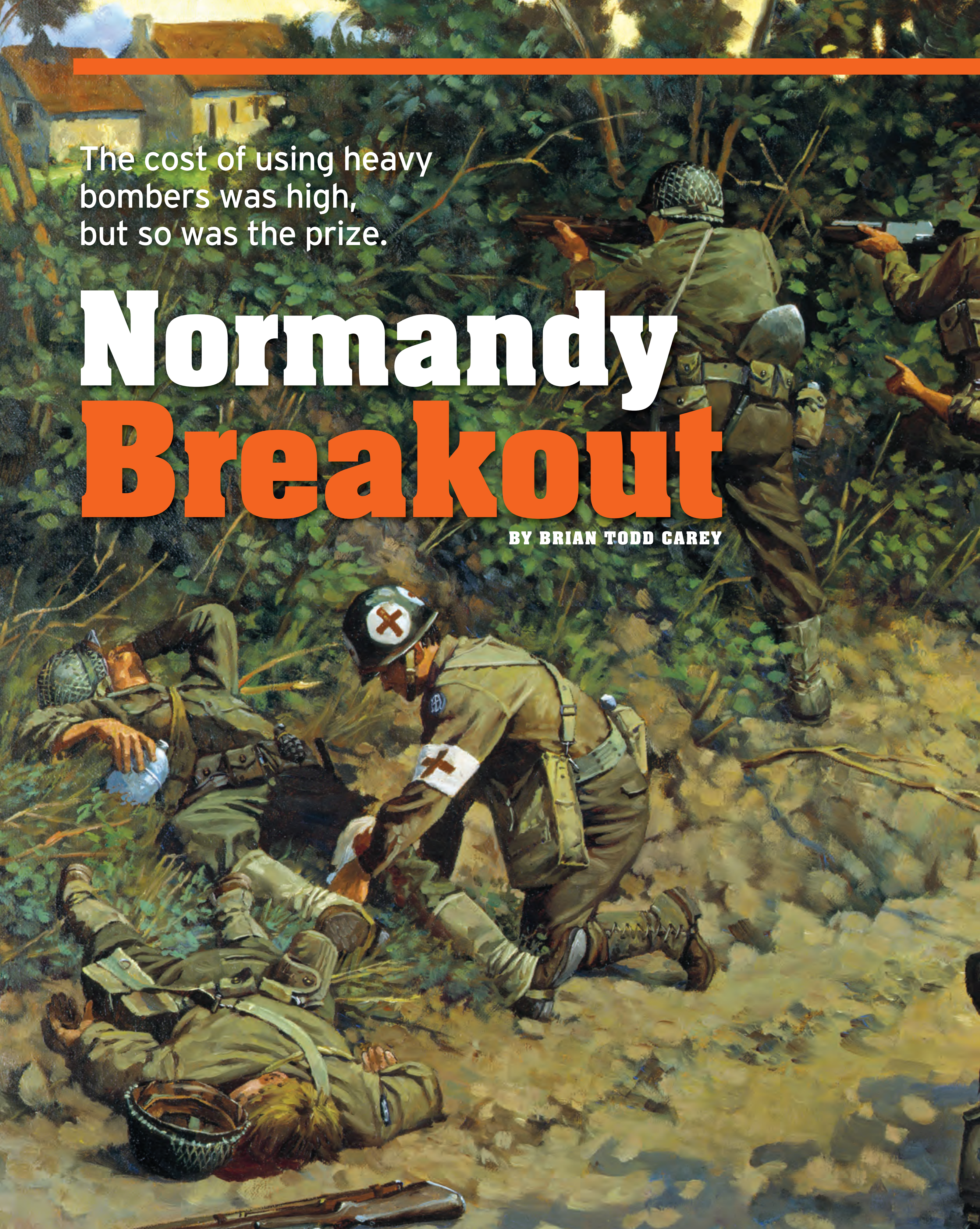
Defensive lines along the Rzhev-Vyazma salient stabilized and largely remained static until the spring of 1943, when the Germans withdrew to avoid being surrounded after Rzhev was liberated on March 5 and Vyazma on March 12.

The hurriedly conceived and poorly executed ground-airborne offensive failed for multiple reasons. The Soviet General Staff and Stalin, the driving force behind the operation, underestimated the enemy's capabilities. Despite numerous partisan and reconnaissance detachments operating behind the German lines, Soviet planners did not have a clear picture of the situation on the ground and enemy dispositions. Instead of concentrating an overwhelming force in one sector, Zhukov attacked along three separate axes. Insufficient armor and artillery assets prevented concentration of strength at key locations, forcing infantry formations into costly frontal attacks in deep snow.

Lack of dedicated transport aviation and inexperience of air crews greatly delayed the deployment of the airborne units. Thus, the planned rapid massive parachute landing did not happen, losing the element of surprise. The PS-84 passenger aviation crews, the military bomber crews and the paratroopers all used different radio frequencies and protocols, hampering coordination and cooperation.

Despite failing to destroy the Army Group Center, the Red Army advanced up to 150 miles and completely liberated the Moscow and Tula regions and parts of the Smolensk and Kalinin regions. The operation was one of the bloodiest battles of World War II, with the Red Army suffering (according to official numbers, which hid the true scale of the disaster) 776,889 casualties, including 272,320 killed or injured seriously enough to be unable to serve. The German casualties were significantly lower at almost 200,000 soldiers. The true events of the Rzhev-Vyazma operation were taboo in Soviet military history until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Zhukov, one of the architects of the disaster, failed to mention the airborne operation in his memoirs. □

Victor Kamenir is the author of The Bloody Triangle: The Defeat of Soviet Armor in the Ukraine *and a frequent contributor to* WWII History *and* Military Heritage *magazines.*



The cost of using heavy bombers was high, but so was the prize.

Normandy Breakout

BY BRIAN TODD CAREY

The Americans' path out of the Cotentin Peninsula was blocked by the German Panzer Lehr Division. Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley proposed Operation Cobra—using American heavy bombers to clear the way for a breakout from Normandy.

Painting by Keith Rocco, www.keithrocco.com

All Photos: National Archives

ABOVE: Scheduled to be captured on D-Day by Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's British Second Army, the French city of Caen was defended by the German Panzergruppe West and held out until August 6, 1944, despite being heavily bombed twice by the RAF. OPPOSITE: U.S. Sherman tanks move past destroyed German Mark IV panzers as the 30th Infantry Division moves on St. Lo. on July 9, 1944. By July 26th, with the help of carpet bombing during Operation Cobra, the Americans were able to break through and continue toward Berlin.

