Blood on the Talon

139th Airborne Engineer Battalion 1943-1945

Volume I: Unit History

Col Ozzie H. Gorbitz, USAFR Ret.
The words within this narrative history are an attempt to extol the heroics of the men of the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion. Despite what the author has written, no manner of dissertation will provide ample gratitude for what they have done for our nation, for the peoples of Europe and for their brothers in arms. Each person who reads these words will hopefully gain some measure of appreciation for what those gallant men were able to accomplish.

For over seven decades, my father has devoted much of his time to the study of the artifacts and history of the wars of the 20th Century. His hobbies and his free time seem to gravitate toward military history. As a result, my brother and I were serendipitously drawn into the passion as well.

Already at the age of four, from the time I was able to trundle along with Dad and my brother Mike, then six, we crossed the fields of Holland, penetrated the woods of the Ardennes, negotiated the Siegfried lines and traversed many other battlefields in Europe, reliving history. We spent countless hours in the best museums and the mustiest antique shops that Europe had to offer. All the while, we watched Dad get acquainted with Belgians, Wallonnens, Hollanders, Germans and even the Luxembourgers.

There is someone who deserves thanks for directing my interests to the study of military history, which led to the development of this manuscript: my father, Master Sergeant Oscar J. Gorbitz, USAF, Retired. It is to him that this narrative is dedicated.
From our father we learned about life, how to treat our fellow man and we developed a passion for military history and its paraphernalia.

What greater childhood could a young boy have than to imagine what it was like for the soldiers as that boy crouched within the actual concrete bunkers of the German border and the discernable trenches of the Ardennes battlefields that were inhabited by soldiers fighting for their existence not twenty years earlier? The selection of helmets, field gear and equipment found in the shops and flea markets in 1965 was still bountiful. It was uncharted territory.

To this day, my father, my brother and I continue this passion. I must, therefore, thank my father for my humble beginnings in military history. Without his exemplary guidance over the many years, this work would have never come to fruition and the history of the 139th AEB and the men who fought in Belgium and Germany would remain invisible to those who peer through the occluded window into the past. This work is dedicated to my father.
Acknowledgements

This entire volume is an acknowledgement of the sacrifices of men of the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion (AEB) -- part of America's Greatest Generation. They have paved the way for many decades of prosperity and advancement not only for Americans, but for many millions of others.

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I am also indebted to Troopers William F. Murphy, Arnold Cisnewski, Harlin M. Ratsch, Raymond P. Leuthy, Vincent A. Mazza, Mark A. Lewis, George W. Nicolette, Jr., Arthur C. “Buddy” Greene, Charles F. Renner, Warren R. Skenadore, and Edward Reich, who provided approval for the use of their detailed recollections, consented to phone interviews, wrote letters and graciously provided copies of photographs for inclusion in my efforts to document the 139th AEB’s exploits in World War II. Thanks are also offered to Mr. Glen Goodman, brother of Earl Goodman, Silver Star winner who was killed on 24 Mar 1945 near Wesel, Germany. Mr. Goodman provided copies of letters written by the 17th Airborne Division’s leaders to Goodman’s family extolling his service, leadership and sacrifice. With the kind permission of these gentlemen, details of the life in the airborne are provided via letters and photographs.

Colonel Patrick Cassidy Jr., USA retired, was instrumental in providing photos, vignettes and stories relating to the wartime service of his father, Francis C. Cassidy Jr., a member of Charlie Company 139th AEB.

Larry Giovinco provided several candid photos from his father, Lawrence Giovinco, who served with the 550th Parachute Infantry Battalion. The 550th fought side-by-side with the 139th during the Battle of the Bulge.

Gary Stift provided information and photographs of his father, Leicester C. Stift who served with Company C, 139th AEB.

Ian Spring, who owns and maintains a superb online archive of unpublished military photographs, www.pixpast.com, was kind enough to allow me to purchase a rare collection of color slides taken by an unknown officer of the 139th AEB.

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Vicki Bentzien, daughter of veteran Robert Bentzien provided a letter, several photos and important historical information about her father and his service with the 139th.

Additional thanks goes to Colonel Thomas Manley, USAFR, his daughter Sabrina and friend who braved the winter storms in Belgium on 4 January 2011 to obtain additional photographs of the Ardennes battlefields for use in this volume.

Final thanks are reserved to my family for humbly enduring the many evenings without my attention, as I typed away on the manuscript. I especially thank my wife, Janet, for her help in proofing and editing. Without her help, this book would never have made it to print.
Stalwart men, solidly established and at peace in their own estates — all these were glorious in their time, each illustrious in his day. Some of them have left behind a name and men recount their praiseworthy deeds; but of others there is no memory, for when they ceased, they ceased. And they are as though they had not lived, they and their children after them. Yet these were godly men whose virtues have not been forgotten; their wealth remains in their families, their heritage with their descendants. Through God’s covenant with them their family endures with posterity, for their sake, and for all time their progeny will endure, their glory will never be blotted out.

Sirach 44: 6-13

1 Sir 44:6-13, (The New American Bible)
Since we cannot relive history as it actually happened, we must be content with looking through a clouded window into the past. The opaque character of history’s window is, in part, due to the permanent or temporary nature of the historical dirt, grime and imperfections in and on the glass’ surface. These imperfections are caused by barriers to accurate information, incomplete or flawed research, or simply a lack of documented records of events. Personal accounts by the participants can add a measure of obscuration which becomes especially difficult to diffuse. Points of view, differing perspectives and cloudy recollections will at times provide conflicting information. The deeper in the past the event lies, the more difficult is the task of cleaning the window.

The particular experiences, the mindset and the bias of the historian can add to the complexity of the assignment. Historians who have not fought in battle cannot fully appreciate the effects of a sub-zero winter on a soldier in wet clothing. They do not feel the biting pain of trench foot, they do not suffer the psychological torment caused by disfiguring combat wounds, and they cannot comprehend the deep anguish and guilt that comes from the loss of a brother in arms. Then again, the unfettered views of an historian who has lived in the archives might allow a more inquisitive perspective borne from the deep desire to understand those feelings.

These are but a few of the factors that occlude the window to military history; they have a very important bearing on how historians view the conduct of battles, the decisions of the leaders and the causes of victory and defeat. A forthright attempt on behalf of the historian to illuminate these experiences is critical to cleansing the window to the past. The travail de l’historien is then to provide diligent and honorable research and conclusions so that the grime and dirt may be removed from the pane in hopes that it will provide a crystal clear and consistent view to the past.

As historians progress in their task of cleaning history’s window, they find that it is not necessarily constructed of one single pane of glass; rather, it is assembled from segments of various pieces. Some are translucent, while others are opaque, prohibiting a clear perception of the past. The choice is then to determine how much of the window to clean and how deeply the cleansing will progress. The larger the segment tackled, the less myopic will be the views and hence only a general nature of what transpired will emerge. Take, for example, Gerhard Weinberg’s massive, yet superb volume: *A World at Arms; a Global History of World War II*. His well-researched work on the general nature of the war puts the entire conflict in perspective within the framework of the various nations, armies and their leaders. It gives the reader a very thorough understanding of the major events and the factors that caused the war and its outcomes, yet it says little to nothing about how the soldiers lived, what they ate, how they endured bitter cold or searing heat and the day-to-day horrors of combat and death. Such a massive work barely allows one to understand how complex history’s window is, let alone begin to peer through it. Eventually, one begins to understand that it is, in fact, a massive pane of various intricate pieces of varying translucency.

Through diligent research, some have uncovered enlightening facts about war and some have challenged previously held conclusions about accepted events. A suitable example of this would be *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions 1941-1945*, by Peter R. Mansoor. In his book, he provides a counter punch to the belief that the Allies won the war in Europe through sheer logistical might. He contends that it was the capability of the United States to quickly develop combat-effective units that defeated their enemies in battle.

Some have opened the door into fascinating units such as the First Special Service Force, Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, or the Nisei. Of the thousands of other small-level units that fought in the war, few have received as just an accounting of their performance as the previously mentioned organizations. Most of these obscure units simply fought as they were tasked. They did so without memorable public distinction, notoriety or recognition. The research relating to such humble units may not uncover significant or controversial details that will shake one’s beliefs about the war; it simply continues to clean history’s window, one segment at a time, ever so slowly, thus allowing a richer, fuller view of the past.

Writing about a small, little-known unit that fought without notoriety in a major battle is not an easy task. The task is made even more difficult if the unit was not instrumental to the outcome of the battles within which they fought. What if that obscure little
Group photo of 3rd Platoon, Company C, 139th AEB taken during the summer of 1944 a few months prior to the division’s embarkation for England. The “X” depicts the unidentified trooper.

unit simply accomplished its small part of the larger mission? Who would know about it, or, who would even care? In some cases, material covering such a unit’s actions is very difficult to find and the researcher must be very diligent in the quest to provide a view into the past. Any attempt to illuminate the historical facts surrounding it may also go unnoticed, the bulk of attention (and hence research), being reserved for the most famous, notorious or celebrated outfits.

The task of this book is not to cleanse the entirety of history’s window, but to select a small fragment of one of the panes and begin to clean the grime from it. Through this work, the reader will not understand the nature of World War II, or fully comprehend the depth of the battles within which the participants fought; the reader will simply be enlightened as to the conduct of one single battalion of soldiers, the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion, as they fought in several battles during the campaigns of one of the hundreds of wars that have been fought throughout history. The segment of the window might seem insignificant to some, but nonetheless it serves to honor those who fought selflessly with the 139th.

The author’s fascination with the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion began with the acquisition of a 17th Airborne Division unit souvenir album in 1998. The album has group photos of every platoon in the division. On one of the 139th AEB photos, pictured above, an “X” appears under one trooper, second row from the front, fifth man from the left. The quest to place a name with the face stirred an interest in the 139th. To date, the author has identified over 200 of the troopers in the unit photos, but, unfortunately, not the one identified by the “X”.

The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion was part of the 17th Airborne Division that fought in the European Theater of Operations (ETO) during World War II. The 17th is one of the more obscure airborne divisions of the war. Almost everyone is familiar with the 101st “Screaming Eagles” and the 82nd “All American” division. Through the recent publicity awakened by popular documentaries, books and movies, the 82nd and 101st have achieved legendary status. The 17th has not reaped the same fame. The 17th was a latecomer to the war, hurriedly entering on 24 December 1944, following the German attack into Belgium. They also participated in Operation VARSITY, the largest single-day airborne operation in history. Despite its lack of publicity, the accomplishments of the 17th Airborne Division and its 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion were contributory to the Allied victory over the Nazis.

This unknown unit, a battalion of more than 500 airborne engineers, was able to achieve success during the Ardennes Campaign, during Operation VARSITY and during their subsequent combat operations. They were not instrumental in single-
handedly defeating the enemy, nor were they the lynch-pin around which the success of any operation hinged. They simply did their job in a professional, aggressive and dependable manner, contributing to the overall outcome of the operation. Their conduct was characterized by “courage and devotion…and amazing aggressiveness.”

There are several factors that allowed the 139th AEB to function successfully in battle. From the unit’s inception, they were subjected to a grueling, arduous training regimen that molded them into airborne engineer troopers, an elite organization with specialized skills. The demands placed on the unit by the instructors and the nature of the training forged the unit into a disciplined and cohesive fighting force. Leadership also played a role in the unit’s accomplishments. On several occasions, leaders, faced with daunting challenges, reacted with aggressiveness and initiative. Subordinate leaders, faced with dead or severely wounded commanders, assumed their responsibilities and continued to lead troopers in the execution of their mission.

Another key factor in the success of the unit was the nature of the individual paratroopers and glidermen. They acted with courage and aggressiveness in the face of direct fire. The fate of the battalion and their mission rested on the combined efforts of each trooper. On many occasions, it was the bravery and initiative of individual soldiers that won the day. Official military records and the General Orders of the 17th Airborne Division narrate many of these heroic exploits. But, for some units, arduous training, inspiring leaders and heroic soldiers were not enough to overcome the fog of war that causes battles to be lost by the brave. The nature of the enemy they were facing was a significant factor as well.

The success of the 139th must also be partially attributed to the depleted nature of the forces they were facing. Their prime opponents during the Ardennes Campaign, the 3. and 15. Panzergrenadier Divisions, the 26. Volksgrenadier Division and the Führer Begleit Brigade had been in continuous movement and combat since 16 December. By the time the 139th arrived and went on the offensive on 4 January, their German foes were getting worn out and had lost many of their armored vehicles to either mechanical problems or direct action. Although the 139th was rigorously trained and exhibited the traits of a cohesive unit ready for a fight, their tenacity and enthusiasm were sometimes overshadowed by a battle-hardened foe. Had the German units been fresh, at the peak of training and possessed their full complement of equipment when the 139th arrived, things might have gone badly for the airborne troopers. The depleted nature of the Panzergrenadiere gave the airborne troops enough of an edge to quickly develop their combat footing and eventually seize the initiative. Near the city of Bastogne, the paratroopers advanced and retreated more than once through the same series of hamlets before the Germans were forced to withdraw.

The reader will no doubt be wondering why the author devoted so much time to the perfunctory battles in the Ardennes prior to the airborne engineers’ entry into battle. There are two reasons for this methodology. First, the operations of the 17th Airborne Division and its 139th Engineer Battalion cannot be properly analyzed without providing an initial understanding of the magnitude of the battle within which they fought. This introduction to the battle will begin at the macro level and gradually focus on the key opponents faced by the 17th and 139th.

Secondly, all of the units that fought against the 139th had already been in direct combat for many days. These several days of movement, attack, counterattack and defense depleted the enemy’s ranks to such a state that it provided the green airborne division and their leaders enough of a cushion to weather the initial shock of first combat. Only from a more thorough analysis of the events from 16 December 1944 to 3 January 1945 can the reader fully appreciate and evaluate the combat performance of the 139th during the Battle of the Bulge. A less detailed review of the engagements of the principle opponents of the 139th would not serve the intended purpose.

There will be some who read these words who will conclude they are perhaps a condemnation of the organization or the tactical ability of the 17th Engineering Battalion. The researcher’s eyes to the village names so that they can more readily be cross referenced on the accompanying maps.

4 History: 139th Airborne Engineers (Muelheim: Albert Selb, 1945), 29-30.
5 The reader should note that all foreign words and the names of all European localities are italicized and spelled in their native language. This convention serves to easily draw the researcher’s eyes to the village names so that they can more readily be cross referenced on the accompanying maps.

6 For a detailed analysis of the German armored vehicle losses, refer to Appendix E.
casualties; that was the case for the 17th Airborne. He was faced with essentially presented one of the most difficult tasks for a combat unit to accomplish. He was conducting a frontal assault against a battle-hardened veteran unit, who had familiarity with the terrain, who had the advantage of owning the high ground and sat in partially-fortified positions. The tactical options available to him were limited. His Corps Commander demanded a breach in the lines or at least steady progress in moving the enemy back in an attempt to reach Houffalize. Such an effort would result in many casualties; that was the case for the 17th Airborne.

Often the subordinate commander is handed a seemingly impossible task without any options, without sufficient time to prepare, and with the full demand of immediate success. There was simply no other option than to attack across unfamiliar terrain, against a partially dug-in enemy who was battle-hardened. The individual soldier, faced with his task certainly had nothing to say about the matter. He simply shouldered his responsibility and followed orders. Such was the case with the engineers of the 139th when they were thrown onto the line as infantry in a frontal attack on 4 January 1945.

The battalion’s second taste of battle came during Operation VARSITY, the largest single-day airborne operation of the war. Most previous airborne operations were executed with airborne and glider deliveries over the course of several days. During VARSITY, two airborne divisions and all of their associated equipment were delivered on the same day. The assault, on 24 March 1945, was against the remnants of a nearly vanquished foe. Although the German defenders fought at the very gates of Germany, an emotionally invigorating incentive, they were no match for the combined force of two fresh airborne divisions supported by an amphibious crossing of the Rhein River by several Allied divisions. The German Wehrmacht had fought a battle where they traded terrain for time west of the Rhein River. Hitler’s insistence on holding every inch of ground was costly to his forces. When they retreated across the Rhein, they had little combat power available for sustained operations. Again, the depleted nature of the German units east of the Rhein River placed the 139th at a distinct combat advantage, as it had during the Ardennes Campaign.

The very nature of airborne operations provides an element of surprise and mass that prevents the enemy from defending every conceivable airborne landing site. Because the combined effect of the airborne force was delivered via aircraft, which departed from airfields hundreds of miles from the battle zone, the enemy could not know the exact time and location of the attack. The skill of the enemy’s intelligence collection and analysis structure was able to eliminate some of the probabilities of time and attack location, but he was still required to defend the key avenues of attack rather than meet an advancing force at the decisive place and time. An aggressive plan executed with vigor against a battle-weary foe was more likely to result in victory. In the case of VARSITY, nearly all of the combat capability was delivered simultaneously in conjunction with the amphibious crossing of the Rhein River during Operation PLUNDER. This was that principle of mass that provided the 139th AEB its final advantage against the Germans.

There is a controversy that remains unresolved to this date: a breach of security prior to Operation VARSITY. Many of the veterans contend that the Germans knew all of the details concerning the operations. They listened to broadcasts from “Axis Sally”, who told them in the days prior to 24 March that the 17th Airborne was to cross the Rhine near Wesel. The controversy remains unsolved while we await the 75 year moratorium on the declassification of certain VARSITY documents.7 For now, we have the opinions and recollections of the veterans and the pre-invasion intelligence assessments offered by German commanders to form our conclusions. The subject is so rich that it warrants more than a few paragraphs or even a chapter; it requires an entire thesis. That is far too large for the scope of this volume, and conflicts with the supposition that the nature of an airborne operation relies on the element of surprise.

A few notes on the methodology of the book are warranted. The author has not taken license to embellish the narrative with glowing colorful prose describing the scenes and events as is done in a novel. The words used are wholly based on material taken directly from primary sources, archival materials or interviews with veterans. This work is not intended to read like a screenplay; rather, it is a formal compilation of the history of a unit, factual in nature.

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Every attempt has been made to ensure the full names and ranks of engineers are properly annotated. This becomes a difficult task in some cases. There are many instances where the daily reports or the message logs list only the last name of an engineer, and do not mention the rank. In the case where there are more than one engineer with the same last name, the author was unable, in some instances, to determine which engineer was referenced. In these cases, only the last name, and if cited, the rank is used. Furthermore, the author has not uncovered a comprehensive listing of both the full names and ranks of the battalion.

The author has chosen to place the footnotes at the bottom of the columns. While this seems to clutter and unbalance the pages somewhat, it is a convenient convention for the researcher and historian. The other manner makes it difficult to follow the archival trail when one has to constantly fumble back and forth between pages and endnotes. With the source at the bottom of the page, the historian or researcher can immediately determine/evaluate the source of the material.

Most of the images that appear in this book have never been published before. Many readers will be familiar with pictures acquired through the National Archives, but most of the images are from the author’s private collection, acquired from various sources, shared by other collectors, or most importantly, shared by veterans and their families. The quality of these photos is sometimes low, in part due to the nature of the scanning device of the provider, or simply because the original image quality was low, or the size very small. In some cases the original images are less that 1 1/2” in width, are scuffed, water damaged or marred. The author has chosen to include them, because of their rarity and relevance to the material. Self publishing provides this luxury of choice. Many of the photos included in the text would not have survived the editors’ cut at many of the well known publishing houses.

The reader will also note that the names of all foreign locations, except the countries, have been italicized in order to render an analysis of the movement of the units and battles easier. Those who are compelled to refer to locations where events happened will more readily be able to pick those locations from within the text. Some of the locations are followed by the military grid reference to aid the reader in locating the smaller towns on the maps supplied in the text.

In most cases, German units have been identified using the German translation, such as: 15. Panzergrenadier Division. The “th” has been replaced with the German convention of using of a simple period (.)

The reader is encouraged to absorb the narration in order to understand the sacrifice made by the men of the 139th AEB, but also to evaluate the words that follow with an inquisitive and critical eye towards the manner in which these sacrifices are recorded.