On June 6, 1944 the Allies opened the Second Front against Nazi Germany. Concentrated against the beaches of Normandy, Operation Overlord landed 20 army divisions plus support troops on five beaches in anticipation of a breakout across France and toward Berlin. American forces landed on the two western beaches, Utah and Omaha, while British and Canadian troops landed farther east on beaches designated Gold, Juno, and Sword. Overall command of Allied ground forces was assigned to Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, while Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley commanded the American Twelfth Army.

Although Allied air forces controlled the skies over the 50-mile front, bombing and strafing could not silence the well-entrenched German guns, especially on Omaha Beach, where casualties numbered 2,000 in contrast to 210 on Utah. Farther east, British and Canadian troops met with less resistance and suffered fewer casualties than the Americans. By day's end, close to 150,000 Allied troops and their accompanying vehicles, equipment, munitions, and provisions were unloaded. Within a week the troop buildup numbered half a million men. By June 10, the separate beachheads had been consolidated into a single front; the Americans were making ground inland and toward the city of Cherbourg on the Cotentin Peninsula. Montgomery's forces, having beaten back panzer counterattacks, pushed toward the city of Caen. By late July, two million men and 250,000 vehicles were ashore in Normandy.

Despite the massive infusion of men and materiel, the planned Allied breakout across France bogged down in Normandy, where thickly banked hedgerows, or *bocages*, provided the German defenders with excellent antitank positions. This slowing of Allied momentum helped the Germans reinforce Normandy with infantry divisions from the Wehrmacht's First and Nineteenth Armies. The Americans took Cherbourg on June 27, but despite heavy RAF bombardment the British assault on Caen (Operation Epsom, June 21-July 1) was halted by the German Army.

In an attempt to break German resistance around Caen, Montgomery ordered a carpet bombing of the area. During the July 7 air operation 457 Halifax and Lancaster bombers dropped 3,000 tons of high explosives in front of the British Army still on the outskirts of the city. Because the bombs were mainly 1,100-pounders, they created craters 20 feet across and filled the streets of the city with the wreckage of stone buildings. The British were able to fight

into the city, but were blocked from moving beyond it by craters and rubble.

On July 18 the British, this time aided by planes from the U.S. Eighth Air Force, tried carpet bombing again, this time with 1,676 heavy and 343 medium and light bombers. The goal was to blow a hole in the German defenses so that Montgomery could push 700 tanks through and onto the Falaise Plain (Operation Goodwood, July 18-20), thence to secure an opening toward Paris. But the German defenders again rode out the bombardment and stopped the British offensive, destroying half the British tanks in the process.

Meanwhile, Bradley's Twelfth Army pushed south to the crucial crossroads town of St. Lo where the German Panzer Lehr Division blocked the Americans' path out of the Cotentin Peninsula. With the failure of Goodwood and the tenacious stand of the Panzer Lehr Division came the real possibility that the intended Allied breakout of Normandy would never be realized. To break the stalemate outside St. Lo, Bradley proposed using American heavy bombers to blow the Germans out of the way. Operation Cobra was Bradley's third attempt to escape from the constricted neck of the Cotentin Peninsula. The first attempt, begun on July 3, had been checked by the hard fighting of the enemy's infantry along the floodline of the Douvre River. The second, begun on July 13, had after five days resulted in the capture of the crucial crossroad town of St. Lo, but at the cost of 11,000 casualties. Operation Cobra would utilize the might of the American heavy bomber fleet to assist the Twelfth Army in breaking out.

Bradley, the chief architect of Cobra, had decided on the plan's outline by July 10 and presented it to his corps commanders two days later. Set for July 21, Operation Cobra would carpet bomb a rectangular area approximately 4 miles long and 1.75 miles deep (7,000 yards by 2,500 yards)—the entire front of Bradley's initial attack. Once the bombs had been dropped, the U.S. 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions would punch a hole through the German defenders.

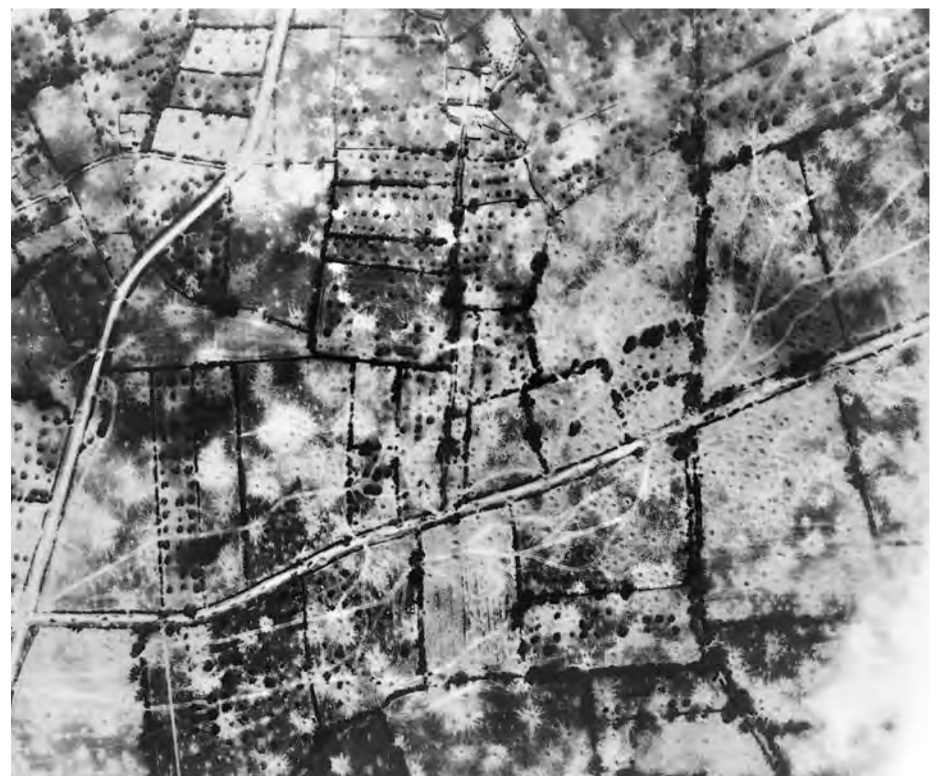
Bradley understood that timing was crucial to Cobra's success. The general wanted a short, intensive bombardment to maximize shock value. He wanted the bombers to approach the target box parallel to the front and along German lines in order to provide a greater security zone for his ground troops. He believed the bombers could attack in the morning from east to west, and in the afternoon, from west to east, to keep the sun in the eyes of German antiaircraft gunners. Immediately after the bombing stopped, the American follow-up attack had to capitalize on the shock. To best do this, Bradley planned to withdraw his troops a mere 800 yards from the front, keeping them close enough to attack quickly and reoccupy conceded space. In order to avoid the huge craters that had slowed the British advance at Caen during Operation Epsom, Bradley required that only 100-pound fragmentation bombs be dropped.

After obtaining Montgomery's approval, Bradley flew to England and presented his plan to Allied air commanders on July 19. In attendance were the Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder, deputy supreme commander for Overlord; Air Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, Commander-in-Chief of Allied Expeditionary Air Force for Overlord; and Carl Spaatz, Supreme Commander of U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe. Bradley asked the men who controlled the skies over the battlefield to give him the air support he needed to break out and continue toward Berlin. He was greeted in England by enthusiasm for his plan. In his memoirs, Bradley commented that "[a]ir's enthusiasm for COBRA almost exceeded that of our own troops on the ground, for air welcomed the St. Lo carpet attack as an unrivaled opportunity to test the feasibility of saturation bombing." He left the meeting with a commitment for 1,500 heavy bombers, almost 900 medium bombers, and some 350 fighter-bombers.

Although the Allied air commanders agreed to the plan for Cobra, they wanted some modifications. The airmen initially wanted a safety zone of 3,000 yards, compared to Bradley's 800. Bradley finally agreed to 1,200 yards, but the heavy bombers would not strike the front edge of the target box. Instead, fighter-bombers would cover this 250 yards. More importantly, Bradley had incorrectly assumed his desire for the bombers to fly a parallel run along the German front had been accepted by all participants of the meeting.

Bad weather forced the postponement of Operation Cobra from July 21 to the 24th. Although the weather on the morning of the 24th proved dubious as well, Leigh-Mallory ordered 1,586 B-17s and B-24s from the Eighth Air Force to support Cobra. Leigh-Mallory himself and other senior airmen flew to Normandy and, after seeing firsthand a 5,000-foot ceiling over the target box, called off the mission and rescheduled it for the next day. But Leigh-Mallory had waited too long to cancel the mission. With bombers only seven minutes from target, calling back all of the airplanes would be impossible. In all, 352 heavy bombers dropped their loads over the target box before finally receiving

ABOVE: A German Fallschirmjäger (paratrooper) in his foxhole behind a hedgerow. The Bocage country of Normandy offered formidable defensive positions; men and weapons were very tough to root out. BELOW: An aerial photograph of the territory after the Cobra bombings showing the immense and concentrated destruction. OPPOSITE: As part of Operation Cobra, American Consolidated B-24 bombers return to England from a run over the battlefront at St. Lo, France, to aid Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley's Twelfth Army in breaking out of the Cotentin Peninsula. During the operation more than 1,500 aircraft dropped more than 4,000 tons of ordnance on the German front lines.



"…it was hell. The planes kept coming overhead like a conveyer belt, and the bomb carpets came down. My front lines looked like a landscape of the moon."

the recall order. And contrary to Bradley's wishes, all the bombers had dropped their loads perpendicular to the front line. Some bombs fell short of their target and on the American 30th Division. Friendly fire killed 25 men and wounded another 131. Moreover, confusion caused by the cancellation of the air phase of Cobra forced Bradley's men to fight again for the ground conceded as a safety zone.

The confusion and tragedy of the July 24 strike can be blamed on many factors. Direct communications between the bombers and the ground troops was nonexistent. Although Leigh-Mallory was physically at Bradley's headquarters near the front, his cancellation order had to be sent back to the Eighth Air Force's Headquarters in England, then sent to Eighth Air Force planes approaching the target area, delaying the execution of his order. Also, Bradley's emphasis on the shock effect of the bombing at the July 19 meeting led Eighth Air Force Headquarters to instruct their planes to bomb at a right angle to the front, thereby ensuring the greatest number of bombers through the short side of the target box in the least amount of time. The perpendicular strike increased the likelihood of friendly-fire casualties, but it also saturated the breakthrough point with bombs in the way Bradley required. Given the choice between a safer, lengthier attack or decreasing the shock value of the carpet bombing, Bradley reluctantly agreed to another perpendicular strike.

The air phase of Operation Cobra began at 10 a.m. on the 25th. Some 1,503 of 1,581 B-17s and B-24s dropped their high explosive and fragmentation bombs on the Panzer Lehr Division. Joining the Eighth Air Force's heavies were medium bombers and fighter-bombers. In total, the air effort dropped more than 4,100 tons on German positions, killing more than a thousand German soldiers, wiping out three battalion command posts, and destroying or severely damaging most of its armor and armored personnel carriers.

The effect of the bombing on the already understrength Panzer Lehr Division was significant. The German division commander, Lt. Gen. Fritz Bayerlein, described the scene outside of St. Lo in a postwar interrogation: "It was hell.... The planes kept coming overhead like a conveyer belt, and the bomb carpets came down.... My front lines looked like a landscape of the moon, and at least seventy percent of personnel were out of action—dead, wounded, crazed, or numb." Bayerlein placed the actual losses of dead and wounded at approximately 50 percent by bombing, 30 percent by artillery, and 20 percent by other weapons.

Still, despite the devastating pattern bombing and the artillery barrage that followed, the Americans were unable to break through the German lines on the 25th. But the American commander opposite the most

Map ©2026 Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis, MN

battered part of the Panzer Lehr Division's lines, Maj. Gen. J. Lawton Collins, shrewdly realized that the German command and control structure had been badly disrupted by the air attack, and planned a full-scale attack the next morning. On the evening of the 25th, Collins brought his VII Corps armor, newly equipped with iron shears to bulldoze the hedgerows, to the front with orders to push through the remaining German defenders at dawn. In the morning the 2nd Armored Division, supported by tactical air and building on the accomplishments of the 30th Infantry Division, cut through the demoralized German defenders. Breakthrough became breakout, and the race to Germany had begun.

The July 26 breakthrough at St. Lo owed its success to aggressive pattern bombing the previous day. Bradley's use of heavy bombers in close air support of ground operations brought the weight of American airpower to bear against a vulnerable opponent at an opportune time. But the success of Operation Cobra was tainted by more friendly-fire incidents. Once again, American bombs acciden-

ABOVE: Army medics tend to some of the 131 30th Division GIs wounded by bombs falling short on July 24 during Operation Cobra. A total of 111 Americans were killed by friendly fire, including Lt. Gen. Leslie J. McNair who had come to Europe to assume command of the newly forming American Ninth Army. Some 490 were wounded. TOP: The carpet bombing of Operation Cobra broke the stalemate at the crucial crossroads town of St. Lo where the German Panzer Lehr Division blocked the path of Gen. Omar Bradley's Twelfth Army out of the Cotentin Peninsula. Once through, the Americans were able to make large territorial gains relatively quickly.

tally hit units in the 30th and 9th Infantry Divisions.

In all, short bombs killed 111 Americans, including Lt. Gen. Leslie J. McNair who had come to Europe to assume command of the newly forming American Ninth Army, and wounded 490 more. Moreover, the close proximity of American troops to the intensive bombing caused 164 post-traumatic shock cases in the 30th Infantry Division, further reducing their combat efficiency.