This therefore, is not about the grand context of the Battle of the Bulge or the strategic implications of Operation VARSITY, but about the details of the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion. This is about their demanding training, their aggressive leadership, their spirit of initiative and about their successful engagement in combat. The reader must indulge the preparatory words concerning the two battles, as verbose as they may seem, so as to be folded into the fullness of the situation on 4 January 1945 when the 139th crossed the Line of Departure to engage their foe for the first time in battle.
T/4 Harry H. Hynes of Antlers OK and Pvt. Frank Benicasa of Brooklyn, NY, both of the 194th GIR, read their mail in a barn near Rechrival, Belgium, 9 Jan 45.
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Legend for Tactical Maps

- Axis unit, action or symbol
- Allied unit, action or symbol
- Advance, Assault or Attack
- Retrograde Movement
- Screen or Flank Security
- Objective

- Anti-Tank Company with *Jagdpanzer Mk IV* Tanks, unit unknown

- Elements of the 3rd *Panzergradiant Division* (Company Strength)

- 3rd Battalion, 433rd Infantry Regiment

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- 115th Regiment, 15th *Panzergrenadier Division*

- Combat Command Able, 11th Armored Division

- *Führer Begleit Brigade*

- 26th *Volksgradiant Division*, with detached units (-)

- 17th Airborne Division
Birth of the Airborne

Brief History of the Parachute

Records show that, as early as 1000 AD, the Chinese used parachutes, or at least hypothesized their use. There are numerous vignettes describing the use of umbrella-like devices, cloth contraptions and such to slow the rate of descent of a falling man.

The most renowned concept of the parachute traces back to the imagination of Leonardo Da Vinci, who rendered the above drawing of a device which would safely lower its user to the ground.8 In his notes Leonardo remarks that,

“If a man is provided with a length of gummed linen cloth - linen fabric treated in such a way as to have all interstices filled - with a length of 12 yards on each side and 12 yards high, he can jump from any great height whatsoever, without any injury...”

As the length of the Florentine ‘braccio’ (yard) was about 60 centimeters, Da Vinci’s parachute can be compared to a quadrangular pyramid having a base of about 7.20 meters and a height of the same size.9 That equates to just over 24’ which approximates the size of a WW2 emergency chute.

History has recorded several examples of such schemes. Some are merely renderings and others tested with relative degrees of failure and success. These exploits range from balloon-jumping with the first para-dog to the use of parachutes to entertain crowds at fairs and such. The French balloonist Jean Pierre Blanchard tested his design with the family dog. His experiment was a complete success, except for the loss of the family dog, not to injury, but to its hurried retreat, dragging the chute behind.

It was the development of the aircraft and the numerous deaths resulting from crashes that necessitated the increased use of the parachute as a life-saving device. Leo Stevens designed a parachute container that could be suspended below an aircraft. The parachute and risers were attached to a harness worn by the jumper. It was Albert Berry who made the first historic leap from an aircraft on 28 February 1912.10 To the amazement of the onlookers, Barry leapt from the aircraft’s axle, the chute blossomed and he landed safely on the ground. Designers experimented with configurations of Stevens’ concept, and what evolved was a chute that was worn on the back of the parachutist. In the early part of the twentieth century, the military harnessed the use of this device, although not to any great extent.

During WWI, the Air Corps of various nations recognized its practicality. Field artillery units used hydrogen balloons with observers on board to direct their barrages. These became lucrative targets.

10 Paratrooper, 11.
Birth of the Airborne

Figure 1.2 Patent document for Smith Parachute showing some of the details of early parachute and harness design.

for enemy planes fitted with machine guns. Parachutes were used to save the lives of several balloonists who needed to make a rapid exit from their platforms during aerial attacks.

With little exception, those who flew planes into combat looked with disdain upon the use of the parachute and preferred to plummet to their end in an ill-conceived notion of death with honor. Germany seemed to be the only country that issued its pilots parachutes. This practice, however, did not begin until mid 1918. The German ace Ernst Udet used the parachute to save his life twice after being shot down in the last months of WW1.11

On April 28, 1919 Leslie L. Irvin, wearing a prototype parachute called Model A, jumped from an airplane. Irvin became the first person to make a free-fall parachute jump from an aircraft with the design that he later patented. Later, Floyd Smith received U. S. Patent No. 1,340,423 on a parachute, which he manufactured and sold at the Floyd Smith Aerial Equipment Co. in San Diego, California.12

The years between 1918 and 1939 saw various degrees of experimentation and implementation with the use of the parachute. Military theorists who proposed the use of the parachute for military purposes faced, in many cases, great resistance from the traditional entrenched strategists and tacticians. The Soviets, on the other hand, were conducting mass parachute training exercises by the mid 1930's and had even incorporated parachute tactics in its military regulations. Following this lead and acknowledging the parachute’s tactical importance, Italy, France and Germany formed their own airborne test and operational units. The Germans, however, took the lead in the development, training and implementation of airborne and glider troops, tactics and equipment. The German Luftwaffe maintained responsibility for all aspects of their airborne forces or Fallschirmjäger. These forces were organized into glider-borne units, parachute units and air-landing units. Generaloberst Kurt Student was placed in command of all Luftwaffe Fallschirmjäger forces. The enthusiastic Student quickly realized the potential of this unique combat force. By January of 1939, Student’s forces consisted of the 1st Parachute Rifle Regiment, a Parachute Engineer Battalion and Number 1 and Number 2 Transport Wings. These forces were designated the 7th Air Division.13 By the end of WWII, there were ten Luftwaffe parachute divisions.14

The first effective combat demonstration of the potential of airborne operations came in May of 1940. Elements of the 7th Air Division of the German Luftwaffe parachuted and landed gliders in Belgium

11 Paratrooper, 21.
13 Napier Crookenden, Airborne at War (London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1978.), 11.
and Holland and seized the fortress of Eben Emael, bridges over the Albert Canal and various tactical objectives, mainly bridges, in Holland. A special assault force, Sturmbteilung Koch, conducted the attack. It consisted of No. 1 Company, 1st Parachute Rifle Regiment, an Airborne Engineer Platoon, the new experimental DFS 230 gliders, 55 JU-52 aircraft and other forces. They captured the fortress of Eben Emael. The operations were a success in that they demonstrated the effective use of airborne forces, they achieved their objectives and they assisted in the invasion of Holland and Belgium. The success was attributed to the months of detailed planning and training, the element of surprise and the excellent coordination between the paratroops, glider troops and the air transport elements.

The Fallschirmjäger forces were quickly expanded, and in May of 1941 the German High Command initiated Operation MERCUR, the airborne invasion of Crete. The capture of this strategically important island was the objective of the combined airborne, glider borne and air-landing force. 22,000 men were committed to this operation against a combined force of 42,000 British and Greek troops.

The plan called for a coordinated effort to seize several airfields then land the remaining forces. Four parachute battalions under command of General Eugen Meindl were to jump and seize the airfield at Maleme, while the 3. Fallschirmjäger Regiment under Oberst Heiderich would capture Canae. In the second wave, the 1. and 2. Parachute Regiments would parachute on Heraklion and Rethymnon. Once an airfield was seized, the 5. Mountain Division would land in transport aircraft while the remaining attack force would land on the beachhead in boats.

The operation achieved its objectives. The island and its airfields were captured, heavy losses were inflicted on the Allied forces and the Allies were forced to evacuate their remaining units. The victory, however, was at a high cost. The Germans suffered 6000 casualties and of that 3700 were Fallschirmjäger. The near disaster, as some historians characterize it, was the result of the lack of the element of surprise, poor communications and a failure to execute the assigned timetable. Hitler viewed this as a travesty and declared, “The day of the parachutist is over”.

For the most part, the employment of German airborne troops after Operation MERCUR was in the role of conventional ground forces. It seemed that the Americans took a different view of the operation. Fortunately, they saw the potential of using airborne troops to bolster the success of ground operations. The element of surprise to achieve key objectives was readily afforded by the use of airborne and glider forces.

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15 German Airborne Troops, 12.
16 German Airborne Troops, 77.
17 MERCUR is the German word for MERCURY
18 Edwards, German Airborne Troops, 28

### Table 1.1: Significant US Airborne Operations of WWII

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Units</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 Nov 42</td>
<td>509th PIB</td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>Entire unit assembled on DZ within 20 minutes. Airfields at Tebessa and Youks Les Bains captured.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9,10 Jul 43</td>
<td>82nd ABN DIV</td>
<td>Sicily</td>
<td>Widely dispersed drops, many casualties, German operations disrupted, objectives secured.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Sep 43</td>
<td>503rd PIR</td>
<td>Nadzab Airfield, New Guinea</td>
<td>Accurate drop, heavily supported from the air.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Sep 43</td>
<td>82nd ABN DIV (-)</td>
<td>Salerno</td>
<td>Accurate drop, minimal injuries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Sep 43</td>
<td>509th PIB</td>
<td>Avellino</td>
<td>Widely dispersed, difficult mission, many casualties, mission successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Jun 44</td>
<td>82nd ABN DIV</td>
<td>Normandie</td>
<td>Wide dispersion but tenacity of paratroopers resulted in mission success and link-up with beachhead forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 Jul 44</td>
<td>503rd PIR</td>
<td>Noemfoor Island</td>
<td>Low drop altitude caused high injury rate. Operation was not necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Aug 44</td>
<td>1st ABN Task Force</td>
<td>Southern France</td>
<td>80% accuracy on drop, tactical objectives swiftly seized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Sep 44</td>
<td>82nd ABN DIV</td>
<td>Holland</td>
<td>Accurate drops, objectives seized, heavy fighting for several days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Dec 44</td>
<td>A BTY, 457th PFAB</td>
<td>Manarawat, Leyte</td>
<td>Emergency drop of A/457 and artillery pieces with pinpoint accuracy to support 511th PIR ground advance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Feb 45</td>
<td>511th PIR</td>
<td>Tagaytay Ridge, Luzon</td>
<td>First 18 planes accurate, remaining 30 dropped 5 miles short.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Feb 44</td>
<td>503rd PIR (-)</td>
<td>Corregidor Island</td>
<td>Fairly accurate drop, 70 casualties, 210 landing injuries, objectives secured. Subsequent fighting heavy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Mar 45</td>
<td>17th ABN DIV</td>
<td>Rhein Crossing</td>
<td>Some dispersion due to visibility and AAA, all missions accomplished.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### U.S. Airborne Forces

The first official training of American parachute troops began in July of 1940 when a test platoon of volunteers from the 29th Infantry was organized. The Test Platoon trained at Ft. Benning, Georgia, under the command of 1st Lt. William T. Ryder. Warrant Officer Harry Wilson, who was the director of the Air Corps School for parachute riggers at Chanute Field, Illinois, took the fifty men through a qualification course of six jumps. The Test Platoon served as the cadre for the training of the 501st Parachute Battalion, which was organized at Ft. Benning in November of 1940. They completed their

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20 Paratrooper, 174.
22 Paratrooper, 326.
23 Devlin, Paratrooper, 430.
24 Crookenden, Airborne at War, 69
training in March of 1941 and were awarded the first U.S. Army parachute badge on March 22.25

Training and organization was expanded over the next few years. Specialist courses were added to the Parachute School. They included communications training, demolitions training, rigger qualification and camouflage techniques.26 The school rapidly achieved a reputation as a model parachute training center, as officers and men from more than ten nations attended the course.27

Studying the lessons of Crete, and not knowing the extent of the German casualties, the Americans began the expansion of the Airborne Command. It is, perhaps, a fortunate twist of fate that the development of the German and American airborne forces took different paths. While the Germans were clipping the wings of their Fallschirmjäger, the Americans were hitting the silk. Additional battalions were formed and trained. From these first units, cadre were taken and used to organize more parachute infantry regiments and divisions. By the end of WWII there were five airborne divisions; the 11th, 13th, 17th, 82nd and 101st, and several independent units. With the exception of the 13th, all divisions experienced combat to varying degrees.28

Gliders Enter the Scene

While the thrill of jumping from a “great height” suspended from a canvas contraption may have had its place in history, it seems that man’s preoccupation with flying has been more intense. Prior to the invention of the reciprocating engine, numerous attempts at un-powered flight were undertaken in gliders. Many of the inventors whose gliders shakily balanced on the edges of sound aerodynamic principles paid with their lives. Inspired by Leonardo Da Vinci’s drawing of an un-powered aircraft, Otto Lilienthal designed and flew his first successful glider in 1891.29

Since its first flight, the glider has provided enjoyment for aviation enthusiasts as well as another method of bringing combat power to bear on the enemy. The post World War One Treaty of Versailles virtually stripped Germany of any military capability. Planes, tanks and submarines were verboten. The glider, not viewed by the framers of the treaty as an implement of war, was not prohibited by the treaty. Germany used the glider extensively to train the future pilots of the Luftwaffe. In addition, the Germans experimented with its use as an infantry delivery vehicle. It seemed perfectly suited for the task. It could carry an effective, although small, combat unit, it was silent in its employment, and, unlike the parachute, it could conduct limited maneuvering to reach an objective.

U.S. Gliders Forces

The U.S. Airborne Command realized the necessity of being able to deliver larger pieces of equipment, such as jeep and 75mm howitzers, into the field with the airborne forces. They approached the idea along parallel lines to the German’s integration of gliders into their Fallschirmjäger units. The US command knew of the operational success of the German Eben Emael raid, but they did not know the details concerning the use of gliders. It was postulated that Germany had an operational glider force and actively experimented in tactics and construction of various designs. Nonetheless, the use of gliders on a larger scale was proposed.
General Henry H. “Hap” Arnold initiated the American glider program in early 1941. On 4 March he directed the Air Corps Experimental Test Center to design a glider. The specifications of the CG-4 Waco required the transport of ten glidermen and their equipment, a 75mm howitzer and crew or a jeep and crew. This proved to be an interesting arrangement, as the small size of the Waco prevented carrying both the jeep and howitzer. After landing with the Jeep, the crew had to locate the howitzer and gun crew in order to tow it to an operational location.

For various reasons, the glider program was off to a less stellar start than that of the parachute program. This was by no means a reflection on the glider troops. They trained just as hard as the paratroops, yet received no special glider pay, did not initially receive a special glider badge and had to suffer the ridicule of their counterparts who wore special uniform, insignia and bloused their boots. It was not until later in the war that this problem was rectified with glider pay and a specially designed glider qualification badge. As a matter of fact, paratroopers who were allowed to cross-train in gliders quickly developed a measure of respect and admiration for their counterparts as they saw the dangers of “crash landing” a glider first-hand.

It was the 17th Airborne Division’s Commander who pioneered the cross training of glider troops. He allowed several glidermen to undergo jump training at Camp Forrest, TN. The first week of physical conditioning, or “A Stage” was waived since the glidermen previously received just as difficult physical training as the paratroops.

More than a dozen companies were awarded contracts to build the Waco. Construction consisted of metal tubing covered with canvas. The floor was constructed of plywood. Control cables powered by muscles were used to move the flight surfaces. With so many contractors and increasing pressure to produce an ample quantity of aircraft, quality control was not the greatest.

One company, the Robertson Aircraft Corporation of St. Louis, Missouri, scheduled a demonstration of a CG-4 with more than 2,000 onlookers. During the flight, one of the Waco’s wings came off and all occupants, including the Mayor of the city, were killed. A subsequent investigation revealed that one of the 70,000 individual parts in the glider had failed. Ironically, the part subcontractor had transitioned from the coffin manufacturing business.

Cost to manufacture varied from a low of $15,400 to a high of $51,000. Specifications for the glider were as follows:

| TABLE 1.2: SIGNIFICANT US GLIDER OPERATIONS OF WWII |
|----------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| DATE     | UNITS          | LOCATION       | RESULTS                     |
| 10 July 43 | 82nd ABN DIV   | Sicily         | Numerous problems with many     |
| 6 Jun 44  | 82nd ABN DIV   | Normandy       | Wide dispersion but tenacity of glider   |
| 15 Aug 44 | 1st ABN Task Force | Southern France | Minimal casualties, very accurate     |
| 17 Sep 44 | 82nd ABN DIV   | Holland        | Accurate landings, objectives seized,   |
| 24 Mar 45 | 17th ABN DIV   | Rhine Crossing | Some dispersion due to visibility and |

30 America’s Finest, 25.  
31 Paratrooper, p. 453  
32 America’s Finest, 25  
33 Glidermen of Neptune, 10  
34 America’s Finest, 18  
35 America’s Finest, 19.
Figure 1.5. Interior view of a CG-4 glider during training at Lubbock Airfield in Texas. Note the paucity of instrumentation, no protection from small arms fire and flak, and the tube/frame construction.

- Length: 48’
- Wingspan: 83.6’
- Load: 10 combat troops or 75mm howitzer + crew or 1 Jeep + crew
- Construction: Metal tubing, canvas, wood
- Crew: Pilot and Copilot
- Instruments: Airspeed, Altimeter, Climb, Turn Rate
- Production: 13,900 units
- Max Speed: 150 mph

The assignment of glider forces began in earnest with the first American division designated as Airborne, namely the 82nd Airborne Division. It was initially composed of one parachute and two glider regiments. Assigned units were: the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, the 325th and 326th Glider Infantry Regiments, the 319th and 320th Glider Field Artillery Battalions, the 376th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, the 80th Airborne Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion and the 307th Parachute Engineer Battalion.

It was anticipated that this 2:1 mix of glider forces to parachute forces would be ideal. As a result of the delays in development and production of sufficient quantities of gliders, and a smaller number of trained glider drivers than anticipated, the 2:1 ratio was later changed to 1:2, (glider regiment to parachute regiments).

Glider units would be an integral part of every airborne division during the war. They fought side by side with their paratroop counterparts, enduring demanding training conditions and the deadly sting of battle. They rightfully secured an honorable place in history as part of the greatest generation. By the time the 17th Airborne Division was activated, the concept of airborne and glider forces was solidified, the training and organization of these units had undergone several modifications, and the first paratroopers had tasted battle in North Africa. The airborne division was now an integral part of the U.S. force structure.

36 Glidermen of Neptune, 16
The Birth of the Golden Talon

As the US Army expanded, so did the size of the Airborne Corps. On 15 August 1942, the 82nd Airborne Division was activated. The 82nd “All American” was divided; from that split came the 101st Airborne Division, the “Screaming Eagles”. From this formation emerged yet another unit, the 17th Airborne Division, the “Golden Talon.” To form the 17th, a cadre was selected from the 101st at Ft Bragg, North Carolina. The Talon’s official activation date was 15 April 1943. Major General William M. Miley, a member of the 101st, was selected for command. He was anxious to get the training of his new division underway.

Division strength as of 1 September 1943 was 563 officers, 19 warrant officers, and 9060 enlisted men for a total of 9642 troops. The unit was organized with two Glider Infantry Regiments (GIR), the 193rd and the 194th, and one Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), the 513th. Division Artillery consisted of two Glider Field Artillery Battalions (GFAB), the 680th and 681st, and one Parachute Field Artillery Battalion (PFAB), the 466th.

To complement the combat capabilities of the infantry regiments and the field artillery battalions, several additional units rounded out the division. These units aided the mobility, effectiveness and capability of the combat arms.

- 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion (AEB)
- 155th Airborne Anti-Aircraft Battalion (AAAB)
- Division Headquarters Company
- Military Police Platoon
- 717th Airborne Signal Company
- 411th Airborne Quartermaster Company
- 717th Airborne Ordnance Company
- Division Band

The “wiring diagram” for the division as of June 1944 was as depicted in Figure 2.2.

By June of 1944, the division’s organization was nearly complete. General Miley had assembled a talented group for his staff. Each of these officers was selected for his professional qualities, character and organizational capabilities. For his Assistant Division Commander, Miley had at his disposal Brigadier General John L. Whitelaw. His Division Artillery Commander was Brigadier General Joseph V. Phelps. The staff consisted of the following officers:

In order to ensure the division functioned properly, it took the special talents and organizational skill of several more officers. Each of these officers was responsible for the underlying success of the operation of the entire division. Without their dedication and persistence, it would have been impossible for such a large unit to function in concert as a formidable component of the Army’s fighting force.