High-level finger pointing took place as a result of the friendly-fire deaths. General Spaatz tried to place blame on the medium bombers of IX Bomber Command. The Eighth Air Force's own investigation showed the 2nd Air Division was responsible. In his memoirs, Bradley accused the airmen of "duplicity," claiming they had told him the July 25 bombing would be parallel to the road. But Bradley and other ground commanders' failure to pull their troops back from what was known as a very dangerous front raises their culpability. What is certain is that the blame for the short bombings does not rest entirely on any one service. Although there was no "duplicity" on the part of the Army Air Force (in fact, air commanders were reluctant to undertake the operation at all), airmen from Tedder and Leigh-Mallory to the bombardiers themselves deserve some of the blame.

Despite the demoralizing effect close air support had on friendly troops, American ground forces successfully pushed through the battered German defenders. The success of Cobra owed to many factors. Unlike Montgomery's failure in Operation Epsom a month before, Bradley attacked with a much greater force against a critically weaker enemy. The German forces in Normandy had suffered seven weeks of attrition and were split between defending the strategic crossroads at St. Lo and the defense of Caen. Unable to reinforce either sector rapidly due to Allied air interdiction, the German line of defense was vulnerable to puncture without enough ammunition or any Luftwaffe air support.

Both Montgomery and Bradley recognized the utility of using heavy bombers in support of ground troops, but the failure of Allied heavy bombers to break the back of German resistance at Caen (causing considerable collateral damage to French civilian and friendly troops) did not deter Bradley from using them at St. Lo. Although friendly-fire casualties did occur in both operations, it was a relatively small price to pay considering the overall stakes. By July 1944 the breakout of Normandy had stalled, and without a determined Allied combined-arms offensive, the very existence of a Second Front was endangered.

Cobra vividly illustrated the firepower heavy bombers could bring in support of ground troops. Although an inexact science in the summer of 1944, the close air support operations in Normandy were the precursor to heavy bombers being used in later ground support missions in the European Theatre and later in Korea, Vietnam, and the recent Gulf War. Heavy bombers have proved a powerful addition to the arsenal of ground commanders, providing critical offensive mass at crucial moments. □

Cobra's Costly Casualty

As Allied bombs rained down from B-17s and B-24s on their own men to open Operation Cobra, a three-star general was visiting the front lines: Commander of Army Ground Forces Lt. Gen. Lesley J. McNair. He would gain the dubious distinction of being the highest ranking American soldier killed in combat in World War II.

McNair had a long and distinguished career in the Army. In World War I, he served on the staff of the U.S. 1st Division and later in General Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force. In the interwar years he commanded the Command and General Staff School. At the outbreak of World War II he commanded the Army Ground Forces, responsible for training the American Army. He established a new and rigorous system under which units experienced conditions close to actual combat. McNair was responsible for the entire cycle: activation, training and evaluation of all new divisions.

As Allied forces began building up in England for the invasion of Europe, McNair was considered for army group command, but he had one setback that was kept secret throughout the war: Leslie McNair was deaf. Instead, he took over command of the fictitious First Army Group, a fake army that Lt. Gen. George S. Patton had been commanding to make the Germans think Allied forces in Normandy were only a diversion to a larger invasion in Pas-de-Calais.

To increase the deception, and to see if his training methods were effective, McNair visited the front, in hopes of being reported on the continent by the German high command. He was visiting the troops of the 30th Infantry Division when the Allies started dropping bombs on the German front. But soon the bombs began falling short and exploding within the American lines. McNair's body was hurled 80 feet in the air from a slit trench. Medics would not have been able to identify him were it not for the three stars they found on one shoulder.

Although only one of a hundred Americans killed in the attack, McNair was given a funeral in accordance with his rank. The only attendees, however, were Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley, the First Army commander, Lt. Gen. Courtney Hodges, who would soon take over First Army, Maj. Gen. Elwood Quesada, IX Tactical Air commander, Maj. Gen. Ralph Royce, XII Tactical Air commander, McNair's aide-de-camp and Patton. No band played and no shots were fired in salute. His death was kept secret to fool the Germans. Patton recorded in his diary that night a simple epitaph: "He was a great friend."

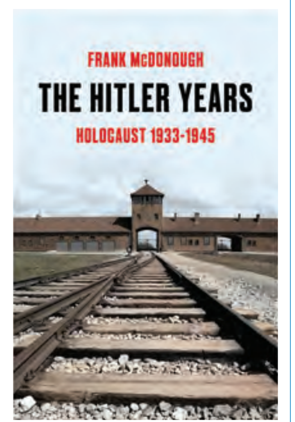
—Ray Denkhaus

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

When U.S. forces with the 42nd and 45th Infantry Divisions and the 20th Armored Division liberated the Dachau Concentraion Camp near Munich on April 29, 1945, soldiers found a multitude of horrors, including more than 30 railroad cars filled with decomposed bodies near the camp entrance.

Like a modern Virgil, McDonough will guide generations of readers through the depths of this dark chapter of history.

The apologue of the "boiling frog," which postulates that an amphibian placed in a pot of tepid water that is gradually heated to the point of boiling won't notice the increase and jump out. Though considered false by modern scientists, it is useful as a metaphor for humanity's capacity for self-delusion and selective ignorance.



That such a concept as a "Holocaust denier" could exist in the 21st century is mind boggling and is the reason that such meticulously researched and accessible works as historian Frank McDonough's *The Hitler Years Holocaust 1933-1945*, the fourth volume in his "Hitler's Germany" series, will always be necessary for future generations willing to not look away.

The series includes *The Weimar Years: Rise and Fall 1918–1933*, detailing pre-Hitler Germany; *The Hitler Years, Volume 1: Triumph, 1933–1939*, a chronicle of Hitler's consolidation of power up to the invasion of Poland; *The Hitler Years, Volume 2: Disaster, 1940–1945*, follows the war, the fall of Germany and the Holocaust.

His clear, concise, factual chronology is unadorned with superlatives—there is no editorial voice nudging the reader as if to say, "look at this, isn't this horrible?" McDonough lays out for a broad audience a chronicle supported by facts, statistics, testimonies and photographs that moves forward with solemnity, in its own gravitational force.

The Hitler Years: Holocaust 1933–1945 (Frank McDonough, Apollo/Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, NY, 416pp., Jan. 27, 2026, $45 HC) moves from the first chapter, "The Persecution Begins' and marches grimly forward: Jewish life under siege; Road to Nuremberg; Racial defilement, emigration and Aryanisation; Escalating violence against Jews; In the ghetto; Mass murder.

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tions of Adolf Hitler's dream of a Third Reich were in place by the end of 1933—including the first concentration camp at Dachau, fully three years before Germany was allowed to host the 1936 Olympic Games for both winter and summer.