Although these officers provided the initial leadership and direction to ensure that General Miley’s objectives were met, it took an enormous amount of effort, talent and initiative on the part of non-commissioned officers and enlisted troops to make things happen. At this point it would be callous not to highlight some very significant points. First of all, every good officer who has served in the armed forces of this nation recognizes that their success is, to a great measure, the result of one or more talented, patient and resourceful NCOs. Without them they would have had to learn much through the process of trial and error. An open-minded and somewhat humble officer who drew on the experience of an NCO and listened to his sage advice increased his chances for success.

The second point can be made clear by the old military saying-- “Don’t call me sir; I work for a living”. Only one who has served in the military can recognize the massive amount of labor that is required to allow a divisional sized unit to function properly. This capability is attributable to the unceasing efforts of thousands of troopers spending hours upon hours of their time to achieve success. It is very unfortunate

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40 CoS: Chief of Staff.
that history is reluctant to record the names and contributions of the many humble troopers who contributed to the great heritage of our military. It seems that many of the documents and books published after the war chiefly identify the commanders or those who were singled out for bravery. As such, it was simple to document the names of each of the unit commanders and the divisional staff officers, but quite a formidable task to find the names of every member of a given unit. It is only due to the recollections and archived photographs of veterans that this would be possible.

During the second week of June, 1944, the Commanding General of the Army Ground Forces, Lieutenant General Lesley James McNair, conducted an inspection of the 17th Airborne Division. The division was completing parachute training for many of the glider troopers at Camp Forrest, Tennessee. The capacity to train parachutists at the Parachute School at Fort Benning, Georgia, was near its peak, so Gen. Miley set up a similar school at Camp Forrest for his division. The school was set up by former members of the Parachute School including the former assistant commandant. Miley’s staff claimed that the accident rate of his school was less than that of the Benning School. Members of the Army Ground Forces staff doubted the claims; however, they did not investigate further.\footnote{U.S. War Department, \textit{Meeting Minutes of the General Council: 1944 Series No. 24, 19 June 1944} (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 15.}
Gen. Miley claimed that these efforts to provide parachute training for his glidermen “effected a marked improvement in discipline of his paratroopers.” Gen. McNair was in agreement with this claim based on his personal observations.⁴²

**Leadership by Example**

Gen. Miley came from a family with a long lineage of military service. Three previous generations before him served in the United States Army. Two great-grandfathers, his grandfather, his father, his great-uncle, his brother and his son all served in the military. His father and older brother graduated from West Point.

Gen. Miley’s early career, which began following graduation from West Point in 1918, took him through many long assignments with few promotions. Since he graduated in 1918, he missed World War I and entered a military that was in decline. Their budget was drastically curtailed, the enlisted and officer corps was sharply reduced and the nation’s concern over military matters waned, as the League of Nations wrapped up the “war to end all wars”. The time between the two world wars was somewhat humbling, very austere and filled with challenges. In the twenty-two years between the wars, he would be promoted only three times.

In September, 1940, as a Major assigned as the Post Athletic Officer at Fort Benning, Georgia, he accepted command of the 501st Parachute Infantry Battalion. He was eager to get back to an operational assignment with troops. By the beginning of November he had assembled his battalion of parachutist-volunteers. Lt. Ryder and the other members of the Parachute Test Platoon began training Miley’s Battalion. Upon completion of their training, the officers of the battalion orchestrated the first official “Prop Blast” in honor of this special occasion. The special drinking tankard used to consume the special brew concocted for the celebration was known as the “Miley Mug.”⁴³

As a Colonel, Miley went on to command the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and was subsequently promoted to Brigadier General to serve as the Assistant Division Commander (ADG) of the newly activated 96th...
Infantry Division in Oregon. He was quickly transferred back with the parachutists once again as the ADG of the newly formed 82nd Airborne Division.\(^{44}\) On 17 April 1943 Major General William M. Miley assumed command of the 17th Airborne Division.\(^{45}\) In just three years, Miley rose in rank from Major to Major General, gaining four promotions in short order.

Miley always led by example, requiring his officers to do the same. His precedent was to never ask his soldiers to do anything that he or his officers would not do themselves. As an example of his leadership, he himself undertook the task of conducting a series of jump experiments to determine the heaviest load with which a paratrooper could jump under combat conditions. Without complaint, he endured the tests, suffering many bruises and eventually a fracture.\(^{46}\)

His handling of a soldier who refused to ride in a glider during training at Camp Mackall is another example of his style. The soldier was removed from training and sent to the stockade while the chain of command determined how to deal with the man’s refusal. Miley was briefed on the situation, including a summary of the soldier’s otherwise good training record. Rather than taking disciplinary action, Miley drove in his sedan to the guardhouse, and he and the soldier rode around the post for awhile. The Pvt. admitted to Gen. Miley that he feared dying in the glider in a crash. Miley convinced the soldier that it was safe. Together they drove to the airfield and completed a ride in a glider including a safe landing. With that, the soldier continued his training.\(^{47}\)

\(^{44}\) Paratrooper, 120, 121, 128.

\(^{45}\) Donald R. Pay, Thunder From Heaven (Birmingham: Boots, the Airborne Quarterly, 1947), 16.

\(^{46}\) Thunder From Heaven, 15-16.

A similar situation in the neighboring 11th Airborne Division, also at Camp Mackall, was resolved in an entirely different manner. On 19 November 1943, Pvt. Ware B. Gurley, of the 224th Airborne Medical Company was ordered to go aloft in a glider. He refused the order of Maj. Henry L. Bastian to get into a CG-4A Glider. He was arrested, a Court Martial was convened and on 25 November 1943 he was found guilty under Article 64 and sentenced. He was discharged, his pay was forfeited and he was ordered confined at hard labor for twenty-five years. Certainly the circumstances were somewhat different, but it underscores the leadership style imparted by Gen. Miley within his division.

**Welcome to Camp Mackall:**

Arriving at the receiving station for a first assignment or for initial training was a very humbling experience. The troopers arrived at a strange location, where they didn’t really know or trust anyone and in many cases, as recruits or replacements, someone was yelling at them. Home must have felt very far away, and in most cases, it was. Camp Mackall might have seemed familiar to those who grew up in the pine covered, sandy terrain of North Carolina, but to most it might as well have been on foreign soil (To those from the north the locals even spoke with a strange accent.).

The creation of Camp Hoffman, as it was originally called, began in the fall of 1942. After six short months of construction, the camp was complete.

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49 Author unknown, *Camp Mackall*, XVIII Airborne Corps Historian Office, Date unknown, p. 1

50 *Camp Mackall, North Carolina*, 5.

51 17th Airborne Division, 19.
Africa. Pvt. Mackall succumbed to his wounds 4 days later in Gibraltar. He was buried on 12 November by the British at the base of that famous site. Mackall was named as the first American paratrooper to be killed in combat during WWII. His family was invited to attend the camp initiation ceremonies on 1 May 1943.

The Camp was divided into two major training areas. These were termed the North Area and the South Area. To allow for glider and troop transport training, as well as to facilitate parachute-training operations, a large field was constructed. It consisted of approximately three miles of runway arrayed in a triangular fashion.

Being of new construction, the camp had numerous facilities to cater to the free time demands of the troops, what little there might have been. Seven separate service clubs located in various camp areas provided a relaxing environment for troopers to write letters, read, listen to music or socialize. For visiting family and friends, two guesthouses were constructed. Each house could accommodate seventy-five guests. The rate per day was quite appealing at 75 cents. For the learned reader, the base had three libraries with many titles and subjects available. To complete the facilities of Camp Mackall, the following other amenities and facilities were offered:

- 2 Cafeterias
- 16 Post Exchanges
- 60 Barbers
- A modern portrait studio
- Main post office with 2 sub stations
- 12 Chapels serviced by 28 Chaplains
- 5 Theaters
- 3 Red Cross offices
- 2 Baseball diamonds
- 6 Drill fields for sports activities
- 1 Amphitheater
- Hunting and fishing facilities
- Swimming and water recreation

To allow troopers to get away to some of the nearby towns, a regular bus route was established by a few private bus companies. Nearby towns consisted of Hamlet, Southern Pines, Pinehurst, Aberdeen and Rockingham. The Seaboard Airline Railway had a station located in Hamlet. The nearest airline facility, for those who could afford the luxury and needed to get home quickly, was located 85 miles away in Charlotte. All in all, it seemed that the outlying communities were very receptive to the additional activity and commerce provided by the presence of the many troops.

Telephone service was another way for troopers to connect with families and loved ones. Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company established phone centers on Camp Mackall. Apparently they viewed this as a business opportunity for the company as well as a necessary service to lonesome soldiers. Phone centers were staffed with operator-attendants and a full time telephone manager.

52 Paratrooper, 196.
53 Camp Mackall, North Carolina, p.5.
54 Camp Mackall, North Carolina, 22.
for the post. In addition to the phone centers, there were a large number of unattended public telephones scattered throughout the camp.\textsuperscript{55} Phone charges in 1944 were far more expensive than they are today. A three minute, weekday, person-to-person call from Camp Mackall to Los Angeles California, cost $4.75. With a trooper’s basic pay around $50 that was quite an expense.

All of the previous information paints quite a blissful picture of life at Camp Mackall. Much of this is gleaned from official sources published during the World War II. The war had, by this time, touched the lives of everyone in America. No one was immune from the suffering. These sources were concerned with boosting morale and keeping everyone focused on the positive aspects of what was indeed a very depressing time for many. The recollections of the veterans of the 17\textsuperscript{th}, however, bear out the true nature of the camp and life therein.

The expedited execution of the construction contract was due in part to the low quality of the buildings. For the most part buildings were constructed of wood and covered with tarpaper. Many years after the events of life here have faded, the faintest trace of the odor of tar will spark memories of Camp Mackall for the veterans who trained there. The insulation quality was low and as a result the facilities were cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Cooling was accomplished with a series of open windows and heat was provided by one bituminous coal burning stove that was centrally located. Troopers’ bunks that were close to the stove gained a margin of comfort while those farthest away might as well have been without heat. Showers and latrine facilities were in separate buildings. For the most part, these had no heat. Troopers would turn on the showers and warm up the area with the steam.

The new recruits arrived at Camp Mackall by train. As they unloaded from the trains at the station, their new instructors greeted them. Many of the cadre of the 17\textsuperscript{th} were former members of the 82\textsuperscript{nd} Airborne Division. These hardened paratroopers got right to the business of training. The air was filled with the sounds of dropped luggage, shuffling feet, instructions being given, commands being shouted, corrections being made and directives to do push-ups being issued. By the end of the first day each soldier was

\textsuperscript{55} Camp Mackall, North Carolina, 25.
most likely bewildered, shocked and dog-tired. Most importantly, each of them was on his way to becoming a soldier, gliderman or paratrooper.

The first few days were spent in-processing, receiving the final clothing allowance, and getting acclimated to the barracks. Most movement to a new building or training location was done at double time. Minor infractions of military bearing, procedures or discipline earned another round of push-ups for the violator and, in many cases, those in his immediate vicinity. Sometimes push-ups were doled out just as a matter of principle. No real reason was needed. This seemed, to many, to make no sense at all. The assignment of push-ups did, in fact, have a definite purpose. The physical demands of parachute and glider training required each recruit to be in excellent physical condition. The constant running and push-ups built strength, stamina and endurance.

Once the troops were fully in-processsed and had received their barracks and unit assignments, the basic training got underway in earnest. Troops started to learn the basics of being an infantryman, artilleryman or a combat engineer. The experiences in training varied as the war progressed. During the early days of Camp Mackall, each trooper’s training was very detailed and complete. No minor area of instruction was overlooked. As the war progressed and there became a greater need to fill the holes in the ranks created by casualties, training was curtailed to a certain extent. Some of the troops recall that they barely knew how to fire a rifle or wear the uniform. This increased the apprehension and fear about entering combat.

Those fortunate to join the 17th before it deployed to England were able to form close-knit bonds with members of their units. They were able to learn the strengths and limitations of their leaders, and gain a margin of confidence in their role within their platoon or company. The engineers were no exception to this experience.
17th Airborne Division

This is to Certify That:

Sgt. John A. Pettell 33617668

has, in accordance with provisions of paragraph IV of War Department Circular 220, 2 June 1944, satisfactorily completed the prescribed course in Knots and Lashings, loading Organizational Equipment, Safe Loading Principles, and has made the prescribed number of Glider Flights. He is, therefore rated from this date as a qualified gliderman.

6 January 1944

By Command of Major General MILEY

OFFICIAL: Gabe W. Lewis, Jr.

W. K. LIEBEL
Colonel, GSC,
Chief of Staff
Brief History of the Corps of Engineers

The US Army Engineer Corps dates back to the Revolutionary War. During that time, there were few colonists with any engineering skills or experience in practical construction, particularly when it came to the building of fortifications and construction in support of the attack or defense. A resolution by the Continental Congress provided one Chief Engineer of the Grand Army, another Chief Engineer to support and two assistants to head a separate department. Colonel Richard Gridley was appointed Chief Engineer on 3 July 1775.

At the urging of General George Washington, and recognizing the need for more skilled engineers, the Continental Congress authorized the further expansion of an engineer corps. The act which created these engineers stated that its officers were to be “skilled in the necessary branches of mathematics; the noncommissioned officers to write a good hand.” French officers helped organize small companies of engineers. Their job consisted mainly of building field fortifications.

One of the foreign military engineers who came to assist the fledgling establishment was Thaddeus Kosciuszko, a Polish officer who had been trained in the engineering schools of Germany, Italy and France. He is known as the father of the engineers.

In 1802, an act of Congress created the permanent structure which became the foundation of today’s Corps of Engineers. The act specified:

“That the President of the United States is hereby authorized and empowered, when he shall deem it expedient, to organize and establish a Corps of Engineers, to consist of one engineer, with the pay, rank and emoluments of a major; two assistant engineers, with the pay, rank and emoluments of captain, two other assistant engineers, with the pay, rank and emoluments of first lieutenant; and ten cadets with the pay of sixteen dollars per month and two rations per day...

The act further established a military academy at West Point, New York, with the principal engineer as the Superintendent of the school. Jonathan Williams, appointed Major, Corps of Engineers, became the first Superintendent of the United States Military Academy on 13 April 1802. The first class consisted of Cadets Joseph Gardner Swift, Simon M. Levy and Walker Keith Armistead.

The size of the fledgling corps remained relatively small until the outbreak of the Civil War. During that time, the size was increased to four companies, a relatively small size compared to its current strength.

The First World War saw the first dramatic increase in the size of the Corps. The static nature of the conflict caused field fortifications to play an important role in preserving the fighting capabilities of forces. Building and maintaining transportation lines, securing safe water supplies, tending to the massive camouflage needs were but a few of the additional tasks assigned to engineers. The strength grew from 2,500 men to approximately 300,000.

56 The Engineer School, ROTC Special Text 25-1 History and Traditions of the Corps of Engineers (Fort Belvoir, The Engineer School, 1953), 1.
57 ROTC Special Text 25-1, 1.
59 ROTC Special Text 25-1, 2-3.
60 ROTC Special Text 25-1, 11.
61 ROTC Special Text 25-1, 11.
62 The Corps of Engineers, 2.
As was typical of American policy regarding the military, after each major conflict, the size and activity of the forces were severely reduced. Following World War I the same fate awaited the Corps of Engineers. By 1939 there were only twelve engineer troop units. They were not at full strength, lacked much of their equipment and had an insufficient number of trained specialists. A few years later, when the Army was operating at peak efficiency in 1944 there were over 1,800 engineer troop units with full manpower, adequate training and a full complement of equipment. The specialized units expanded to include topographic companies, camouflage battalions, engineer fire fighting platoons, engineer aviation regiments and airborne engineer battalions such as the 139th AEB.63

**Activation of the 139th AEB**

The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion was activated along with the 17th Airborne Division on 15 April 1943. The activation was pursuant to authority of the Commanding General of the SECOND Army in accordance with *War Department, The Adjutant General; Washington D.C. Letter AG 320.2 dated 31 December 1942*. The battalion was assigned the combat call sign of *Chateau*, the French word for castle, owing to the symbol of the Corps of Engineers that adorned the men’s uniforms.

**General Order Number 1, 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion** was signed on 15 April 1943 by its new Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Stanley T. B. Johnson. The order officially activated the Battalion Headquarters, assigned Lt. Col. Johnson as the commander, and appointed the battalion staff as follows:64

- Maj. James I. Mason Executive Officer
- 1st Lt. Karl M. Rosswog, S-1, Adjutant
- Capt. John G. Wurtz, Jr. S-2/3 Intel/Ops
- 1st Lt. John G. Lee S-4 Supply

The Battalion Commander was attending the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas at the time. The training he received at Ft. Leavenworth would be more than adequate to prepare him to organize his staff, oversee the training

63 *ROTC Special Text 25-1*, 57.

The Battalion consisted of a Headquarters and Service (H&S) Company, Able and Baker Companies (glider), Charlie Company (parachute) and the Medical Section. It was organized under Table of Organization and Equipment (T/O & E) 5-227.

The T/O & E for a Glider Engineer Company, dated 1 August 1944, specified the makeup of an Engineer Glider Company. The unit consisted of the Headquarters Element and two Platoons with a total of ninety-one troopers; eighty-seven enlisted men and four officers.68 The Headquarters Element contained fifteen troopers; thirteen enlisted men and two officers. The Company Commander with a grade of Captain and the Executive Officer with a grade of Second Lieutenant made up the officers. The enlisted members of the element consisted of a First Sergeant, a Staff Sergeant to direct the element, a Supply Sergeant, a Company Clerk, and ten enlisted engineers who assisted in the general operation, defense and logistics of the company.69

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Each of the two platoons was composed of thirty-eight men; thirty-seven enlisted men and one officer. The officer, with the grade of First Lieutenant, served as the Platoon Commander. Each Platoon contained a Platoon Sergeant, a Staff Sergeant, three Sergeant Squad Leaders, three Corporal Assistant

65Original Unit History, 1.
66Original Unit History, 1.
67Original Unit History, 1.
69T.O. & E. 5-228, 1 August 1944, 1-2.
Squad Leaders and twenty-nine engineers in grades ranging from Private to Technician 5th Class, depending on time in service and qualifications.70

The platoon was equipped with a generous level of firepower. Along with the individual weapons (three .45 caliber sub machineguns, ten M1A1 carbines and twenty-five M1 Garand rifles), the platoon had two M1919 air cooled .30 caliber machine guns, three 2.36” rocket launchers, three M7 grenade launchers, three engineer squad demolition sets No. 1, an engineer platoon demolition set No. 2 and twenty-four engineer individual demolition sets No. 5.71 This amounted to a considerable level of firepower and destructive capability for a single platoon. Considering the ample supply of antipersonnel and anti-tank mines allocated to the division, a properly led engineer platoon was capable of making the enemy’s assault very costly.

The basic fighting element of the Engineer Company was the Engineer Squad. The squads contained the bulk of the engineer troopers. The composition of the nine-man engineer squad is illustrated in Figure 3.5. They carried out the multitude of engineering and infantry tasks assigned to the company. They were capable of a vast array of construction tasks including building bridges, general fortification improvements and constructing shelters. They were able to emplace and document friendly minefields as well as locate, mark and remove enemy minefields. They were also skilled in the art of defusing enemy booby traps, and were well-versed in the use of demolitions, including American, British and German types. They could emplace obstacles or remove them and they often fought as infantry. They were also skilled in reconnaissance operations.72

Along with the standard complement of supplies and gear, the engineers were issued chemical detector kits, carpenter equipment, pneumatic boats for reconnaissance and limited river crossing operations, demolition equipment, camouflage materials, pioneering equipment, a compressor, light messenger motorcycles and demining equipment.73

The T/O & E for the Airborne Engineer units underwent changes as after-action reports and lessons learned came from battlefield commanders. The War Department issued a new T/O & E on 16 December 1944, ironically on the same date that Hitler launched Operation WACHT AM RHEIN. The key changes made in this T/O & E were the incorporation of an additional platoon in each company and an increase in the size of the headquarters elements. Figure 3.7 illustrates the changes to the Airborne Engineer Battalion’s force structure as directed by the new T/O & E.74

The increase in the size of the company served to make it more effective with an additional platoon and an organic mess and transportation capability. The addition of three gasoline engine driven crawler tractors (deleted August 1945), a 2 ½ ton dump truck, a 2 ½ ton cargo truck and four Jeeps with two trailers necessitated the allocation of trained vehicle operators.