After he was appointed Chancellor in January 1933 came the Reichstag Fire Decree in February that suspended essential civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, assembly, and the press, and allowed the regime to imprison political opponents without trial.

The Enabling Act followed in March, granting Hitler the power to legislate without consent of the Reichstag, making him a dictator and effectively ending parliamentary democracy.

Hitler immediately began *Gleichschaltung* (Coordination), the process of infusing all parts of German society—political parties, trade unions, media, and state governments—with Nazi ideology and subject to its control.

By December 1933, only the *Geheime Staatspolizei* (Secret State Police) or Gestapo, for short, created that summer, in conjunction with the regular police force, were allowed to commit prisoners into "protective custody"(*Schutzhaft*).

The main part of the Nazi terror system, the Gestapo only had about 1,000 officers in 1933, though that number would grow to 15,000 by 1939. Ordinary German citizens were its eyes and ears, giving it the fearsome reputation as an "all-powerful thought police."

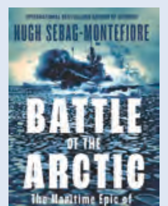
McDonough writes that the concentration camps, known as the *Konzentrationslager*, or "KL," staffed and run by the SS were the second part of the Nazi terror system.

The "protective custody," supposedly simultaneously protected the public from those the Gestapo arrested and protected the arrested from the rest of the population. Gestapo founder Hermann Göring, put it more chillingly. Those who had committed treason and who could be proven to have done so, would be turned over to the police. "The others, however, of whom one might expect such acts, but who had not yet committed them, were taken into protective custody, and these were the people who were taken to the concentration camps."

Only six months later came "The Night of the Long Knives," June 30-July 2, 1934, in which Hitler, at the urging of Göring and Heinrich Himmler, ordered the killings of officially 85, but possibly many more to elim-

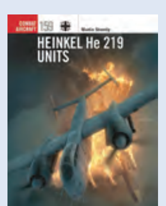
New and Noteworthy

Leatherneck Physician: The Life and Legacy of Rear Admiral Eugene R. Hering, Jr. (Captain Eugene H. Ginchereau, MC, USNR (Ret.) and André B. Sobocinski, McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 120 pp. Jan. 6, 2026 $39.95 HC) The first naval medical officer to serve as the Medical Officer of the Marine Corps, Hering was at the Pusan Perimeter, Inchon, and the Chosin Reservoir.



Battle of the Arctic: The Maritime Epic of World War II (Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, Pegasus Books/Dist. by Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 816 pp., Jan. 6, 2026, $42 HC) The harrowing tale of the Arctic convoys sailing the Arctic Circle to supply war materials to Russia.

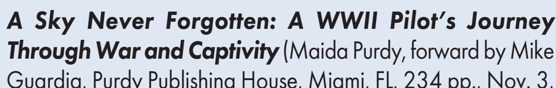
USS Yorktown (CV-10): Essex-Class Carrier in WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Apollo 8 (David Doyle, Schiffer Military History, Atglen, PA, 176 pp., 350 b/w and color photos, Jan. 28, 2026 $29.99 HC) This Legends of Warfare book includes 350 images of the ship during its long naval service.



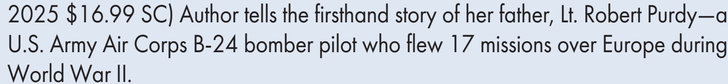
Heinkel He 219 Units (Martin Streetly, illustrated by Gareth Hector and Janusz Swiatlon, Osprey Publishing, New York, NY, 96 pp., color artwork plates and maps, b/w and color photographs and illustrations, Jan. 27, 2026 $25 SC) Combat Aircraft entry on the Heinkel He 219, the Luftwaffe's only purpose-built nightfighter.

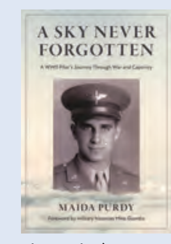
Lighting the Torch: The Tunisian Campaign and Forging an Allied Way of War 1942-43 (Sam Wallace, Helion and Company (Dist. by Casemate), Warwick, England, 208pp., Jan. 31, 2026 $49.95 HC) Covers the WWII Tunisian Campaign, November 1942 to May 1943, where the Allies forces, especially the Americans, "learned to fight."

Bloody Skies: Fifteenth Fighter Command Against All Odds (Thomas McKelvey Cleaver, Osprey Publishing, New York, NY, 320 pp., 6 pp.-b/w plate section, March 10, 2026 $32 HC) The "Forgotten 15th" included famous units like the Red Tails—the Tuskegee Airmen—the 82nd Fighter Group and the 325th's "Checkertail Clan."

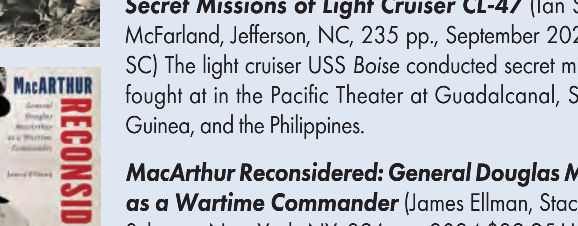


A Sky Never Forgotten: A WWII Pilot's Journey Through War and Captivity (Maida Purdy, forward by Mike Guardia, Purdy Publishing House, Miami, FL, 234 pp., Nov. 3, 2025 $16.99 SC) Author tells the firsthand story of her father, Lt. Robert Purdy—a U.S. Army Air Corps B-24 bomber pilot who flew 17 missions over Europe during World War II.

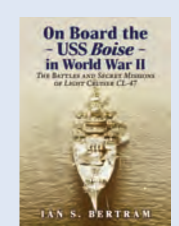




Rhineland: Hitler's Last Defence, 1944–45(Anthony Tucker-Jones, Osprey, New York, NY, 288 pp., 16 pages of b/w plates, b/w maps throughout, Oct. 7, 2025 $35 HC) The Allied battle to cross the Rhine River into Germany told from the perspective of the Axis defenders.



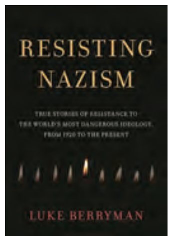
On Board the USS Boise in World War II: The Battles and Secret Missions of Light Cruiser CL-47 (Ian S. Bertram, McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 235 pp., September 2025 $39.95 SC) The light cruiser USS *Boise* conducted secret missions and fought at in the Pacific Theater at Guadalcanal, Sicily, New Guinea, and the Philippines.



MacArthur Reconsidered: General Douglas MacArthur as a Wartime Commander (James Ellman, Stackpole Books/Dist. by Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 296 pp., 2024 $29.95 HC) One of America's most controversial generals, MacArthur continues to polarize. Unlike many, who see him as a great leader and patriot who had a few flaws, Ellman argues that "MacArthur was a lackluster battlefield commander who suffered stunning defeats while undermining the command structure of our military."

inate the potential threat of Ernst Röhm and the Nazis paramilitary organization, Sturmabteilung (SA), also known as the "Brownshirts."

Resisting Nazism: True Stories of Resistance to the World's Most Dangerous Ideology, from 1920 to the Present (Luke Berryman, Bloomsbury Academic, New York, NY, 296 pp., Jan. 22, 2026 $27 HC)

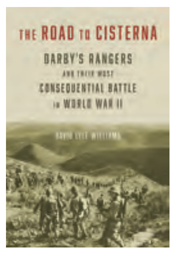


The founder of The Ninth Candle, a Chicago-based organization focused on Holocaust education and fighting antisemitism, Berryman was inspired to collect these stories of resistance by the experiences of his gradfathers—Sam Mindel, who survived the Holocaust, and William L. Ferguson, who was a top turret gunner/engineer on the B-17 bomber *Flak Shack* shot down over Germany during World War II.

The 12 chapters recount different stories of resistance, from the "Edelweiss Pirates," working-class German teens rebelling culturally by listening forbidden jazz and fighting Hitler Youth patrols, to Sebastian Haffner, a lawyer who fled Germany and wrote *Germany: Jekyll and Hyde* in 1940 to help the Allies understand Hitler and the Nazis.

There is also Leon Bass, 19, a member of the segregated 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion, whose officers were white. Bass provided support at Buchenwald, an experience that inspired him to become an educator. "I came into that camp an angry Black soldier. Angry at my country and justifiably so," Bass would later say in lectures on the Holocaust. "Angry because they were treating me as though I was not good enough. But [that day] I came to the realization that human suffering could touch us all... Buchenwald was the face of evil... It was racism."

The Road to Cisterna: Darby's Rangers and Their Most Consequential Battle in World War II (David Lyle Williams, LSU Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 401 pp., 22 illustrations, 12 maps, Sept. 26, 2025, $44.95 HC)



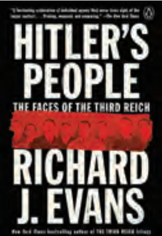
The Battle of Anzio (January 22-May 25, 1944) was aimed at bypassing the German's daunting Gustav Line in an effort to capture Rome. The amphibious forces under Maj. Gen. John P. Lucas the amphibious landing some 30 miles south of Rome was unopposed. A cautious Lucas chose to consolidate the beachhead instead of advancing. It was a costly decision, for by the time an attack was launched on January 29, the 69,000 Allies were facing 71,500 German troops.

A former U.S. Army officer, Williams spent 25 years collecting the combat experiences of 160 Rangers, compiling a comprehensive history of the unit. Though he has made use of official records and published sources, Williams notes that most of the material for this book has come from letters, personal interviews, and unpublished accounts from the Rangers themselves or from their family members.

In retelling the events of 1944, Williams uses the men's own words and accounts to "correct a number of errors and misconceptions that have been repeated over the years, including the commonly repeated error that only six Rangers returned from the Battle of Cisterna, all the others being reported either killed or captured."

Here, for the first time, the story of the Cisterna battle is comprehensively told in chronological order by 46 of the men who fought there.

Hitler's People: The Faces of the Third Reich (Richard J. Evans, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 624 pp., photographs, notes, bibliography, index, Nov. 18, 2025 $24 SC)

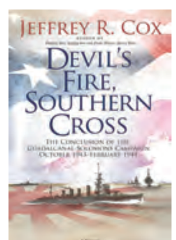


Much has been written on the politics and institutions of Germany during the rise of the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP) from 1933 to 1945. Evans notes that past research on the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazis has tended to shy away from the personalities, whereas his goal is to examine who these people were—from Hitler right down to the lowest ranks of the party and beyond.

Evans points out that through the publication of diaries, letters and memoirs, as well as annotated scholarly editions of documents, and many other previously unavailable sources, our collective knowledge of key Nazi individuals such as Goebbels, Speer, Himmler, Rosenberg, and even Hitler has been enormously expanded.

"The transformation of our knowledge of the Nazi movement and the Nazi dictatorship goes far down the scale of responsibility and complicity, and the biographical approach, often based on evidence presented in post-war trials, has emerged as a mainstay of "perpetrator research" (*Täterforschung*) since around the turn of the century," Evans writes. "The basis for an attempt at answering the questions with which this book began is now available to a far greater extent than it was even twenty years ago."

Devil's Fire, Southern Cross: The Conclusion of the Guadalcanal-Solomons Campaign, October 1943–February 1944 (Jeffrey Cox, Osprey, New York, NY, 496pp., 8 pages of b/w plates, maps, index, select bibliography, Nov. 18, 2025 $35 HC)



The first major Allied offensive in the Pacific during World War II, the brutal six-month struggle that was the Guadalcanal-Solomons Campaign (August 1942-February 1943) marked a turning point in the war as U.S. forces stopped Japanese expansion, captured vital Henderson Field, and began the long island-hopping advance towards Japan, with heavy casualties on both sides from fierce fighting, disease, and naval clashes. *Devil's Fire, Southern Cross* is the fourth and concluding book in Cox's popular landmark series on the Guadalcanal-Solomons Campaign that includes *Morning Star, Midnight Sun* (Early Guadalcanal-Solomons Campaign), *Blazing Star, Setting Sun* (November 1942-March 1943), and *Dark Waters, Starry Skies* (March-October 1943).

FORGOTTEN SOULS: The Search for the Lost Tuskegee Airmen (Cheryl W. Thompson, Dafina Books (Kensington Publishing Corp)-Dist. by Penguin Random House, 240 pp., Jan. 27, 2026 $30 HC)

An investigative journalist for NPR and the daughter of one of the Tuskegee Airmen—the Black pilots who mostly flew as fighter escorts for America during WWII—the author follows the legacy of the

Simulation Gaming

BY JOSEPH LUSTER

COMPANY OF HEROES 3 ADDS FOUR NEW BATTLEGROUPS AND GROUND OF ACES GOES HATS OFF FOR THE HEALERS

COMPANY OF HEROES 3 — ENDURE & DEFY

PUBLISHER RELIC ENTERTAINMENT • **GENRE** STRATEGY • **SYSTEM** PC • **AVAILABLE** NOW

Another new piece of DLC has arrived for *Company of Heroes 3*, giving players even more to dig into as we journey into the new year. The latest is *Endure & Defy*, which launched in late November via Steam for $24.99, and includes four new Battlegroups, one for each faction, and other fresh content for the real-time strategy entry.

The latest addition for the U.S. forces is the Italian Partisan Battlegroup, which excels at deception and sabotage. Tunnel networks and underground detonations will help collapse the enemy from within, while ground forces can be enhanced with the use of resistance fighters and saboteurs. On the Wehrmacht side of things we have the Last Stand Battlegroup, which includes the new Borgward Wanze for effective, improvised attacks.