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70 T.O. & E. 5-228, 1 August 1944, 1-2.
71 T.O. & E. 5-228, 1 August 1944, 2-5.
73 T.O. & E. 5-228, 1 August 1944, 2-5.
During the 1940’s most of the young men coming into the Army were not trained in driving and maintaining vehicles. Few lived in families who had the wherewithal to afford a car or truck, and hence these men had no experience operating a motor vehicle. Those who lived on farms or who had certain jobs in the urban areas might have had experience operating a tractor, truck or car. These usually became the unit’s drivers. The selection process at the induction centers attempted to screen inductees to cull those with experience operating construction equipment or heavy machinery. Many times these men were assigned to engineer replacement training units.

The Company Headquarters Element added a mess sergeant, three cooks, a cook’s helper, an armorer, three light truck drivers and two additional basic engineers, increasing the size of the element to twenty-four troopers and two officers, eleven enlisted members more than the previous TO&E. The size of the operating squads was kept the same, but the Platoon Headquarters Element added a tractor driver and a light truck driver. The addition of organic transportation and messing was a great boost to morale. Most of these new elements were in place with the 139th when they entered combat west of Bastogne in December 1944.75

The total size of the Engineer Company grew from 91 to 146. The company now had organic transportation, messing capability and a specialist to repair and maintain the unit’s organic weapons such as the Bazooka and M1919 machine guns. The Engineer Company could, in essence, double as a light infantry company in the defensive role with a limited offensive capability. The troopers found themselves on the line in the infantry role quite often. During the Ardennes Campaign it would be their christening combat role. Filling a gap in the division’s frontal boundary,
Capt. Cornell Pope led his engineers into battle on 4 January 1945 as infantrymen.

**Training Begins in Earnest**

About five weeks after the cadre started their Cadre Course, the trainees began to arrive at Camp Mackall. The first gaggle arrived on 20 April 1943. Voluntary enlistees and draftees from the many Induction Centers arrived to fill the ranks of Able and Baker Companies. Once the inductees completed their basic training with the 139th, Charlie Company was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia to complete parachutist training. During these four weeks, the remainder of the battalion attended various specialist courses to accentuate the skills of the engineers. Those who went to Fort Benning had never worked harder in their lives. Many of them also received their first furloughs. Upon graduation they received their wings, celebrated and also received a seven day furlough with instructions to return to Camp Mackall upon completion of the leave.76

Once the unit was reunited at Mackall, battalion level training began in earnest.

The battalion joined in many field training exercises in and around the camp.77 Their purpose was to take the individual training skills learned by the engineers and combine them at the platoon level, the company level and eventually at the battalion level. This ensured that the entire unit could function as a cohesive force in support of the division objectives. Unit-level field training problems and exercises also allowed the staff and officer corps to practice coordination, communication and command. Even in garrison these tasks are somewhat difficult, but in the field they became very challenging. Things done easily on the post were exceptionally difficult at night, in the rain, without an operable radio or working wire communications line. Lt. Col. Johnson needed these challenges to hone the skills of his staff and commanders so that in combat each would function with the best effectiveness possible.

Finally, on 4 February 1944, the 139th was ordered to Portland, Tennessee to participate in the “Tennessee Maneuvers”. This would be a division level exercise whose purpose was to certify that the division was ready for deployment. The battalion departed on 4 February via rail transportation under cool and rainy conditions. They arrived at their

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76 *Original Unit History*, 1.
77 *Original Unit History*, 2.
bivouac location on 5 February. They spent the next ten days preparing for the maneuvers.

Many of the 17th troopers described the conditions during the maneuvers as very arduous. They lamented the weather, as it was cold, rainy and snowy much of the time. As a member of the Division Headquarters described;

“It is bitter cold here for the last couple days. The ground is frozen and a strong wind blows continuously. We get very little sleep under these conditions. At breakfast the food got cold before we could eat it, and the last of the coffee froze in the cup...It rained torrents for the last three days, with the Nashville papers claiming it was the worst flooding in years, leaving us working in a sea of mud. Our “A” bags got wet and the clothes inside are mildewed. Supplies are stalled and meals are irregular.”

There could be no better environment to prepare the troopers for the future combat conditions in Belgium during what would be the worst winter in forty years.

During the Tennessee Maneuvers, the 139th was notified of a drastic organizational change. In its entirety, Charlie Company was withdrawn from the unit and reassigned as the Engineer Company of the 517th Parachute Combat Team. Soon after the notification, that Team was alerted for overseas duty. To replace the immense void created by this reassignment, the 597th Airborne Engineer Company, under the Command of 1st Lt. Victor D. Filimon was designated Company C, 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion. These changes were instituted pursuant to; “Change in Assignment and Redesignation of Certain Units (AG 322 29 February 44 OB-1-GNGCT-M, War Department, Washington, D.C., dated 3 March 1944).”

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79 Sam Marks, “Tennessee Maneuvers: January to March 1944” Thunder From Heaven 51 No. 3 (September 2004) 88.
Figure 3.11 Lt. Col. S.T.B. Johnson following his assignment to the 13th Airborne Division after VE Day.

The following officers would command the respective companies and would lead their men into combat in the Ardennes:

- Capt. George W. Kross, Jr. A Company
- Capt. Cornell Pope B Company
- 1st Lt. Victor D. Filimon C Company
- Capt. Karl M. Rosswog H&S Company

After six more weeks under simulated combat conditions, the maneuvers were over, but the heavy training schedule continued for many months. The unit was trucked from Portland to Camp Forrest, Tennessee on 24 March 1944. Ironically, exactly one year later they would be riding in gliders to land in Germany for Operation VARSITY.

At Camp Forrest, the men continued specialist training. They completed courses in bridging, demolition, camouflage, maintenance and operation of the assigned vehicles among other courses. Furloughs were also issued to ensure the men received an opportunity to visit loved ones prior to deployment overseas.

The engineers’ training had consisted of several months of grueling courses of instruction under spartan conditions. The leaders earned the respect of their men; they were confident and effective. Lt. Col. Johnson felt that his battalion was nearly ready for battle.

The remaining weeks passed quickly, and on 10 August 1944, the 17th Airborne Division received movement orders to join the European Theater of Operations (ETO). They left via rail transportation to Camp Miles Standish, Massachusetts, their port of embarkation. The formation and state-side training of the 139th was complete. On 24 August 1944, the unit was not yet at full strength, but the S-1 reported the manning as follows:

- Officers: 26
- Warrant Officers: 2
- Enlisted Men: 393
- Total Strength: 421

**Lt. Col. Stanley Tine Birger Johnson**

Lieutenant Colonel Stanley T. B. Johnson was the Battalion’s first commander. He served in that capacity until the war’s end. He led them from the unit’s activation on 15 April 1945 until just after the war’s end, when he was reassigned to command the 127th Airborne Engineer Battalion of the 13th Airborne Division, June 1945.

Stanley Tine Birger Johnson was born in Jamestown, New York on 21 April 1913. His parents, Oscar Birger Johnson and Ester Sophia Rosengren, emigrated from Sweden to Jamestown, New York, where they married. Stanley was their only child. One of Stanley’s grandfathers, Karl Rosengren, served with the Swedish military as a *Fahnjunkaran* of the Livgardet in Stockholm.

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81 *Original Unit History*, 2.
82 *Marches*, 1.
84 Susan Johnson, “*Genealogy and Burial Information of Johnson/Rosengren*,” 5 Jun 1988, np.
By all accounts, the family lived quite well in New York where Stanley grew up. Following graduation from high school in 1931, Stanley was nominated to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York and subsequently received an appointment. He entered as a new cadet, class of 1935. Upon graduation, he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Field Artillery and subsequently transferred to the Corps of Engineers. Two years later, on 24 November 1937, he married Barbara Wilde in the Cadet Chapel at West Point. Together they raised three children, two boys and a girl, the youngest.

In 1938 he graduated from Cornell University with a Master’s Degree in Engineering. One of his first units of assignment as a young officer was the 3rd Infantry Division, specifically its 6th Engineers. From 1939 to 1942 He served as the Assistant to the District Engineer and Executive in the Louisville, Kentucky District of the Corps of Engineers.85 Following this assignment, he was selected for attendance at the Army Command and General Staff School, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. It was there that he received his notice that he was to command the 139th.

Lt. Col Johnson’s philosophy of running the battalion was most likely refreshing to his Non-commissioned Officers. When Johnson’s son deployed to Vietnam in 1965, his father conveyed to him his philosophy of leadership:

“...I called a meeting of all the BN’s Sergeants and told them that they ran the BN and as far as I was concerned was to see to it that all their needs from bullets to hot water and socks, wrenches and bolts; to fight this damned war was my job. Just let me know when, where and how much and I’ll do my utmost to make it happen. We were Fighting The Battle of the Bulge. Your Mother was also fighting her own Battle of the Bulge, giving birth to you “little Trooper” as the doctor proclaimed delivering you into the loving arms of your Mother. As history has shown, your mother, I and my Sergeants all did a splendid job of it. So Troop, never forget your Sergeants and those who help you along the way.”

85 “Genealogy and Burial Information of Johnson/Rosengren,” np.

**Meet the Engineers**

The men of the 139th came mainly from the Midwest and New England region. Recruiting to fill the growing ranks of America’s combat divisions was done by regions. Inductees from specific states tended to end up in certain divisions. The 17th Airborne Division took most of its recruits from the northeast region of the country, although there are numerous exceptions. Many of those assigned to parachute units were volunteers, taken from other airborne divisions. The glider and special troops were predominately draftees, or reassigned from elsewhere to the 17th.

The age of the engineers varied from very young, to fairly old for recruits. Clyde E. Sheely was a relative youngster when he entered service. He was born in 1925 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania graduating from high school before enlisting. Born in 1911, Simon L. Troutman grew up in Oriental, Pennsylvania, a relatively old man when he entered service.

Despite heavy recruitment from the New England region, some of the parachutists came from different places across the country, and hence the 139th was made up of men from all corners of America. Devon E. Zolman was born in Claypool, Indiana in 1923. There was Kenneth E. Meyers of Brookville, Pennsylvania, and A.C. “Buddy” Green, who hailed from Cordell Oklahoma. He entered
Sgt. Francis “Frank” C. Cassidy Jr. joined the Army on 14 April 1942 and spent part of that year with the 331st Engineers, Company D at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. He was in Canada and Alaska from August 1942 to December 1943. Apparently tired of building runways in Alaska and Canada, several of his friends volunteered for airborne training. He was in Company I of the 1st Parachute Training Regiment at Fort Benning, GA, graduating 5 February 1944. He must have really wanted to be a Paratrooper because his son remembered that he always had a problem with heights. He spent some time in the 597th Parachute Engineers before being assigned to the 659th Airborne Engineers Company C at Camp Pickett, VA. His Regiment was broken up and he was reassigned to the 17th Airborne and the 139th.\textsuperscript{87}

Leicester C. Stift was inducted in the U.S. Army in March of 1943 at the age of 18. Besides basic training, he went to jump school to become a paratrooper. He also went through several different demolition training courses and qualified as a Sharpshooter with the M1 Carbine and as a Marksman with the M1 Garand. Leicester spent the bulk of his military career as a Technician, 5th Grade. He was 20 years old when he arrived in the ETO on 8 February 1945. He was assigned as a replacement to Charlie Company.\textsuperscript{88}

Sgt. Harlin M. Ratsch hailed from Rochester, Minnesota. He came to Camp Joseph T. Robinson, Arkansas on 23 February 1943 where he completed Basic Training. In an excerpt from his journal he recounts his transfer to the airborne:

“We took Basic Infantry Training here at Camp Joseph T. Robinson outside of Little Rock, Arkansas. Betty came down for a weekend the first part of May. Was assigned to Co. D – 68th Battalion of the 14th Training Regiment while here. Signed up to join the “Paratroops”. Will leave here soon for Fort Benning, Georgia.”\textsuperscript{89}

Mark R. Krosch was from Morris, Minnesota. He was born in 1912 and worked in a number of jobs during the depression, he hitchhiked to California service on 11 June 1943. He took demolition training at Camp Abbot, Oregon, parachute training at Fort Benning, Georgia and was assigned as a Demolition Specialist with the 139th.\textsuperscript{90}
and, given the nature of his family history, he enlisted in the Army.90

S/Sgt. Charles Renner grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, entered the Army on 13 January 1943 and took basic training at Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

Raymond Leuthey, from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania joined the service on 29 March 1943. He served in the 139th from his initial enlistment until the unit was deactivated.

PFC William F. Murphy’s hometown was Boston, Massachusetts. He joined the Army on March 7, 1943 and completed Basic Training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. He was initially assigned to the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) where he completed a month of college at the University of Alabama and eight months at Boston University. He subsequently joined the 139th.

90 http://www.tributes.com/show/Mark-Krosch-89686461

“In April or May of 1944 ASTP was phasing out so I took an exam for the U.S. Army Air Force and passed it. I was due to be sent to Greensboro North Carolina (I think) but the First Sergeant called me into his office and told me that I was going flying, but it would be in the 17th Airborne Division. I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about, but I soon found out!”91

Sgt. George W. Niccollet left Broad Channel, New York and entered service on 13 November 1943. He initially served with the 9th Armored Engineer Battalion taking basic training at Camp Funston, Kansas before joining the 597th Engineer Jump Company and eventually the 139th.92

S/Sgt. Vincent Mazza was following his chosen career path when the war interrupted his plans, as it had done for millions of other Americans. He recalls:

“I was 16 years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked. I was starting my second year in business school. At 17 years of

age I passed a civil service exam and was appointed as a secretary by the U.S. Engineer Departments and worked there until I was drafted at age 18 from Syracuse, New York with 5,000 men... only men who worked in construction, demolition equipment operators and repairs were sent to the engineer battalion. Men from every state was in the battalion and the average age was 32 because we had older men... most 18 year old men were sent to the infantry.”93

The Battalion Executive Officer, Major James I. Mason hailed from Seeleyville, Indiana. He attended Rose Polytechnic Institute, where he graduated with a degree in Mechanical Engineering and a reserve commission as a Second Lieutenant. On 11 November 1940, he entered active duty as a First Lieutenant serving at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. He served on the cadre for the formation of the 307th Engineers of the 82nd Infantry Division (prior to its designation as an airborne unit) and as a member of the cadre for the 101st Division as the Division Engineer. After attending the Field Grade Officers Course at Ft. Belvoir, he was transferred to the 139th AEB. He completed Airborne School at Camp Forrest.94

Each of the engineers had their story of how they made their way to the 139th. George W. Nicollet recalls:

“While on desert training with the 9th Armored Division (north of Needles, Calif.), myself and a few friends decided to volunteer for the paratroopers. We were sent down to Fort Benning... After 5 jumps we got our wings. We were sent to Camp Mackall and all engineers were put in a pool. The 597 Engineers were activated and we were sent to Millstone Lake, North Carolina just outside of Hoffman.”95

Richard Shibley was born and raised in Akron, Ohio and attended Kenyon College. He:

“... left school to join the Marines on Jan. 7, 1943, but was “washed out in basic training” because of a broken neck he got while playing football at Kenyon. He returned to and spent the next three months driving a milk wagon for Reiter Dairy, before enlisting in the U.S. Army and signing on to be a paratrooper. “They made $30 more a month,” Shibley said, adding there was an extra $50 a month on top of that if they served overseas.”96

Shibley was assigned to Charlie Company as a demolition expert. He also served as the company bugler.

One of the Battalion’s Platoon Sergeants, S/Sgt. James P. Topar, of Scranton, PA entered service in the Army in 1937. He was assigned to a coastal artillery unit stationed in Hawaii. Following four years there, he transferred to the 2nd Armored Division where he served as part of the cadre of an engineer outfit. He also served with the 8th Armored Division at Fort Knox, Kentucky and the 9th Armored Division at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Never one to be happy with a static situation, he volunteered for and was selected for parachute training at Fort Benning. He eventually came to Charlie Company by way of...

95 George W. Nicollette, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 1.
the 597th Engineer Company that was also billeted at Camp Mackall.97

1st Sgt. James O. Beare was the senior NCO in C Company. He and S/Sgt. Earl Goodman were assigned to a reconnaissance and construction unit stationed in Newfoundland. This joint assignment fostered a bond of trust and friendship between the two. Thereafter, Beare served in various other units before arriving at Camp Mackall with the 597th Engineer Company. He completed jump training and returned to Mackall as a qualified parachutist in February 1943.

Goodman also volunteered to become a parachutist and met up with Beare after completing parachute training at Fort Benning. He arrived at Mackall in January 1944.98 S/Sgt. Goodman would receive a battlefield promotion in the Ardennes and would be posthumously awarded the Silver Star during Operation VARSITY.

Cpl. Warren R. Skenadore enlisted from Green Bay, Wisconsin. He served as a medic for the 139th and safeguarded the engineers from Bastogne through Germany. He saved many lives and was awarded the Silver Star. He recalled how close they grew during their challenging training and combat.

“There was Sgt. Petrell. He was squad leader. We had a close knit [group]. Four of us, Fred Conn from Pennsylvania, Murray from Long Beach, California. “Lightning Murray” A little one from Cleveland [Barbrick]. Then myself. The four of us were always together. When you seen one of us you always knew the other four were always around.”99

PFC Ralph R. Grooten was born on 25 May 1924 at Schaduck Landing, New York. He graduated from high school in 1941 and entered the Army in February 1943. Following basic training, he served as a demolitions expert with the 60th Combat Engineers. Since Ralph had a hankering for flying, he received a

97 The Talon, 26 May 1944, 4.
98 The Talon, 26 May 1944, 4.
transfer to the Army Air Corps at Lockbourne Air Force Base in Columbus, Ohio. There he was trained as a navigator on B-17’s until the Air Force closed the program in 1944. Ralph then volunteered for parachute training at Fort Benning. In early January 1945, with newly minted airborne wings and former experience as a demolition man, he was assigned to Lt. Filimon’s company. When he finally returned home in March 1946, he had completed seventeen military jumps and rode a glider into combat in Germany.  

PFC Edward Reich joined the Battalion early in 1943. He spent the duration of the war assigned to the 139th until his transfer to the 101st Airborne shortly after the war ended. He spent several months with the unit in Camp Mackall and Camp Forrest, participated in the freezing Tennessee maneuvers and shipped out with his buddies to England in August of ’44. Reich saw combat during the Ardennes and participated in operation VARSITY. What he recalls most was the close-knit nature of the members of the unit. As he put it:  


Interview with Edward Reich, 4 December 2012.
“Everyone got along well. We always helped each other out. The guys were pretty good buddies to be with.”

Staff Sergeant Robert H. Bentzien was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on 12 Nov 16. Robert’s mother died shortly thereafter during the tragic flu epidemic of 1918 that claimed so many lives and changed the course of thousands of American families. As a result, Robert spent the better part of his youth living with close relatives. The relationships with his aunts, uncles, cousins and relatives and the childhood adventures had a marked impact on Robert. At an early age he became accustomed to the hard work associated with farming.

On 15 Sep 41, at the age of 24, before the winds of war had reached the United States, Robert enlisted in the Army at Camp Grant, Illinois. The rough and tumble lifestyle living with relatives combined with an affinity for working hard perhaps made the rigors of military life in the Army easier to shoulder. He conducted much of his initial and advanced training in Puerto Rico. It is there where he fondly remembers learning about his new “best friend”, his M1 rifle. He spent many months training on the island until he volunteered for airborne training and left for the mainland on 11 Jul 43. Shortly thereafter he was promoted to the rank of SSgt. He attended the Parachute School at Ft. Benning Georgia, presumably as part of the 2nd Parachute Training Regiment. With his newly minted jump wings, and a shiny pair of brown jump boots, he left for the European Theater of Operations (ETO) on 31 Jan.
As with any unit drawing from the vast melting pot that was America, there were those who were not model soldiers. One such man, Private Edward J. Rollinson, was trouble from the beginning. Records indicate that he had a troubled childhood owing in part to the early death of his father. He was often truant and finally requested to leave high school during the third year. He had been arrested seven or eight times prior to enlistment and had spent a few nights in jail. Most of the offenses were for drunk and disorderly conduct and once for beating up a policeman. After his enlistment, three times he was tried by court-martial for drunk and disorderly conduct and for going absent without leave (AWOL). He was convicted each time, and served six months in confinement. This is but one account of a single engineer whose life was ruined by alcoholism. There were no doubt other offenders, but none that emerged as serious as Rollinson.

With few exceptions, the members of the 139th were superb soldiers. The recruiting process, although it had its flaws, saw to it that engineer units had the highest quality of enlisted men. Many of them were taken from ASTP when the war needed more replacements. These college schooled men were a welcome addition to the ranks of the engineers. The technical and tactical requirements of the engineers were more demanding than those of the infantry, artillery or armored corps. These men were generally highly intelligent, easy to train and already possessed some of the technical skills needed for engineering missions.

Airborne Engineers generally did not operate as a cohesive company or battalion. They were normally farmed out by squads or platoons to work with the different battalions of the division. As such, they needed to be self sufficient, armed with initiative and smart enough to make things work without officers or senior non-commissioned officers immediately available. They were a cut above the rest!

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102 Vicki Bentzien, email to the Author, np.
Airborne Engineer Training

Basic Engineer Training

Most of the recruits were drawn from the troop reception centers which collected the volunteers as well as draftees. These went to the Headquarters Company, Able Company and Baker Company. This accounts for the fact that some of the members of the Airborne Engineer Company were not volunteers in the pure sense; they were simply drafted into service and assigned to an airborne unit. Hence most of those assigned to the glider companies had not volunteered for parachute duty.

Since Charlie Company was designated as a “jump” company, it would receive men who had volunteered for parachute duty. Capt. R. W. Dalyrymple reported to Camp Toccoa, Georgia, to select a suitable number of men to fill out the ranks of C Company. All of those he selected had volunteered for the hazards of life as a paratrooper. By 20 April 1943, the recruits, draftees and those selected from Camp Toccoa began to arrive at Camp Mackall. The cadre began the arduous task of building a cohesive battalion.

For approximately a year and a half, the 139th AEB would undergo an exceptionally demanding regimen of training at Camp Mackall, North Carolina. Engineer training was perhaps the most diverse course of instruction given to members of the US Army during WW2. In addition to learning the basic principles of soldiering, engineer trainees received a wealth of instruction in the art of mobility and counter-mobility. The engineer soldier’s main purpose was to assist the ground commander in reaching his objective by removing or breaching obstacles and by creating a clear path for advancement. This function is referred to as mobility. It includes filling in tank ditches, removing minefields and other obstacles as well as improving roads and building bridges. Without the direct involvement of combat engineers, a commander’s task of advancing to the objective could be rendered nearly impossible.

Counter-mobility includes impeding the enemy commander from advancing on his objectives. Tasks include placing minefields, building abatis and tank ditches, preparing items for immediate or future demolition or assisting in the improvement of field fortifications for defending forces. In addition to his mobility and counter-mobility tasks an engineer was expected to fight as an infantryman.

The Engineer Soldier’s Handbook summarizes the expectations of an Engineer:

“You are an Engineer. You are going to build bridges and blow them up. You are going to stop tanks and destroy them.

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104 Original Unit History, 1.
105 The Corps of Engineers, 7-10.
106 The Corps of Engineers, 7-10.
You are going to build roads, airfields and buildings. You are going to construct fortifications. You are going to make sure that our own troops move ahead against all opposition, and you are going to see to it that enemy obstacles do not interfere with our own advance. You are an Engineer.

You have been chosen to do a man-sized job for the Army and for your country. To do it well you must keep your eyes and ears open, your mind alert, and be always on your toes. You must keep yourself in top-notch condition. You must become physically tough and an expert in your job. Whether or not our Army succeeds depends a lot on how much better you are at your job than the enemy engineer is at his.

That’s a large order. The Army knows it is; but the Army also knows that if you give it the best that is in you, you will do the job well. You will build, tear down, and fight better than any other soldier in the world. You will be an American Engineer.\textsuperscript{107}

The specific training regimen assigned to the Airborne Engineer Battalion consisted of a twelve-week training program broken down into blocks of instruction. Each engineer received a minimum of forty-eight hours of instruction per week, not counting additional duties, airborne/glider training and make-up training. For basic military subjects, eighty-three hours were allocated to teach skills such as field sanitation, first aid, marching, dismounted drill and physical training. Fifty-four hours were allocated to tactical combat principles, which included battle courses. Technical engineer training took the bulk of the time and was allocated 151 hours of instruction and hands-on training.

The subjects included field fortifications, stream crossing operations, wire and other obstacles, engineer reconnaissance, map reading, battlefield salvage, road construction and repair, general construction and specific training with mines and booby traps. Training in demolitions was allocated a hefty yet suitable fifty-four hours of instruction. Additional subjects included camouflage, motor

Airborne Engineer Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Subject</th>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Detailed Training Subjects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Military Subjects</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>Field Sanitation, first aid, foot marches, dismounted drill, physical training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactical Principles Combat</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Battle courses and additional field operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Engineer Subjects</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>Field fortifications, fixed bridges, stream crossings, floating bridges, wire obstacles, other obstacles, reconnaissance, map reading, battlefield salvage, road repair and construction, general constructions, mines, booby traps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camouflage</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Camouflage techniques and camouflage discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemical Warfare</td>
<td>8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demolitions</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Demolition of structures, economy in use, characteristics of enemy explosives, use of fire, expedients, disabling and destroying equipment, training tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor Movements</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Convoying, loading and unloading, marking routes, reconnaissance, logistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rail Movements</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Loading, unloading, security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Air-ground liaison, defense against air attack, defense against mechanized attack, intelligence, patrolling, local security, safeguarding military information, threat recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Operations</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Operations in the field with organic equipment on continuing tactical mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night Operations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum of four hours per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspections</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Tests</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Time</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>For additional training based on individual or subordinate unit progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Time</td>
<td>574</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

movements, rail movements, security, field operations and night operations. The specific training plan is annotated in Table 4.1.108

One of the primary training goals of engineer basic training was to teach candidates how to properly use and maintain the vast array of tools carried by engineer units. Tools consisted of the following items or sets:

- Adz
- Axe
- Brush hook
- Claw hammer
- Crow Bar

D-Handled Shovel
- Earth Augers (Various lengths)
- Hand Saw
- Hatchet
- Long Handled Shovel
- Machete
- Maul
- One-man Cross Cut Saw
- Peavy
- Pick
- Pinch Bar
- Pneumatic and Gas Chain Saw
- Pneumatic Digging Tools
- Pneumatic Pavement Breaker
- Pneumatic Rock Drill
- Pneumatic Wood Drill
- Sledge
- Two-man Cross Cut Saw
- Various Wrenches and Hand Tools
- Wire Cutters

Wood Bits and Brace
Wrecking Bar

Each of these tools had primary and secondary uses to aid in the mission of mobility and counter mobility. For as many men as entered engineer training who were selected for their experience in the use of these tools, there were many more that had never touched even a hammer. The task for the instructors was daunting. The success of each engineer unit required that newly trained replacements be able to skillfully use these many tools. The task of creating a field fortification for even a small unit required most of the tools mentioned above.

Training centered on these aspects: care, safety, and use. The engineer was taught that the condition of each tool depends on the engineer himself. A tool, once issued, became that engineer’s responsibility. If it was misused or not properly maintained, it would not be effective for the next job. A reduction in effectiveness meant an increase in the time required to accomplish an engineering task. Time in combat is a precious commodity. More time to prepare makes both the attacker and defender more capable. The opposite is true as well. Tools were to be cleaned, oiled, sharpened if required and returned to storage in impeccable condition.

Tool safety was equally important. The vast array of tools made it important for each engineer to know the safe use of each of them. Failure to follow simple rules of tool safety could result in injury to an engineer or others or an ineffective completion of task. Inefficiency reduces the unit’s combat capability and makes the enemy’s job easier.

The nature of airborne units demanded that they be able to operate independently, usually behind enemy lines, for several days. Each independent unit needed an ability to fight against armor as well as infantry elements. They were also tasked with the destruction of point targets, such as bridges, bunkers or artillery emplacements that were identified as key to the overall success of the operation. In order to succeed in these various missions, paratroopers were trained to use many different types of destructive weapons and equipment.

In May of 1942, a demolitions course was added to the Parachute School at Ft. Benning. Here troopers learned the tactics and techniques of demolitions. The “hands-on” portion of instruction was, no doubt, very exciting. Field Manual (FM) 21-105, the Engineer Soldier’s Handbook, indicated that the most important job of an engineer is the handling of explosive and demolition tools. For the airborne engineer this held true, as the number and variety of demolition paraphernalia was quite impressive. As a result, the equipment carried by the troopers was extremely heavy. It was therefore critical to ensure the troopers were physically fit and able to endure the hardships of the parachute jump or glider drop while heavily burdened with equipment. This no doubt made airborne engineer training more demanding than the training of regular combat engineers.

Parachute Training

The training program for parachutists of WW2 was one of the most rigorous specialty training programs in the country and consisted of four stages of training, each lasting one week (a methodology still in use today). Regulations required that volunteers must be not over 32 years of age, (except field officers), 185 pounds in weight, or six feet in height. Each must have better than average heart action and blood pressure, good muscles, joints and leg bones and an excellent military record.

The first week consisted of “A” Stage, which was devoted to physical conditioning. This was intended to condition the volunteers for the rigors of military parachuting and to weed out those who did not have the intestinal fortitude to be subject to such demands. Additionally, “A” Stage served to identify those who covered up physical ailments which could hamper their ability to function as a combat capable paratrooper. Troopers participated in calisthenics, tumbling exercises, hand-to-hand combat training, and finally parachute packing and inspection.

The calisthenics were conducted in groups of about forty paratroopers in formation. The unit was maneuvered to “open ranks”, to increase the spacing during the various exercises. At the front was an airborne qualified instructor who demonstrated and then led the troops through several different stretching and strength building exercises. Amid the formation, other instructors would patrol up and down the ranks making on the spot corrections, providing additional

109 Parachute School USA, 26.
111 Paratrooper, 85. The author was fortunate to attend and graduate from the U.S. Army Airborne School at Ft. Benning, GA in 1980. The nature and difficulty of the training had not changed much between 1941 and 1980.
instruction and giving one-on-one attention to those not giving 110% effort. Calisthenics were also conducted with Indian clubs (wooden weights) and with weapons to build additional upper body strength and agility.

Hand-to-hand training was conducted in the sawdust pits. Instructors demonstrated the fundamentals of unarmed self-defense and then gave the troopers the opportunity to practice on one another. Training in the sawdust pits in the sticky heat of a Georgia summer was an unforgettable experience. The gritty sawdust seemed to penetrate into every void and pocket of the uniform and body. It made one miserable as it stuck to the sweat covered skin like feathers to molasses. It built character, they said.

The daily morning formation runs were equally challenging. Troopers ran in formation wearing heavy cotton herringbone twill uniforms with their leather paratrooper boots. Some even ran with the stiff “boon dockers” and canvas gaiters. The duration and pace of the runs were frequently increased to ensure a constant and ever increasing conditioning of the legs, lungs and stamina. The physical and mental demands of “A” Stage were, by design, extremely demanding. The requirements of jumping en masse from an aircraft flying, in many cases, only a few hundred feet above the ground were even more rigorous. One who has accomplished a few sport parachute jumps cannot imagine what it is like to take several thousand soldiers, saddle them up with over 100 pounds of gear each, get them loaded onto hundreds of aircraft and then have them exit in a matter of a few minutes only to quickly assemble on the ground. Discipline, cohesion, strength of spirit and body and mutual trust were required. It was the goal of this stage of training to begin the process of developing these characteristics in the troopers.

A more cerebral part of “A” Stage was the training in parachute packing.

“"In the parachute packing phase of the trainee’s work he is required to learn how to pack and inspect his own parachute; how to fold the chute so that it will open evenly and surely; and how to adjust the parachute so that a snug fit is obtained so that the opening shock will not cause injury. Qualified rigger instructors give him daily instruction and at the end of the course he is
The packing and inspection of parachutes is no longer taught to parachutists in the 4-week course. Graduates today must volunteer for and be selected for parachute riggers’ training.

“B” Stage consisted of mastering the parachute-landing fall (PLF) through the use of the platform trainer, the landing trainer, the mock-up door, the suspended harness, and the tower mock-up. This stage ingrains in the trooper’s behavior the specific procedures and safety precautions which ensures he acts instinctively when aloft.

A unique piece of equipment encountered during this phase was the Stafford Trainaisium developed by Dr. George Stafford. It was the only one of its kind in the U.S. Army and cost a whopping $4,000 to construct. It was a metal structure, 30’ high and nearly 50’ square and consisted of a maze of catwalks, ladders built at all angles, horizontal bars and gymnasium ropes. They were all designed to strengthen and develop the muscles apt to be used in full scale parachute jumping. In all, the troopers were to execute twenty separate movements while on the device along with 140 other trainees at the same time.

Wooden platforms were used to teach the troopers the fundamentals of the parachute landing fall, or PLF. The PLF was developed to allow a paratrooper to land, or tumble safely once his feet hit the ground. Troopers were taught how to land on the five points of contact. These in order are the balls of the feet, the calves, the sides of the thighs, the buttocks, and the fleshy portions of the side of the body. These were deemed the most padded and protected areas of the body. If a trooper landed and systematically cushioned his fall by “tumbling” along these five points of contact in order he could minimize the force of the landing. Stories were told of troopers who made a less than perfect landing on the “three points of contact” – the heels, the butt and the

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112 Five Eleven, (Atlanta: Albert Love Enterprises, 1943),
113 Five Eleven, 2
Airborne Engineer Training

Figure 4.8 Trainees connect a parachute to the suspension/release ring under the 250’ tower. It would be hoisted upward with a trainee suspended beneath and then released for the memorable descent.

Figure 4.7 Huge powered fans were used to simulate the effects of strong winds on the drop zone. Students had to demonstrate the proper technique for dealing with this potentially dangerous situation.

head. Troopers jumped off of the platforms in ever increasing heights until they had gained confidence and mastered the PLF.

The landing trainer consisted of a parachute harness with shortened risers suspended from a line and pulley. Troopers climbed onto a platform, attached the harness and slid down the line. As they approached the ground, they were to execute a perfect PLF. This was practiced from every angle. Since actual steerable parachutes had not yet been introduced within the Army, troopers would be forced to land while the wind pushed them forwards, sideways or backwards.

Since these parachutes could not be steered in a specific direction a soldier had to learn how to “slip” his chute. This was done by pulling down on one or two of the risers on the side that the trooper wanted to slip to. As the chute was pulled down on the respective side air spilled out on the opposite side and created a force, which “slipped” the chute in the wind. The suspended trainer allowed a trooper to practice this technique so he could slip away from trees or power lines. A few minutes spent hanging in the harness while listening to instruction and those demonstrating the technique seemed like an eternity. The stiff webbing leg-straps of the harness seemed to cut into the soldiers’ crotch and were extremely uncomfortable when assuming a good PLF position, which included keeping the feet and knees together. This device earned the moniker “suspended agony”

Another piece of equipment used during this stage was the mock-up door. It was a facsimile of the interior and exit door of a C-47. Soldiers were trained in the fundamentals of operations within the C-47, pre-jump commands, movement to the door and exiting.

All of these specific training events culminated in a jump from the tower mock-up. Troopers climbed the 40’ tower into a mock-up of an aircraft, donned a harness, hooked up, and on command exited the tower. Their harness was connected to another pulley-line system which allowed them to fall several feet and simulate “opening shock”. The pulley allowed them to slide down a cable, out of the way of the next trooper and to the ground a distance away.
The third week, "C" Stage, was where the trooper got his first feel for parachute jumping. A series of ever increasing heights and sensations got him ready for the real jump. The student was first taken up on a controlled tower in a seat that was likened to those seen in the World’s Fair. He was expected to ride the seat until he got used to the sensation of descent. The trooper was placed in a harness, hauled up a 250’ tower and directed to pull his rip cord. He then fell a distance of about twenty feet and was introduced to the sensation of opening shock while quite a distance above the ground. After this came the free tower. The jumper was strapped into a harness, hauled up to the top of the 250’ tower while suspended from a parachute canopy. The canopy was released and the trooper made his first free descent while suspended under a canopy in a harness. Once the trooper had demonstrated mastery of all parachute techniques he was advanced to “D” Stage.

It was during this stage that each trooper was required to complete five jumps. He made a combination of jumps with and without combat equipment, and during “mass jump exercises”. During mass jump exercises several men jumped from multiple aircraft at the same time, simulating the quick combat exit technique. What a happy day it was as each of the troopers finished his last training jump and was awarded the well-deserved Parachutist Badge.

Cpl. Harlin Ratsch recorded his experiences during parachuting in a series of photographs provided to the author, (Figures 4.10-4.14), some of which he took while suspended below his parachute several hundred feet above the ground. His captions are reproduced below the images.

The many months of rigorous engineer training and the many more weeks of harsh and unrelenting parachute training ensured that the men of the 139th AEB were ready for man’s ultimate test; combat. In August of 1944, the unit deployed to England to complete final division training and to prepare for combat operations on the European continent.

The strategic situation would provide their first challenge. The events that were to embroil the 139th in combat would be harsher than they could imagine.

The very demanding regimen of training was a key reason why the 139th was able to perform so well during the Battle of the Bulge and during

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114 Paratrooper, 97-99.
115 Parachute School USA, 2.
116 17th Airborne Division, 15.
Operation VARSITY. Each trooper had demonstrated the necessary skills and intelligence required of a combat engineer. They had completed basic training and twelve weeks of specialized engineer training.

The added difficulty of parachute and glider training ensured that only the most physically fit and stout of heart remained in the unit. This was not a place for malcontents; by the time they left for England, not a slacker remained.

The leaders suffered right alongside the troopers. They awoke before them and did not rest until after the men were cared for at day’s end. They
planned, sacrificed, meted out discipline and chores, encouraged and led from the front. Each leader secured the respect and approval of their subordinates. This conjunction of trust and compassion served as the final element that bonded the men to their leaders and formed them into a cohesive fighting unit, the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion. This bond of trust between leaders and men would be severely tested. In just a few months they would be rushed into combat in Belgium to stem the German advance in the Ardennes.
Airborne Engineer Training
Planning WACHT AM RHEIN

Strategic Situation: Germany

The blast in the Führer’s headquarters was deadly, but amidst the dust, debris and acrid smell of depleted cordite, Nazi Germany’s despot leader Adolph Hitler emerged relatively unscathed. His uniform was tattered and torn; he sustained injuries to his body, but he was alive. The bomb placed by Count von Stauffenberg on 20 July 1944 failed to achieve its desired goal of ridding Germany of a madman destined to destroy the very fiber of a nation. It seemed that the end was near. It seemed that Germany was a crushed and defeated nation, depleted of manpower and resources, incessantly bombed day and night, and now undermined from within. The end was certainly at hand.

Less than two months later, while receiving his daily situation update at the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) Headquarters on 16 September 1944, one of the briefers mentioned the success of local German counterattacks against the Allies in the Ardennes. Hearing this, Hitler jumped up and proclaimed, “I have just made a momentous decision. I shall go over to the counter attack. That is to say, here, out of the Ardennes, with the objective Antwerp.” Operation WACHT AM RHEIN was born. How could he arrive at such a decision in the midst of the near collapse of his nation?