Other Battlegroups include the Polish Cavalry for the British forces, with elite Polish lancer sections at the tip of the spear, and the Kriegsmarine, which bolsters the Deutches Afrikakorps with exceptional engineering and combat capabilities. All of the new additions are available for both multiplayer and co-op/skirmish battles against the computer.

Company of Heroes 3 has been around for nearly three years at this point, and while it's had its ups and downs over that period, it's been nice to see Relic Entertainment consistently supporting it. When the main game is solid, the level of enjoyment you get out of a title like this in the long term ultimately comes down to the player base. As long as you have some like-minded folks to play with once you're ready to fully tackle multiplayer, you'll find that the third entry has strong legs supporting it.

GROUND OF ACES: HEALING THE HEROES

PUBLISHER BLINDFLUG STUDIOS AG • **GENRE** STRATEGY • **SYSTEM** PC • **AVAILABLE** 2026

Following its Early Access launch in July 2025, the folks at Blindflug Studios AG have kept World War II base-building strategy game *Ground of Aces* strong with new content. We previously covered the high-flying "Scramble!!" DLC, and now the team is already back with the second major update.

Titled "Heal the Heroes," this one takes a welcome pivot to put the spotlight on expanding "the human stories at the heart of the airfield." Health recovery and aid are the centerpiece of Heal the Heroes, which introduces new gameplay systems while raising the stakes for every mission in unique ways.

Since personnel can now sustain injuries during base attacks and missions, you'll need to smartly incorporate field hospitals and other related facilities. Parts of your base can now be transformed into these functional infirmaries, giving doctors and nurses a home base to assist injured crew members.

These aren't the only heroes being highlighted here. The update adds women staff and crew members to the airfield with the introduction of the W.A.A.F. (Women's Auxiliary Air Force). With more varied stories to tell, *Ground of Aces* can focus more on the humanity at stake, and those persevering to make mission success a possibility in the first place.

The Swiss-Polish indie devs behind Ground of Aces have been giving players plenty to play with since the game first launched. Showing a different side of war is always welcome, and it's never a bad time to tip your cap to those who put it all on the line to heal rather than harm during our darkest days. ■

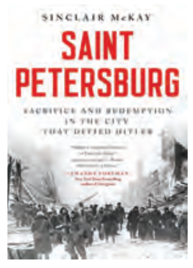
27 men who never came back.

Of those nearly 1,000 that flew over Europe, Thompson tells the stories of the 27 who went missing in combat, "the lives they lived, the reasons their planes went down, why the remains of all but two were never found, and the impact their disappearances had on their families and communities."

More than 16,000 African Americans trained at Alabama's Tuskegee Army Air Field. Some 996 of them were pilots and 352 of them were deployed to combat during WWII. The first class of cadets graduated on March 7, 1942.

The first African American fighter squadron to deploy overseas was the 99th Fighter Squadron. Later, the 332nd Fighter Group, the core of the famous "Red Tails," was formed with the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302nd Fighter Squadrons. The African-American 477th Bombardment Group also trained during the war, but did not see combat.

Saint Petersburg: Sacrifice and Redemption in the City that Defied Hitler (Sinclair McKay, Pegasus Books/ dist. Simon & Schuster, 432pp., January 6, 2026 $35 HC)

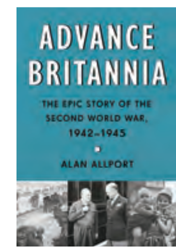


Within the expansive history of Russia's iconic second largest city, from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin, McKay details the nearly 900 days of the Siege of Leningrad (as the city was then known), considered to be one of the worst sieges in history, causing an estimated 1.5 million deaths out of city population of about 3.2 million.

From September 8, 1941, to January 27, 1944—872 days—troops from Germany and Finland surrounded but never captured Leningrad, deciding instead to bomb the city and starve its inhabitants. Many of the deaths were caused by starvation during the winter of 1941–1942.

McKay, the author of *The Hidden History of Code-Breaking*, mines diaries, memoirs, and letters from the city's inhabitants to paint a grim picture of the misery of the siege and the few, faint flickers of humanity that shone through.

Advance Britannia: The Epic Story of the Second World War, 1942-1945 (Alan Allport, Knopf, New York, NY, 656 pp., maps, illustrations, bibliography, index, Jan. 6, 2026 $40 HC))



Professor Allport's *Advance Britannia* picks up where *Britain at Bay: The Epic Story of the Second World War 1938-1941*, described by *The Wall Street Journal* as "the single best examination of British politics, society, and strategy [from 1938 to 1941] that has ever been written," left off.

The Imperial Japanese Navy has just launched its surprise attack on Hawaii's Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Churchill is ready to declare war on Japan, but calls American President Theodore Roosevelt before he does.

While on the phone, Churchill is told by his secretary that the Japanese troop convoy spotted by a Royal Airforce reconnaissance plane the day before in the South China Sea is unloading an invasion force on the British colony of Malaya.

"We are all in the same boat now," remarked Roosevelt wryly.

Allport is the author of *Demobbed: Coming Home After the Second World War* and *Browned Off and Bloody-Minded: The British Soldier Goes to War 1939–1945*.

Stay Alive: Berlin, 1939-1945 (Ian Buruma, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 400 pp. March 17, 2026 $32 HC)

Already a struggle, life in Berlin grew worse in 1943, with the German defeat at Stalingrad, and then nightmarish as the Allied bombs began to fall, before the terror of the approaching Red Army gripped the city.

Buruma's title for this moving portrait of a city and its people came from the cessation of the common Berliner greetings of "Auf wiedersehen" or even "Heil Hitler," which gave way to *Bleiben Sie übrig*—"Stay alive." By the end of World War II, Berlin's population of 4.2 million had fallen by nearly 50 percent.

Buruma's own father, a Dutch student conscripted into forced labor in the war economy along with 400,000 other imported workers, was one of the people trying to stay alive in Berlin. □

BUD ELLIOTT

Continued from page 43

Though the efforts of the 40th Division have been nearly forgotten or overlooked, other divisions have suffered a similar fate. In the case of the 40th, it is very possible the Second World War would have dragged on much longer had it not been for their contributions.

My father went back to his carpentry career and focused on shake roofing. He would specialize in this for 31 years. He seldom spoke of his war experiences, and it took me many years to get the few stories I know.

I often was confused as to when and where something happened because once he had mentioned it, he clammed up. Things like, "we went awhile without food once," he stared at the wall, reluctantly trying to bring it back, "about eight days," or "I once shot a guy from 600 yards! Good shot, the gut next to me said. We saw two other japs run out with a stretcher and take the guy away."