To the Allies, Hitler and his war machine were kaput. They were certain that the war would be over by Christmas. They executed massive thousand-bomber raids on German industrial centers day and night. The defensive walls were crumbling on all sides. The successful advances by the Russians in the east and the Anglo-alliance in the west had pushed the Wehrmacht nearly to the borders of Germany. The Nazi war machine had lost nearly twenty-seven divisions in the ensuing push. When compared to the Allies’ ability to rapidly produce and field combat equipment, the situation looked bleak. Casualties mounted to more than 3.7 million men; the destruction of equipment was substantial. The Germans were outnumbered 2.5:1 in tanks and nearly 20:1 in aircraft. Nearly 14,000 allied planes blackened Nazi skies bombing cities, strafing convoys and devastating lines of communication. This was the Allied assessment of the German strategic situation.

118 WACHT AM RHEIN is German means literally “guard or wait along the Rhine” or commonly but incorrectly referred to as “watch along the Rhine”. The title was intended to connote a defensive operation.
119 Parker, Battle of the Bulge, 13.
121 The Battle for the Huertgen Forest, 14.
Hitler saw the situation in completely different terms. Although shaken, both physically and psychologically by the attempt on his life, he was supremely confident that Germany was capable of significant offensive action. In actuality, the blast solidified his belief in his cause. Over the course of the next few months he formulated and executed a plan in an attempt to achieve a brilliant strategic victory against the Allies.

Hitler had unwavering faith in his own military genius. He felt that he alone, by a stroke of strategic mastery, could turn the tide of the war in his favor. He was convinced that the weather, long nights and fog-ridden mornings offered the perfect opportunity for a rapid campaign that would produce a decisive result. He was certainly cognizant of the fact that Germany had twice launched successful attacks from this region in the past, and this must have served to bolster his confidence. He was not totally blind to the fact that he faced seemingly insurmountable odds. His assumptions underscored his ultimate goal in the offensive coup; to facilitate a negotiated peace favorable to Germany.

The evidence shows that he felt a strategic attack in the west instead of the east would achieve greater results. In his opinion, his strategic genius could design a plan that would drive a steel wedge between the American and British lines, slice toward Antwerp and trap the British again. This would surely dissolve the alliance and allow him to sue for peace. Thereafter he could focus on the true menace, Russia. Many of his most senior leaders were very unsettled by the lofty goals set by Hitler’s vision and encouraged alternative plans for attacks of less magnitude. Hitler would have nothing to do with their pessimism. In his mind, he alone was the master of strategy.

Adolph Hitler was a self-taught student of military history, in particular, German military history. He studied history often, and at times looked down his nose at his professionally trained and experienced military strategists. He was enamored with Friedrich der Grosse, the legendary leader who vanquished enemies and established Germany’s place as a world power. He studied him and his military successes. Hitler was quoted as saying, “He defeated enemies twice his strength… by a bold attack.” In many ways Hitler was no more ostentatious in his self-confidence and trust in military history than was the American General George S. Patton Jr. or the British Field Marshall Sir Bernard Montgomery. Each was arrogant, supremely self-confident and vain in his beliefs. Like Patton, Hitler was a fanatical believer in the offense. He subscribed to the notion of the German military strategist, Carl von Clausewitz, that the offense was the pure and decisive form of war.

This view was actually no different than that of his general staff. The German art of war strove to perfect three particular characteristics to ensure a quick and decisive victory. Prussian military leaders relied on Bewegungskrieg which stressed maneuver, usually via an encircling engagement called the

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124 *Battle of the Bulge*, 13-17.
125 *The Longest Winter*, 32.
Kesselschlacht. The key ingredient in this form of war was a “flexible system of command… that left a great deal of initiative in the hands of lower commanders,” called Auftragstaktik. In essence, the offense was the German way of warfare. It embodied the spirit of the German officer corps. Since Hitler viewed strategy in a bold sense and was enthusiastic about offensive action he and his staff were essentially in lockstep on the issue of the offense.

Briefings to the Führer were presented in such a manner as to lessen the impact of any potentially negative information. Such was the case on 16 September 1944, when he proclaimed his decision to attack from the Ardennes. Most of the information presented to him on the day where he made his fateful decision was positively slanted. Even the noted historian, Herbert Cole, who wrote one of the most acclaimed works on the Battle of the Bulge, concludes that the picture made available to Hitler was not one of gloom and despair. The daily briefings and the information made available to him by a host of bootlicking staff officers and others afraid to incur his wrath were generally presented in the best possible light. Accurate and detailed factual data concerning the plight of the nation, the morale and the capabilities of the Wehrmacht were not made available to Hitler. How could he conclude that the end was near when most of the coarse information available to him was spun into silk?

Although the German Army had taken a sound beating since 6 June 1944, their order of battle was not much different than it was before the Allied landings on D-Day. Most of the Wehrmacht’s higher echelon headquarters and structure still remained intact. The surviving framework and command structure facilitated a more rapid construction of new divisions. At the level above the regiment nearly all of the major German units on the Western Front had their communications and staff essentially intact. Although they lacked sufficient equipment and transportation assets, as of September 1944 the Wehrmacht still had over ten million men in uniform.

From June 1944 to September 1944, the Nazi war machine was churning out a new supply of resources. Hitler had directed an increase in the number of tanks produced, particularly of the heavy class such as the Panther and Tiger. He intended to equip ten new Panzer brigades. He raised fifteen new divisions during the latter part of the summer by returning wounded troops to new divisions, by reorganizing his support forces, and by culling the nation of men who, although useful to industry and administration, were desperately needed at the front. He created the Volksgrenadier Division. Although it was smaller in size than the standard German infantry division and less trained, it would be fused

131 *The Battle for the Huertgen Forest*, 10-11.
132 *The Battle for the Huertgen Forest*, 12.
134 Volksgrenadier is the German term for “people’s infantryman”, or “grenadier.”
with more firepower in the form of direct and indirect fire support weapons and the new Sturmgewehr 44, a weapon that rivaled the M-1 Garand and the venerable Thompson sub-machine gun. This immensely increased the overall firepower of the standard German infantry unit which was normally equipped with a bolt action rifle in support of medium machine guns. As a final measure of additional expansion, Hitler could rely on his supply of Festungstruppen who manned the pill boxes and bunkers along the West Wall. Although they were not of the best quality, these additional troops increased the available numbers to fill the gaps in Germany’s defenses. Their use in the Huertgen campaign was actually quite effective in many regards.

In the autumn of 1944, Germany faced a strategic situation which showed promise. There was no major engagement of the West Wall defenses, and Germany had the seemingly impenetrable obstacle of the Rhein River at her back. All of Germany, including East Prussia, remained sovereign. She still controlled parts of Scandinavia, Denmark, Holland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece. Three allies, Finland, Hungary and Greece, still fought on. Although Italy had capitulated and many of the Allied divisions on the Eastern Front collapsed from the pressure of the Russian advance, Hitler still had much cause for hope given the nature of the strategic situation. Following his decision to attack, Hitler received a steady flow of encouragement that his plan would be decisively successful.

In his analysis Hitler was not overly impressed with the American fighting ability and he was somewhat aware of the operational situation in the Ardennes where the Americans held a thin front line with virgin or battered units. These factors, coupled with his view of the strained relations between America and Great Britain and his nearly accurate understanding of the logistical situation, gave him the necessary data to conclude that the proper location to strike would be against the American front in the Ardennes with the further objective to seize the port of Antwerp.

There was one final element that influenced Hitler’s confidence in his decision, namely the element of surprise. There was suspicion that the Allies were breaking the Nazi’s secret Enigma codes and reading their communiqués. As a result, Hitler ordered absolute secrecy at all levels of command. If, in fact, the Allies were banking on knowing in advance about the Nazi war plans, Hitler could lull them into a sense of complacency. He even held the most basic details of the attack from his most senior officers. The very selection of the title Operation WACHT AM RHEIN, which literally means guard along the Rhein, or wait along the Rhein, denoted a defensive measure. This most certainly provided Hitler a higher degree of confidence that his plans could not be divined by the Allies. Such secrecy allowed the Germans to maintain the element of surprise and kept the Allies quiet in the Ardennes sector.

**German Operational Planning**

From mid-September to November, Hitler’s key staff worked in total secrecy on a series of proposals for the Operation WACHT AM RHEIN.

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136 *The Battle for the Huertgen Forest*, 15. Festungstruppen is the German term for “fortress troops”.
139 *The Battle for the Huertgen Forest*, 12.
Hitler’s planning parameters included the following: an initiation of the offensive around the end of November, an attack axis through the Ardennes, seizure of the Meuse River bridges between Liege and Namur, and the capture of Antwerp as the final objective. These objectives facilitated his ultimate goal: the containment of the Canadian and British forces to the north.141

The initial plan under Army Group B called for thirty-eight divisions arrayed under two Panzer armies and two mechanized armies. The forces covered a sixty-five mile front and would be arrayed from north to south as follows; SIXTH Panzer Army, FIFTH Panzer Army, SEVENTH Army and FIFTEENTH Army in the south. The combined force included eleven army corps composing the thirty-eight divisions, (fifteen mechanized/motorized and twenty-three infantry), along with nine Volksartillerie corps and seven Volkswerfer brigades.142 The FIFTEENTH Army was later deleted from the attack plan, although its use as a follow-up force was still contemplated.

Although this appeared to be an impressive array of forces, the numbers did not represent the actual forces available. As mentioned before, Hitler’s staff was reluctant to present pessimistic data. There were few who were willing to show the true nature of the battle weary force structure. Some units were double-counted and others, which had been disbanded, were counted anyway. No one wanted to let Hitler know that these units no longer existed. Some divisions assigned to the operation were heavily engaged in combat and could not be released to participate. Such was the case with the 17. Panzer-grenadier Division and the 10. SS Panzer Division.143

The staff attempted to present Hitler with several smaller-scale versions of his plan. He dismissed them outright and felt they were letting him down. He wanted a single master stroke; anything less was unacceptable. The staff continued to work to refine the plan. The initial target date for the operation was set for 25 November. The magnitude of the logistical problems made it impossible for supplies to be stockpiled and troops to be marshaled to meet that timeline. The Allied offense near Aachen and Metz complicated matters.

On 1 November, the Chief of the Wehrmacht Staff briefed the operations plan. The objective of the operations would be the destruction of the enemy north of the line Antwerp-Brussels-Bastogne. Following a short, yet powerful, artillery barrage, Army Group B would attack with the SIXTH Panzer Army on the right Flank, FIFTH Panzer Army in the Middle, and the SEVENTH Army on the left flank.144 The SIXTH Panzer Army was to assault through the Ardennes to cross the Maas River near Liege, build up suitable strength on the west bank and then continue the offensive across the Albert Canal between Maastricht and Liege to seize the terrain north toward Antwerp.145 The FIFTH Panzer Army was to cross the Maas River between Fumay and Namur and to counter enemy reserves moving against the rear and flank of the SIXTH Panzer Army along a line from Dinant-Namur-Brussel-Antwerp.146 The SEVENTH Army was assigned the mission of protecting the southern flank of the offensive, to reach a crossing of the Maas River and eventually reach the Semois. It was to seize as much terrain as possible and, if needed, it was to conduct a destructive retrograde operation buying time for the offensive while making the enemy pay for every bit of ground taken.147 Figure 6 depicts the general axis of advance and the objectives for the three Armies.

On 9 November, the staff was informed that they could not count on using the two divisions that were heavily engaged near Aachen and Metz. The field commanders would have to do with the forces already at their disposal. This would have to be accomplished while holding the positions along the Maas River near Venlo, the air defense zone near Duren, the Mosel River positions near Diedenhofen and the fortress at Metz.148 It was a tall order for the available forces. On 10 November, Hitler signed the Operations plan finalizing the assault.149

As 25 November approached, further troops and materiel targeted for the Ardennes push could not be freed up. Units slated for movement to meet the 25 November timeline were still engaged with the Allies and could not be spared. Many of the units slated for the offensive had been more or less continually engaged in combat since June 1944. Each was in

141 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge , 19.
142 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge , 34. Volkswerfer brigades were equipped with the feared Nebelwerfer rocket launchers that fired six 150mm rockets equipped with high explosive warheads. Their effect was devastating.
143 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge , 35.
145 Kriegstagebuch Teilband I, 435.
146 Kriegstagebuch Teilband I, 436.
147 Kriegstagebuch Teilband I, 436.
148 Kriegstagebuch, Teilband I, 426.
149 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge , 34.
some level of disrepair, recuperation or refitting. Some of the units were not at full strength, had not received their full complement of equipment or had not completed rudimentary training. The lack of armored vehicles was especially troubling.\textsuperscript{150} There was still a tremendous amount of work to be done to bring these units to a suitable level of preparation for offensive operations. The task was insurmountable. Feldmarschal Model recommended that the offense be rescheduled for 15 December.\textsuperscript{151} By the beginning of December the OKW realized that the inflated number of divisions would not materialize. The initial plan of thirty-eight divisions, which was earlier reduced to thirty-six divisions finally stood at thirty.\textsuperscript{152} The perceived potential success of the plan was beginning to suffer from the reality of the situation, and the date of the attack was fast approaching.

The over-ambitious nature of the plan was evident to everyone on the German staff. There were serious doubts concerning its success, but the subordinate commanders were compelled to make it work.\textsuperscript{153} The terrain, the numerous rivers to cross, the lack of a suitable road structure and insufficient supplies to sustain the push all the way to Antwerp made this plan ideal for the defender.

An offensive operation generally requires greater numerical superiority to succeed. Although the Germans were adding to their available forces each day, they realized the necessity to slant every aspect of the operation in their favor. The staff urged the necessity for absolute surprise in order to magnify their combat power. Secrecy regulations were strictly prohibited and units made great efforts to completely remove any hint of offensive planning.\textsuperscript{154} Surprise, secrecy, audacity and brilliant planning -- how could Hitler be wrong?

## Strategic Situation: Allies

From mid-September to December, scant German forces were able to thwart the Allied advance in the west. Five separate American infantry divisions failed to achieve any significant advance south of Aachen in the Huertgen Forest. Using a mobile defense and closely following the principle of economy of force, Hitler was able to hold the Allies at bay in the Huertgen, causing many casualties.\textsuperscript{155}

The Allies attempted, but were unable to achieve, a bridgehead across the Rhein at Arnhem. Although Montgomery’s boastful plan, Operation MARKET GARDEN, provided a salient in Holland, it failed to achieve the desired effect and left a precarious position for the Allies. A secondary purpose of the operation was to discern if the Germans still possessed the ability to respond to a large attack. Montgomery, with his insatiable desire to strike immediately for the heart of Germany, was convinced they could not. General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, felt more cautious. The German response at Arnhem proved him to be more correct than Monty. The Nazis were able to quickly bring a sufficient amount of armor, particularly heavy tanks, into the fight.\textsuperscript{156} By early October 1944, the Allies were extended well into Holland as a result of Monty’s gamble and Ike’s acquiescence. Their ability to sustain such an extended logistical position was tenuous.

Attempts to achieve a significant strategic position on the part of the Allies were showing either the fatigue of their military and logistical might, or the continued capacity of the German Army to keep on fighting. “What the German army in the fall of 1944 lacked in the quality of its troops, it made up for by the strength of its defensive position.”\textsuperscript{157} Eisenhower described the situation in November as, “…the dirtiest kind of infantry slugging. Advances were slow and laborious. Gains were ordinarily measured in terms of yards rather than miles… Losses were

\textsuperscript{151} The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 38-39.
\textsuperscript{152} The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 63-64.
\textsuperscript{155} The Battle for the Huertgen Forest, 195-6.
\textsuperscript{157} Peter Mansoor, The GI offensive in Europe, The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941-1945 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 182.
becoming high in rifle companies, and were increasingly hard to replace.\textsuperscript{158} To Hitler, the Allied advance was petering out.

As rapidly as the Allied advance had moved forward, it decelerated in similar fashion. Supply lines ranged from the French coast along the English Channel to the eastern reaches of France, Belgium and Luxembourg.\textsuperscript{159} The Allies had essentially outstripped their supplies. The ports seized in \textit{Brest} and \textit{Marseille} were so heavily damaged by the retreating German forces that their benefit was not to be quickly realized. They were unable to seize additional ports to reduce the strain on the logistical machine.\textsuperscript{160} The front held by the Allies in the west was so long that they had to judiciously place their forces to cover the several hundred-mile long lines. Within the \textit{Ardennes} sector, the Allies felt no attack was imminent. It was there that newly arrived and battered units in need of rest were placed.\textsuperscript{161}

On 17 Oct 44, while elements of the 21\textsuperscript{st} Army Group were in a slugging match with the Germans in Holland, a proposal was fielded to cross the \textit{Rhein} between the towns of \textit{Emmerich} and \textit{Wesel} along the Northern section of the \textit{Rhein} near the Holland-Germany border. General Brereton’s 1\textsuperscript{st} Allied Airborne Army staff began planning. On 7 Nov 44, a preliminary staff study was issued for Operation VARSITY. The staff study proposed the use of two airborne divisions, the British 6\textsuperscript{th} and U.S. 17\textsuperscript{th} under the XVIII Airborne Corps. This force was to seize the Eastern \textit{Rhein} bridgeheads in the vicinity of \textit{Emmerich} and \textit{Rees} in support of a Ninth Army \textit{Rhein} crossing.\textsuperscript{162}

Throughout October and into November, the staff was engaged in continual reassessment of the strategic situation. Having delayed their estimates, they issued a new assessment that the \textit{Rhein} would be breached by the end of the year. Hence the planners met on 20 Nov 44 and set the date for the assault on the \textit{Rhein} for 1 Jan 45, anticipating the execution of an airborne operation to breach the river.\textsuperscript{163}

The Allies did not realize at the time that Hitler was sure that the strategic alliance was near collapse. According to a close confidant of Hitler, he was convinced that neither Great Britain nor the United States wanted to continue the war. He felt that if Germany could deliver a “smashing blow in the west”, it might compel the Allies to seek an armistice

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{158} \textit{Ike, an American Hero}, 529.
  \item \textsuperscript{159} \textit{The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge}, 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{161} \textit{The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge}, 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{162} Dr. John C. Warren, \textit{USAF Historical Studies: No. 97, Airborne Operations in World War II, European Theater, 1942-1945} (Maxwell AFB: USAF Historical Division, Research Studies Institute, Air University, U.S. Air Force, 1956), 156.
  \item \textsuperscript{163} \textit{USAF Historical Studies: No. 97}, 156.
\end{itemize}
before public support within their nations would dwindle.164 To a degree, Hitler held a rather dim view of Americans’ fighting capabilities. He felt that the Americans were ineffective as a fighting force and that the home front would crack under a heavy blow.165 Hitler also made the logical conclusion that if America were knocked out of the war, Great Britain would quickly follow. This prospect invigorated his desire to concentrate on a single front.166 His conclusion, reached in October of 1944, was to initiate Operation *Wacht am Rhein*. It would be an assault through the quiet *Ardennes* region against the thinly held Allied lines and would unfold with complete surprise and draw the 139th into combat.

Once the Allies realized they had overextended their supply lines and began to comprehend that Operation *MARKET-GARDEN* had failed to pierce the *Reich* proper, they settled down along much of the front to revisit strategy and allow units to rest and refit. Although they were still engaged heavily in areas such as the *Huertgen* and the *Vosges* regions, made preparations, Eisenhower continued to direct combat operations with the objective of “chewing up as many German divisions as possible before the main offensive.”169 A number of Allied operations would be undertaken north and south of the *Ardennes* sector. Assaults were directed in the *Saverne* region, the *Saar* region and the *Ruhr* region.

Only one operation would take place in the *Ardennes* sector, on 13 December, where the Germans planned to anchor their attack near *Monschau*. This operation consisted of elements of Major General Leonard T. Gerow’s V Corps, namely the 2nd and 78th Infantry Divisions, attacking through the American lines to straighten out the frontal boundary near *Monschau*. The attack commenced on 13 December, met stiffening resistance on 14 December, and finally ran square into a counterattack by the German 272. and 326. *Volksgrenadier* Divisions. Other than this annoyance, operations in the *Ardennes* sector were quiet on 15 December.170

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164 *The Longest Winter*, 31.

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167 *Battle of the Bulge*, 39.
The German attack was planned in the area of the Ardennes held by V and VIII Corps. The northern edge of the German assault was to hit the 99th Infantry Division. The 99th held a rather long frontal boundary from Monschau in the north to the Losheimer Graben in the south at the Corps’s southern boundary with VIII Corps. Along with the untested 99th, Gerow had the veteran 8th and 2nd Infantry Divisions whose ranks were depleted from heavy fighting during October and November. The newly assigned 78th would assist with the attack on 13 December. The 102nd and 14th Cavalry Regiments assisted the 99th in holding the rather long divisional frontage.

Major General Troy H. Middleton’s VIII Corps was equally strung out from the Losheimer Graben as far south as Echternach where the Sauer and Prüm Rivers collide near Trier. This represented a distance of eighty-five miles, nearly three times the doctrinal front for a corps in the defense. Middleton’s forces arrayed north to south consisted of the green 106th Infantry Division and the combat-depleted 28th and 4th Infantry Divisions coming from the casualty-laden fighting in the Huertgen region. Middleton also had the new 9th Armored Division. He dispatched its three combat commands to various sectors along the line. They would serve as his mobile reserve.

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171 Weather data taken from Operational Diary 17th Airborne Division, temperatures from Battle of the Bulge, Danny Parker, p 192,193 with gaps filled in from Thunder From Heaven. Weather reports for some days were not found.

172 http://stardate.org/nightsky/riseset/ accessed 28 Dec 09 was consulted to calculate the approximate sunrise and sunset times for the general location, not withstanding daylight savings time conversions.

173 In some cases visibility (vis) was provided in the 17th Airborne Operational Diary. Morning fog was a constant detractor during the period. On some days the fog would burn off by 1000 to 1200 hours allowing visibility to increase considerably.

174 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, airpower was available on 1 Jan 45 and assisted in stopping an armored counterattack against CCA/11th Armored Division.

175 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 55-56. Various accounts of the Corps and Divisions’ frontal responsibilities do not match. Cole accounts for eighty-five miles, but when
The 106th Infantry Division frontal boundary ran for twenty-one miles from the northern boundary with VIII Corps south to the village of Lutzkampfen. The 28th Infantry Division’s boundary to the south extended twenty-eight miles from Lutzkampfen to Wallendorf. South of the 28th was the 60th Armored Infantry Battalion of the 9th AD who guarded a four-mile sector from Wallendorf to Dillingen. The final unit was the 4th Infantry Division, still seriously short of soldiers following the tough fighting in the Huertgen. Despite the unit’s depleted state, they were assigned a thirty-five mile sector from Dillingen to the VIII Corps southern boundary. Adding the total miles covered by the individual units the total rises to eighty-eight miles.  

Very few of them had any premonition of the events that were to unfold on the morning of 16 December 1944.

Ardennes Weather Conditions

There is no doubt that the weather played a significant part in the Ardennes Campaign. Hitler had counted on poor weather to thwart the efforts of the Army Air Corps to influence the battle. This was a prime reason for selecting the November/December timeframe for the operation. The conditions in the Ardennes during the late fall and early winter were quite harsh. In reality, the combatants were faced with one of the worst winters on record. In some cases, the weather helped the attacker who was able to operate without fear from air attack, while at other times the weather impeded the advance of German units.

Conditions revealed freezing temperatures throughout, poor visibility and low ceilings on most of the days that the 17th Airborne fought near Bastogne. Table 5.1 portrays those conditions. While
the German and Allied strategists were fretting over prevailing pressure patterns, differences between dew point and ambient temperature and prevailing wind speed and direction, the *Frontschweinen* and *dogfaces* fretted over wet socks and freezing temperatures.\(^{178}\) Their myopic view encompassed the living conditions within the few cubic feet of their foxhole: how to stay dry, how to keep from freezing to death, and how to avoid a disfiguring wound.

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\(^{178}\) *Frontschweinen* is the German term synonymous with dogfaces. Literally it means “battlefront pigs”.
The 139th Arrives in England

Training in England

Following the Tennessee maneuvers in March of 1944, and final polishing at Camp Forrest, the 17th Airborne Division was ready for deployment overseas. The successful maneuvers proved the unit’s ability to operate as a division. In August of 1944, the entire division moved to Camp Miles Standish at Taunton, Massachusetts in preparation for movement to Europe for advanced training. Cpl. Harlin Ratsch recounts one of the more humorous events during the short stay at Taunton;

“While there, some of the guys got “Mohawk Haircuts”. During one of our many “Fall Out for inspection” drills we were informed to go back in the barracks and try it again. Told to be in formation one minute after whistle blew. When the whistle blew, guys piled out of all the windows, even on the second floor. Funny! The officers didn’t think it was so funny, tho. Ha.”179

Rail transportation was a welcome relief to hours in cargo truck on dusty roads in the August heat and humidity. The bulk of the division arrived on 10 August.180 Ratsch recalls setting foot on the gangplank of the troop ship at 0855 hrs on 17 August and setting sail at 1700 hours that evening. A few days later, on 24 August he sighted land, “…somewhere on the west side of England.”181

The division arrived at Camp Chiseldon, England on 30 August. They set up their headquarters in the camp with the bulk of the division’s elements stationed there or in Ogbourne and St. George Camps. Some of them billeted at Chilbolton and the division artillery was housed at Larkhill.182 The 139th boarded trains at Liverpool and moved to Camp Ashton Keynes on 26 August. The weather was warm and clear during the short train ride.183 At these various locations the division continued to train to peak perfection. Trooper William F. Murphy recalls that they were encamped about ten miles from Swindon and lived in a British home, that of Diana Dors. Their home was near an English bakery and he remembers the smell of fresh bread in the street. The village was Ashton Keynes. He did not like the warm beer, although he got along fine with the locals. He was able to go to London a few times between his arrival and deployment to France in December. While in London, Murphy recalled sitting up all night in the “tube” while bombs fell overhead.184

Shortly after the unit arrived in England, the 507th PIR, a veteran of the Normandie fighting, was added to the rolls of the 17th Airborne Division. As a result, the 139th increased in size again, receiving two

179 Harlin M. Ratsch, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 4.
180 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion, Marches, 1.
181 Harlin M. Ratsch, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 4.
183 Marches, 1.
184 William F. Murphy, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, n.p.
additional engineer platoons. These were assigned to Charlie Company for the purpose of supporting the 507th. The units were quickly assimilated into the battalion receiving a full complement of equipment. They were fully prepared when the unit entered battle on 4 January 1945. This reorganization did not match the TO&E, but was necessary to provide ample engineer support to the new regiment.

Trooper Ratsch recalls conducting a parachute jump with members of the 507th on October 1st. It was an equipment jump, his 12th jump since entering airborne training. Ratsch commented that they practiced the jump with their rifles assembled in one piece and did not use the padded rifle cases. The experiences of the veterans of Normandie caused a reactive change. The troopers had previously been trained to disassemble their M-1 Garand into two pieces for placement in the felt padded Griswold jump bag. The members of the 507th found the assembly of the rifle under combat conditions at night too cumbersome once on the ground. They wanted to immediately engage the enemy. A few seconds’ delay in assembling the rifle proved deadly in Normandie. The veterans taught the green engineer troops to jump with their rifles assembled under their harness.

During the jump “Grogg” was killed and E.T. Bankhead was sent to the hospital with cracked ribs and bruises. Although these were only training events, they were a chilling reminder of the dangerous nature of the airborne. On 2 October, Ratsch and other members of the 139th made another jump; it would be his 13th jump. During that exercise, trooper Walthers was killed.

Other sad incidents included a traffic accident in which a busload of the division’s troopers was struck by a speeding truck on 22 October, killing ten troopers and injuring another twenty-one. On 12 December, the pilot of a British Horsa glider conducting cross-training between British and American glidermen lost control, crashed and killed all thirty-one of the troopers aboard and the crew. These frequent training fatalities were a sober reminder of the realities that were soon to face the men of the engineer battalion.

184 Harlin M. Ratsch, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 5.
185 Harlin M. Ratsch, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 5. During the author’s extensive research, troopers Grogg and Walthers could not be identified. The 507th PIR lists three men with the last name of Walthers in their unit, but none are listed as having been Killed on Duty. There is no annotation for Grogg. Grogg might have been Kenneth L. Cribbs, the only engineer mentioned as Killed on Duty.
186 Harlin M. Ratsch, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 5.
187 The Story of Chiseldon, 80.
The division held a formal review on 15 November for Lieutenant General Lewis Brereton, the Commander of the FIRST Allied Airborne Army. During the review, several members of the 507th were presented valor awards for their action in combat on the Normandie fields.\textsuperscript{191}

During the rest of November and into December, the men of the division continued to train. The troopers conducted more jumps and training exercises, received instruction in urban fighting and presented demolition classes for other unit members. There was also time for a few more visits to London, local passes, dances in the towns and trips elsewhere.\textsuperscript{192} The highlight of the season was Thanksgiving Day.

The meal was exquisite, and the troopers consumed 7 tons of turkey, 1407 pounds of candy, 93 pounds of cranberry sauce, 703 pounds of sweet potatoes and pies produced from the contents of 1128 No. 2 ½ cans of pumpkin filling. It was, “some chow!”\textsuperscript{193} Apparently things turned sour as the frozen turkeys were not properly defrosted prior to cooking and several members of the division suffered gastro-

\textsuperscript{191} Thunder from Heaven, 17.
\textsuperscript{192} George W. Nicollete, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 4.
\textsuperscript{193} Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 4.
intestinal discomfort. The latrines, which consisted of ‘honey pots’, were quite busy for a few days. 194

The men left their memories of the eventful meal behind, and again in the back of cargo trucks, the men huddled amidst the cold and rainy weather as they made their way to the new destination. 195 This was the men’s seventh movement since arriving at Camp Mackall.

The Talon on Alert

On the 16th of December, while the division was preparing for another three-day field exercise including another parachute drop, the notice of the Ardennes breakthrough came in. Vincent Mazza recalls receiving the initial order from General Ridgeway to, “…get to the Bulge ASAP…” 196 On 20 December, the engineers boarded British lorries to Aldermaston Field to await air transport to France. 197

On 21 December 1944, the division received the official Warning Order to proceed to France to reinforce the American Lines. The division was transported to several marshalling areas at different bases in England while they awaited the movement to France. The terrible weather prevented their immediate movement by air. The unit’s basic load of equipment including ammunition, rations, demolitions, and vehicles was made ready, most to be transported aboard C-47 cargo/transport aircraft. 198

On 23 December, the 139th and the weather were ready. The next night, one serial of the battalion flew to Orléans, France while another serial landed at Rhiems. The fragmented units rejoined at Moulmelon, France in an old French barracks. Mazza recalls arriving in France around Christmas. Christmas dinner consisted of canned 10-in-1 rations. 199

Charlie Company was the first element of the battalion to move out at around noon on 25 December. Their vehicle convoy departed Moulmelon towards the French City of Sedan. The unit deployed to defensive positions in the city and rigged several bridges for demolition. It was still anticipated that the German penetration could reach even this location. Eisenhower’s staff did not want any further penetration into France. On the day after Christmas, the remainder of the battalion moved forward to join the company. Headquarters Company moved to the town of Mohon and was billeted in a girls’ school building. Around 1000 hours that evening, the Headquarters

194 The Story of Chiseldon, 80.
195 Marches, 1.
196 Vincent A. Mazza, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 2.
197 Marches, 1.
198 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 6.
199 Vincent A. Mazza, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 2. Additional research is required to ascertain exactly when the 17th received the preliminary notice of the breakthrough and their subsequent alert notice. The official notice came on 21 December.
Company members received their first taste of battle as German planes strafed and bombed their location. T/5 Warren Skenadore recalled how the arrival progressed:

“It was something, because we landed in an airfield in France. We was supposed to be picked up by some vehicles. There were always so many SNAFUS. We waited around there for, I dunno how long, for a couple of hours. The Colonel said, ‘Come on. Let’s move.’ We had a full field pack. We marched all afternoon, about 25 miles, and we pulled into this camp. It was dark when we pulled in and they said, ‘Break ranks,’ and we sat on the side of the road. The Colonel said, ‘I’m going into camp to get something for you guys to eat.’ We sat along side of the road in the ditches. It was Christmas time and you could hear White Christmas, the song. That was really demoralizing. Then the next day we took off.”

The battalion headquarters continued to advance forward, along with the other companies while new intelligence was provided about the German penetration and the battles in their intended sector. On 2 January, the battalion moved to Neufchateau, Belgium. Trooper Mazza recalled their first evening near the front as the engineers set up their perimeter. There were several personnel stumbling through the night in front of their position. They failed to respond to the password and the troopers opened fire, killing the party. To their chagrin, it was a group of French or Belgian resistance fighters searching for German forces. Unfortunately, this mistake occurred often in combat.

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200 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 7.
201 Warren Skenadore, interviewed by author.
202 Vincent A. Mazza, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 3.
While the 139th was moving from France into Belgium, elements of several other divisions were poised for another significant battle on the terrain where the engineers would shortly fight. The Germans were planning to close the narrow corridor into Bastogne and seal the Americans in again. At the same time, the Americans were renewing the attack to widen the corridor and begin an assault to close the Ardennes salient at Houffalize. These few days of heated combat, pitting armor, infantry and artillery against one another, further depleted the combat effectiveness of the units soon to be facing the 139th engineers. The average airborne engineer knew little about the battle conditions near Bastogne or of the current state of the German combatants he was to face.
The 139th Arrives in England
German Success: 16-20 Dec 44

The German assault troops were moved up to the front line during the night prior to the attack. Only then were the Frontschweinen informed of the plans. At 0530 on 16 December 1944, the 7,822 artillery and Nebelwerfer tubes assigned to the operation opened fire.203 The barrage lasted until 0700 in some sectors. The advance of the infantry was aided by the use of many searchlights that when turned on reflected their light off the clouds and illuminated the path for the assault forces.204

Progress in the SIXTH Army sector near Monschau was slowed by fierce resistance from the American units on the line. Everywhere small-unit leaders took charge of the situation and mounted fierce defenses; ceding ground reluctantly and making the attacking troops pay dearly for advances. Local German successes forced some American units back into defensive positions. The defensive line along the front was no longer a continuous one, rather a broken line of strongholds centered on the villages. The slow German success in the SIXTH Army sector was no doubt due in part to the assault mounted by the American 2nd and 78th divisions during the three days preceding the German assault. The necessity of German counterattacks against the American advance disrupted their ability to mount a fresh assault as outlined in the master attack plan. The Chief of Staff of the Wehrmacht, General Fritz Krämer stated that the attack by the 2nd Infantry Division on 13 December had, “…severely thrown off their plans.”205

In the center of Gerow’s V Corps, the Germans made some progress. The line was moved back several miles to the Elsenborn Ridge, where elements of the 99th and other units eventually mounted a solid defense. The high terrain there kept the Germans from advancing further north. There were some solid gains made in this sector. Leading the advance of 1. SS Panzer Division with his Kampfgruppe, Joachim Peiper made exceptional progress slicing through the southern flank of the 99th division, where it bordered the green 106th division. Peiper’s lead tanks penetrated over twenty-five miles in a few days, reaching La Gleizé, Trois Ponts and as far as Hebiemont. His advance was eventually halted by a combination of blown bridges, forced route changes, lack of fuel and tenacious defense. The 9. Panzer Division, which was moving to the south of the 1. SS Panzer Division made similar gains. They advanced nearly to the Salm River.206

204 Cole, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 82. Cole lists the barrage as having lasted ninety minutes ended at 0700. Other sources indicate the barrage ended at 0600, some as short as 10-15 minutes. This disparity could either be due to differences in Day light saving’s time computation by historians or because other sectors only fired for thirty minutes or less.
205 Parker, Battle of the Bulge, p.35. Kampfgruppe is the German term for “battle group”, a tasked organized unit of battalion strength or greater.

206 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, Map II.
Immediately south, in the 106th Infantry Division area, the infantrymen were having a tough time. Elements of three German units sliced through the boundary between the 99th and the 106th where the 14th Cavalry Regiment was screening. The 14th made a precipitous withdrawal towards St. Vith leaving the 106th Division’s flank exposed. The 18th Volksgrenadier Division exploited this gap and, together with the 62nd Volksgrenadier Division immediately to the south, encircled a large part of the 106th division. The better parts of two regiments were trapped. The divisional commander directed the units to attempt an infiltration to the rear. Only Col. Alexander Reid’s 424th Infantry Regiment was able to retreat and join the 7th Armored Division defenders in the line south of St. Vith. After bitter fighting and running low on ammunition, the two remaining regiments signaled surrender.207

The greatest German success was in the SIXTH Panzer Army area in the 28th Infantry Division sector. The 28th had an exceptionally long frontal boundary to defend. Given the casualties previously taken in the Huertgen, they were not in superb fighting shape as they attempted to infuse new recruits into their ranks. The Germans threw three veteran Panzer divisions and two Volksgrenadier divisions at the 28th’s lines. The result was predictable. Remnants of the 28th fell back and regrouped in small villages, where they set up local defensive perimeters. In some cases, they were simply bypassed by the advancing armored units. The 110th Infantry Regiment’s actions in Wiltz, Clervaux and Marnach thwarted German breakthrough efforts for several days, buying time for the Allies to rush reinforcements into the region. They were assisted by elements of the division’s 44th Engineer Combat Battalion, the 603rd Tank Destroyer Battalion and the 707th Tank Battalion.208 Despite heroic defensive fighting, the Germans pushed all the way to the outlying villages near Bastogne. By the 19th of December, Panzer Lehr Division was just two miles from Bastogne. Local strongholds in the various outlying towns, such as Bizory and Mageret, bought the Allies time to organize a defensive perimeter and rush reinforcements into the Bastogne.209

SEVENTH Army advances in the south were not as successful, due in large part to the difficult terrain and natural obstacles they had to cross. The Volksgrenadier Divisions and the 5th Fallschirmjäger Division were faced with crossing the rain-swollen Our River. The terrain on either side rises steeply and forced all movements to the few roads that snaked through the narrow defiles west of the river. A few defenders with anti-tank weapons were easily able to slow movement to a crawl. The Germans were forced to pick off individual elements to continue their advance. The American 4th Infantry Division was able to contain any significant penetration holding the line on the high ground along the line Echdorf-Ettelbruck-Scheidlingen. The SEVENTH Army never made any significant advances in their sector, although they managed to push some forces toward Bastogne to aid in the siege. By the 19th, the SEVENTH Army was

208 The Ardennes Offensive: Central Sector, 68-74.
209 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, Map IV.
The Ardennes Campaign

Figure 7.3 Beyond the town of Malmedy, these American troops pause for a rest as they advance forward. From left to right: Sgt. Lyle Greene, S/Sgt. Joseph DeMott, PFC Fred Mozoni.

going over to the defensive. Part of the reason for the SEVENTH Army’s lack of progress was its force composition. It was the weakest of the three assaulting armies with three Volksgrenadier Divisions and one Fallschirmjäger Division. The 5. Fallschirmjäger Division achieved the most progress and penetrated all the way to Bastogne. They participated in the heavy fighting on the southeast side in an effort to close the gap around the city. They also defended fiercely for several days against repeated attacks by the 4th Armored and 35th Infantry Divisions assaulting from the south as part of III Corps pressure on the southern flank of the Bulge.

In summary, the first five days of WACHT AM RHEIN met with mixed results. The initial objectives set by Hitler were not realized. The northern and southern shoulders held. Limited penetrations were achieved in the center sector leading to the encirclement of Bastogne. German units advanced as far west as the Ourthe River. Logistical limitations, difficult movement through the rugged terrain, tenacious defense in some sectors and the quick American response blunted further penetration.

As far as the Allies knew, the operation was a strategic blow to them. The attack was unanticipated and they were faced with a crisis. From their perspective, the Germans had penetrated dozens of miles in a few days and were threatening the rear area lines of communications. There was even speculation that the objective was Eisenhower’s headquarters. What made the difference in the German lack of success was the swiftness with which the Allied poured forces into the fray. Many senior German commanders commented on this observation after the war.