One time I remember he said something as if to almost justify things, "I was so hardened in the war. Nothing bothered me. I would sit down and eat my rations with dead and rotting Japs all around me. Now, I almost puke if a fly gets in my milk."

Though he survived countless battles, he did not survive a 35-year battle with alcoholism, which killed him in 1981 at the age of 65.

Everyone knew him as a gentle and patient man. He had a stubborn streak, but tried to be fair with everyone. He loved all animals, especially dogs and horses. He preferred to put a spider outside rather than kill it. I saw him save a scorpion from being stomped on. He was an avid gardener and loved to build things.

When I was 14 my father bought me my first firearm, a single-shot bolt-action .22. We went into the woods, and he helped me sight it in. He had been an avid hunter before the war with a 30.06, a 30/30, an over-and-under, a ruger and many others, but had sold them all before I was born. When I asked him why he had sold the guns and quit hunting his answer, as always, was short and to the point—"I have been the hunted." □

Scott Elliott is a freelance travel and history writer who has contributed to various online and print publications, including Wild West, Route, *and* Idaho Magazine.

Continued from page 33

and weakened Japanese soldiers were alive perhaps "because they were too badly wounded to commit suicide," the Star Association wrote. Roughly 500 of the original 1,000 Japanese soldiers had been able to escape the mangrove swamps alive and then had tried to escape the island and reach the mainland of Burma. Many of these were captured by British naval units patrolling around the island. Gen William Slim, by then commander of the entire British offensive in Burma, reported "that the last enemy fugitives fell victim to the naval patrols—and the sharks—as they attempted in small craft or on rafts to reach the mainland."

The survivors discovered inside the swamp and some of the Japanese taken by the British navy told their captors horrific tales of dozens of crocodiles attacking them en masse and appearing out of nowhere to drag off their companions. The nights had been filled with screams, gunfire, and the sounds of animal attacks, they said.

By then, with the flanking maneuver by the Royal Marines at Yan Bauk Chaung and the encircling of the swamp, the battle for the islands was effectively over; no further fighting of any extent was taking place on Ramree, Akyab, or Cheduba. On February 22, the Allied ships were withdrawn for other duties, and the Ramree Island campaign was declared to be officially ended.

No official military report, Japanese or British, mentions a large crocodile attack on Ramree. The story lives on based almost solely on Bruce Wright's mention of it in a one paragraph account in his 1962 book *Wildlife Sketches: Near and Far*. It has generally been accepted as factual because of Wright's reputation as a naturalist.

Two years after Wright, conservationist Roger Caras' book, *Dangerous to Man*, mentioned Ramree as "one of the most deliberate and wholesale attacks on man by large animals that is on record." Caras has admitted that from "a source other than Bruce Wright, I would be tempted to discount it. [But] Bruce Wright, a highly trained professional naturalist, was there at Ramree."

Wright was indeed on the island at the time, but he was not an eyewitness. He wrote in his 1968 book, *The Frogmen of Burma*, that he heard about the attacks from Brits serving on patrol boats in the islands. Despite Wright's reputation and because of secondhand sourcing, many historians have doubts about the events of the so-called "most horrible" night.

This does not prove Wright's account untrue, but over the decades, several historians have disputed his description of the events within the swamp for several reasons.

For one, local villagers who were alive during the battle, including some who had been conscripted by the Japanese military, claimed most of the Japanese casualties were due to dehydration and disease caused by exposure as well as the lack of clean food and water.

For another, though military historians recognize that crocodiles attack humans, they argue at the same time that "Japanese firepower, which tore holes in British tanks and armour" would have been able to handle large numbers of them."

"That late in the war," another historian wrote, "with supplies being interdicted by the allies, Japanese troops were already in poor health. It is likely that most of the troops [entering the swamp] were already suffering from malaria, beriberi, dysentery, or even all three.... They would not have lasted more than a couple of days without water, trying to slog their way through muddy swamps. They would have collapsed and drowned."

The size of the supposed crocodile population has also been questioned. The Ramree mangrove swamp simply would not have been able to support the alleged thousands of crocodiles that were said to have preyed on the Japanese. "How had these ravening monsters survived before [the coming of the Japanese]," historian Frank McLynn wrote, "and how were they to survive later?"

Scientists who study crocodiles also claimed that crocodile "feeding frenzies" of this scale, especially involving humans, are unheard of.

Yet the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*), is known to be one of two crocodile species that "regularly prey on humans," according to scientists, and they are said to aggressively defend their territory. Saltwater crocodile predation is still happening. In 2015, there were 180 total crocodile attacks, 79 of them fatal, reported in Southeast Asia, coastal India, and Oceania—the regions where saltwater crocodiles live. A Burmese man was killed by a saltwater crocodile in 2008 and an unfortunate 8-year-old girl was attacked and eaten in Indonesia in 2021.

Crocodiles are dangerous, but it is unlikely they were the sole cause of what had been termed the "Ramree Island Massacre."

But in that case, what caused the terrifying sounds that British boat patrols reportedly heard in February of 1945? Especially the gunshots. They are not explained by dehydration, starvation, or topical disease.

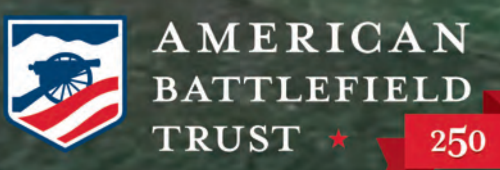
According to British military records uncovered in a *National Geographic* investigation into the Ramree Island deaths, however, in the early hours of Feb. 18, 1945, the Allies discovered a "desperate attempt" by hundreds of Japanese soldiers to swim across a channel separating Ramree from the Burmese mainland. "Except for a few swimmers, it's doubtful that any survived the crossing," reads the official British report as quoted by the *National Geographic*. "It's estimated that at least 100 Japanese were killed or drowned that night ... 200 killed is regarded as a conservative estimate—about 40 loaded boats were known to have sunk. Possibly another 50 Japanese died in the mangrove from exposure and want of food and water. 14 prisoners were taken."

Some of the Japanese who died in the swamp were probably killed by dehydration as has been suggested. They were probably not in good health to begin with. Others drowned, and others were killed by snakes and insect bites. Others by disease. But others—perhaps the majority, perhaps not—were killed by the fearsome one-ton saltwater crocodiles of the Ramree Island swamp.

How many of these brave—and perhaps deluded—Japanese soldiers died from each of these causes could be—and has been—debated at length by historians and investigators, but the question has never been—and probably never will be—resolved.

There is no question, however, that the battle was a clear British victory and no question that far fewer Japanese soldiers came out of the swamp than had gone in.

The argument is about what killed them, the swamp itself, disease, dehydration, snakes, and scorpions, or 1,000-lb. saltwater crocodiles. □



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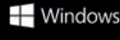
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