The Allied Response

On the line, soldiers reacted by returning fire and sending reports to headquarters elements. For many, it was difficult to request indirect fire support since most of the land lines were cut and the radio channels were clogged with chatter. Since observers were having a hard time contacting the larger artillery batteries, it was the use of organic 60mm and 81mm mortars that were most effective at the front. Those units with an open line from an observer to an

211 Battle of the Bulge, 199, 211.
available artillery unit executed fire missions in response.

Some units, such as the 99th, were able to spend the days prior to the unanticipated attack working on their defensive positions, improving communications lines and placing obstacles, as well as conducting patrolling operations. The overhead log covers of their positions blunted the effects of the barrage. Despite this, the Germans advanced, heaved more indirect fire and caused heavy casualties in some sectors. Despite the lack of timely information in Eisenhower’s headquarters, and the resulting confusion, it was quite obvious to the men on the line what was happening -- a major attack!212

Late in the afternoon on 16 December, a Colonel from the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force intelligence section quietly entered a room where Eisenhower, Bradley and others were talking. He handed a note to Eisenhower’s intelligence officer, Major General Kenneth Strong. Strong broke into the conversation indicating that the Germans had achieved a penetration in five points along the Allied front in the Ardennes. Eisenhower, Bradley and all present could not believe what they were hearing.213 It was hard for all to comprehend that such a quiet sector could be the source of disarray. The information was so confounding that it would take an additional two days before Bradley acknowledged that the operation was more than a spoiling attack. He was urging an offensive for the Rhein even on the 17th! Despite Bradley’s optimism, Eisenhower proceeded in response with plans for Gen. George S. Patton to move the better part of three divisions directly north to penetrate the southern shoulder of the salient to blunt the offensive.214 Additional forces were directed to stem the penetration.

Two Armored Divisions, the 10th and 7th, had been positioned several kilometers off the front line where the Germans attacked. They were immediately rushed forward to halt the German advance.215 The 7th went to St. Vith while elements of the 10th went to Bastogne. The 7th arrived quickly at St. Vith and, together with Combat Command B of the 9th Armored Division, formed a horseshoe defense centered on the town. They pieced together remnants of other units that were straggling to the rear. St. Vith proved to be a roadblock for the Germans as the units were forced to bypass to the north and south.216

The timely arrival of the 10th Armored at Bastogne along with the 101st Airborne Division allowed the city’s ring to be pushed out several miles creating a defensive salient that threatened the German operation.217 Several units from Gerow’s V Corps were sent into battle from the north. The American 1st and 2nd Infantry Divisions were immediately available and they were able to quickly bear against the northern shoulder of the rapidly forming salient. The 30th Infantry Division was

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213 A Time for Trumpets, 645, 185.
214 A Time for Trumpets, 418.
215 Decision at St. Vith, 58-59.
216 A Time for Trumpets, 416.
released from Lt. Gen. Simpson’s NINTH Army to help stop the 1. SS Panzer Division’s drive toward the Meuse. The 82nd Airborne Division was moved into Werbemont directly in the path of the 1. SS. They fought tenaciously to halt Kampfgruppe Peiper at Stoumont and La Gleizé. Maj. Gen. Lawton Collins’ VII Corps, north of the salient, freed up the 3rd Armored Division to assist the defense of Elsenborn Ridge. Elsenborn Ridge became an impenetrable obstacle and an eventual threat from which the Americans could mount an assault to pinch off the salient. It essentially became the immovable northern flank of the penetration. To contain any further westward advance, the 2nd Armored Division was dispatched from Maastricht, Holland, directly south, to attack the German advance at its western-most point near Ciney-Celles.

Despite the initial belief that the offensive might be a spoiling attack, Eisenhower was taking no more chances. He wanted decisive action to prevent any further chaos. Bradley met with Patton on 18 December. Patton informed Bradley that he could move quickly with three divisions. By nightfall the first movements were underway. By the 19th of December there were nearly 180,000 men in the Ardennes, nearly twice the original end strength at the onset of the attack. As a final measure of assurance, Eisenhower alerted three divisions in England and directed them to accelerate their movement schedules to the continent. Among those units was the 17th Airborne Division along with its 139th AEB.

In a post war interview, SIXTH Panzer Army Commander, General der Waffen SS Josef, “Sepp” Dietrich commented that the battle was lost on the third or fourth day. He attributed the difficulties to a failure to properly prepare, a lack of logistics and the rapid response of the Americans. FIFTH Panzer Army Commander, General der Panzer Truppen Hasso von Manteufel echoed these sentiments that the Americans had, “...reacted more quickly than was expected by the German Supreme Command...” Despite these conclusions, the German attack continued. The Army commanders realized the folly of continued efforts, but the OKW wanted the advance to continue.

The Siege of Bastogne

Although Bastogne was not seen by the Germans in the original plan as the key to the operation, they always acknowledged the importance of the road junction. It became more important as the battle in the Ardennes raged. Had they been able to make consistent and quick progress toward the Meuse, Bastogne could have been bypassed and

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218 The Ardennes Offensive: Central Sector, 8-9.
219 A Time for Trumpets, 416.
220 The Ardennes Offensive: Central Sector, 17.
221 A Time for Trumpets, 417-418.
222 A Time for Trumpets, 420.
224 Hitler’s Ardennes Offensive, 141.
mopped up as planned. When the Germans intercepted an American radio transmission indicating that two divisions were being moved rapidly to Bastogne, the city's importance changed. The infusion of two American divisions in the middle of the salient was a clear threat to the German penetration westward. From Bastogne, the Americans could mount a significant attack north and pinch off the salient. The Germans would have to react to this threat.\footnote{225} In a post-war interview of two senior German officers, Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel and Generaloberst Alfred Jodl, regarding the importance of Bastogne, both acknowledged that it was initially to be bypassed by the first assault wave and then addressed by the second wave following behind. Upon realizing the threat from, "...strong enemy counterattacks..." they diverted their attention to Bastogne and directed its capture.\footnote{226}

Once the Germans heightened the strategic importance of Bastogne, as the Americans already had, they provided directives at the corps level to adjust their movements against the city. On 19 December, the 26. Volksgrenadier Division received orders to advance on the city from the north by way of Arloncourt. Panzer Lehr division was directed to attack from the east into Bastogne through Mageret-Wardin.\footnote{227}

While the effort to erase this strong point was underway, the 2. Panzer Division was to continue the attack west to reach the River Meuse. Eisenhower had correctly assessed the Meuse as a secondary objective and diverted the 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} Armored Divisions to the south along with the 84\textsuperscript{th} Infantry Division. The 2. Panzer eventually tangled with elements of the American 2\textsuperscript{nd} Armored Division. The British 29\textsuperscript{th} Armored Brigade was placed near Dinant on the Meuse River as a final blocking force, should the German advance penetrate the American forces. Between 22 and 25 December, the two forces engaged the Germans, the Americans from the north and the British from the west. The 2. Panzer was finally halted a few kilometers east of the Meuse River at Foy-Notre-Dame. A lack of supplies, no reinforcements, Allied air interdiction and ten days of continuous combat took its toll on the German attackers. The 2. Panzer’s entry into Foy-Notre-Dame marked the westernmost extent of the penetration.\footnote{228}

The efforts of the American 10\textsuperscript{th} Armored Division on the east side of Bastogne delayed the advance of the 26. Volksgrenadier Division and Panzer Lehr Division, but at great expense in men and materiel. The Division lost over fifty tanks and armored vehicles, and an even greater number of trucks and Jeeps fell into the hands of the Germans. These captured vehicles were a welcome addition to ease the German transportation difficulties.\footnote{229} Despite the losses, these delays gave General Anthony McAuliffe, the commander of the defense of Bastogne, time to continue his defensive preparations and to sneak additional forces into the ring. It also allowed the THIRD Army Commander more time to advance on the salient from the south.

Despite the tremendous efforts of the 10\textsuperscript{th} Armored Division, the Germans renewed the attack on 20 December with elements of the XLVII Panzer Corps. The ring around Bastogne was tightening. The 26. Volksgrenadier Division renewed the assault from the southwest in an attempt to get into Bastogne

\footnote{225} A Time for Trumpets, 416. \footnote{226} Hitler’s Ardennes Offensive, 239. \footnote{227} The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 449-450. \footnote{228} Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now, 349-356. \footnote{229} Hitler’s Ardennes Offensive, 107.
proper while Panzer Lehr Division renewed its efforts from the east and southeast of the city. The 5. Fallschirmjäger Division was on the move to bolster the attack.²³⁰ An additional unit, the 116. Panzer Division “Windhund” mounted an attack to the south from Houffalize toward Bastogne.²³¹ The various efforts were still not successful in either breaking through the ever-closing ring, or sealing the gap that existed to the southwest. By the evening of 21 December, the only open gap was the four kilometers between Champs and Senonchamps. In the late morning of the next day, 22 December, the famous surrender ultimatum was delivered to General Anthony McAuliffe by members of the Panzer Lehr Division. The famous response, “Nuts!” signaled his rejection of the offer. The attacks resumed.²³²

On the 22nd, the 26. Volksgrenadier Division Commander was given overall responsibility for the encirclement of Bastogne. The attacks continued, and finally by midday 23 December, the noose was closed. The ferocity of the attacks and tenacious defense of Bastogne had so depleted the combat power of the German units that they essentially went on the defensive around the city. The combat power of the 26. Volksgrenadier Division was most notably depleted.²³³ This would be one of the units facing the 17th Airborne Division in the days that followed. The diminished combat effectiveness of the 26. positively impacted the success of the 17th.

Hitler was not initially obsessed with Bastogne. Prior to 26 December, the efforts to contain and erase the Bastogne stronghold were mainly handled at the Corps level. Since Hitler had not seen Bastogne as strategically significant, he had, “...not expressed any particular interest in the town...” and gave its capture little thought. The commander responsible for containing the city, 26. Volksgrenadier Division Commander, was unable to get all of the reinforcements he needed to complete the containment and erasure of the defensive war.²³⁴ This was probably due to a failure of Hitler to see it as important and not allow a diversion of forces from the master plan. Hitler still pressed for a continued western attack to gain the Meuse crossing. Hitler did, however, authorize the release of two divisions, the 9.Panzer Division and 15. Panzergrenadier Division from the strategic reserves. The 15. was routed toward Bastogne by the staff. A reinforced battle group of that division arrived on Christmas Eve.²³⁵ The 15. would be one of the future adversaries of the 17th Airborne Division. The erosion of their combat effectiveness by attacking Bastogne would also become a factor in the success of the 17th.

While the Germans pummeled the city and closed the gap, three American divisions of III Corps attacked towards Bastogne on 22 December to relieve the siege. Combat Command A advanced along the main highway from Arlon to Bastogne and Combat Command B advanced on secondary roads towards Chaumont. The two combat commands fought their way northward against the 5. Fallschirmjäger Division and elements of the 26. Volksgrenadier Division.²³⁶ The Germans were now fighting on two sides; to their front facing Bastogne, and to their rear against 4th Armored Division. Town by town, with assistance of fighter-bombers when the weather allowed, the 4th advanced slowly toward Bastogne taking losses and inflicting casualties on the Germans. Finally, at 1640 hours on 26 December, 1st Lieutenant Charles Boggess along with his crew in Thunderbolt IV “unbuttoned” their Sherman tank and greeted Lieutenant Webster of the 326th Airborne Engineers, 101st Airborne Division.²³⁷ The corridor was reopened.

For the next few days the Americans worked to secure the narrow corridor into Bastogne and prepare to contain the larger salient. The American plan was to drive elements of Patton’s THIRD Army from the south, through Bastogne to Houffalize and meet there with elements of the FIRST Army driving south toward the same objective.²³⁸ This battle plan shaped the battleground for the 17th Airborne Division and drew elements of four battle weary units right where the 17th would deploy; Führer Begleit Brigade, 3. and 15. Panzergrenadier Divisions and the 26. Volksgrenadier Division.

The first mention of the city of Bastogne in the Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht was not until 27 December, when an order was issued by Oberbefehlshaber West, “The Fuehrer has ordered that Bastogne be taken at all costs.”²³⁹ This force of will set the stage for the bitter fighting that would greet the men of the 139th.

²³⁰ Hitler’s Ardennes Offensive, 108.
²³¹ Hitler’s Ardennes Offensive, 110. Windhund is the German word for “Greyhound” and is representative of the speed of the German armored unit.
²³² Hitler’s Ardennes Offensive, 110-111.
²³³ Hitler’s Ardennes Offensive, 112-113,118.
²³⁴ Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now, 336.
²³⁵ The Ardennes Offensive: Central Sector, 88.
²³⁷ Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now, 370-373.
²³⁸ Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now, 391.
²³⁹ Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now, 401.
The Tactical Situation: 28-29 Dec 44

When the 4th Armored Division reopened the corridor into the beleaguered city of Bastogne on 26 December, the Germans realized the tenuous nature of their operational situation. If the Americans were allowed to fill the city with fresh troops, they would be able to slice northward and cut off the salient leaving several German divisions trapped in the west. It would signal the end of the entire operation. By now, Hitler had intervened in the detailed planning and provided his direction. The Americans, on the other hand, were not satisfied with merely opening a corridor to Bastogne and rescuing the defenders; they were intent on pinching off the Ardennes salient and trapping German forces.

On 29 December, General Manteuffel brought his corps commanders together to discuss the situation. He reiterated the importance of the Bastogne salient, called it the, “central problem,” and further outlined a three-phased plan to proceed. First the ring would be closed around Bastogne, and then the Americans would be pushed south followed by a final assault to force the Americans out of Bastogne. The XXXIX Corps would attack from the southeast of Bastogne and meet the XLVII Corps attacking from the west of the city. The meeting of the two corps would close the gap once again and end the first phase, or so it was envisioned.

The units of the western attacking force consisted of the Führer Begleit Brigade, the 3. Panzergrenadier Division and a regiment of the 15. Panzergrenadier Division. The remnants of the 26. Volksgrenadier Division would operate in a blocking position to the north and northeast. The attack was set for 30 December. These four German units had been engaged in near-continuous combat since 16 December and would face the 17th Airborne less than a week later.

Meanwhile, Patton directed his staff to draft the plans for the THIRD Army to extend his attack north towards Houffalize and eventually St. Vith. Patton’s VII Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Troy Middleton, issued directives to his divisional commanders: they were to make the initial push west of Bastogne toward Houffalize. His units were: Combat Command A (CCA), 9th Armored Division, and the 11th Armored and 87th Infantry Divisions. Their mission was simple enough in concept, “...swing around the west of Bastogne, capture the heights of Houffalize, and secure the Ourthe River line.” The 87th would advance on the left, the 11th in the center and CCA, 9th on the right. The American attack would receive the significant weight of ten battalions of corps artillery.

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241 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 612.

242 Corps Commanders of the Bulge, 236.

243 Corps Commanders of the Bulge, 237.
The plans of the opposing corps commanders created a scenario for a classic meeting engagement southwest of Bastogne. Both elements attacked with armor support, both with the intent of seizing subsequent objectives and both scheduled frontal attacks for 30 December in the early morning. Both units made advances into position for a few days prior to the 30th. Although the two corps fought on a much broader front, the terrain that was later occupied by the 17th Airborne Division and the 139th AEB this was predominately the scene of a fight between the Führer Begleit Brigade and elements of the 11th Armored Division.

Throughout the 28th and 29th, elements of the VII Corps made a concerted effort to gain ground and widen the corridor. While the 4th Armored Division busied itself with an advance along and on either side of the Warnach-Bastogne highway, CCA of 9th Armored Division advanced along the Neufchateau-Bastogne highway, protecting the western flank of the 4th. Between the 27th and 29th of January, Task Force Collins and Task Force Karsteter continued attacks on Chenogne and Senonchamps, respectively. Each time the attacks gained ground, but were beaten back by counter attacks of infantry and tanks sprinkled with artillery and mortar fire. Eventually, the two task forces seized a foothold on the western edge of the corridor in the towns of Sibret and Villeroux. During the night of the 28th and into the 29th, repeated probes, attacks and counter attacks by both sides littered the battlefield with the refuse of combat. The Corps Commander pressed for a continued widening of the northwest boundary of the corridor.

On the 29th, Company A, 19th Tank Battalion and Company B, 60th Armored Infantry Battalion led the TF Karsteter attack on Senonchamps. They entered the town by late afternoon, but heavy antitank and artillery fire forced them back to the high ground south of town.
Task Force Collins’ attack was led by Company C, 60th AIB with support from Company C, 19th Armored. They cleared Chenogne by early evening. They handed over the town to elements of the 89th Reconnaissance Squadron who were forced out of the town near midnight by a combined arms attack. B Troop, 89th Recon recorded the following entry in the After Action Report for the 29th:

At 1800 received mission 1st Platoon to outpost tanks at Villeroux, 3rd Platoon to outpost Chenogne, Belgium. Chenogne not taken, therefore, 3rd platoon entered town met heavy enemy fire and ordered to withdraw and set up outpost positions south of Chenogne. Two EM wounded. One man killed by American AA Halftrack, in hands of enemy on outpost positions. 3 EM injured.

By the end of 29 December TF Karsteter held the high ground and the wooded area south of Senonchamps. They used the night to regroup and resupply. TF Collins essentially occupied the positions they held at the start of the day and beat off evening probes and small attacks from the Chenogne area and the woods to the northeast. The repeated attacks by CCA continued to keep the German attackers off balance. Although elements of the Führer Begleit Brigade and 3 and 15. Panzergrenadier Division were positioning themselves for the 30 December attack, they had to repeatedly contend with the tactical situation near Chenogne and Senonchamps. This impacted their initiative to a degree and also continued the erosion of their combat power. The enclosed map (Figure 7.9) shows the unit’s starting positions on the morning of 30 December, the day of the meeting engagement.

Meeting Engagement: 30 Dec 44

The Commander of 11th Armored Division received V Corps order No. 12 at 1800 hours on 29 December ordering him to attack in a northerly direction to, “capture the high ground south of Houffalize and secure the l’Ourthe River line.” Several units, including the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, (-), were attached to the 11th. The initial plan called for CCA to attack west of the wooded area labeled Bois de Hiase de Magery and CCB to attack on the east side. For the attack on the east side, CCB was divided into three task forces: Task forces Poker, Pat and a Reserve Task Force. Task Force Poker, the armored force, was composed of the 41st Tank Battalion minus one company and A Company, 21st AIB. Task Force Pat had as its core the 21st AIB minus one company and C Company of the 21st Tank Battalion. TF Poker was assigned the armor avenue approach through the Rechrival River valley towards Rechrival while TF Pat would attack and seize the hotly contested town of Chenogne held predominately by the FBB.

The German attack, however, commenced at 0730 on 30 December with a line of advance south through the Bois de Fragotte to the towns of Villeroux and Sibret. Führer Begleit Brigade was to drive south, take Chenogne and continue on to Sibret to cut the major road from Neufchateau to Bastogne. The commander of the Führer Begleit Brigade, Oberst Remer had a tank group with a Battalion of Panzergrenadier riding with his strike force.

The After Action Report of the 60th Armored Infantry Battalion reported that the German attack began at 0530. Their assessment was:

“…a strong attack south from Chenogne apparently with the aim of cutting the Neufchateau-Bastogne road. This attack was launched by an enemy force estimated the size of a Brigade. Of this an estimated Battalion of Infantry and a company of tanks attacked our positions both frontally and from the flanks.”

The forward elements of TF Collins were forced from their positions on the high ground south of Chenogne back to the prepared positions just north of Sibret. The Germans took heavy casualties in the assault which was eventually repulsed. The report

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246 Armor at Bastogne, 168.
The combat experiences of members of the 11th Armored Division indicate the level of ferocity of the battle. One soldier of the 21st Armored Infantry Battalion, Ray Johnson, reported on the events of 30 December as they assaulted the heavily contested village of Chenogne:

“We were crossing an open area when suddenly the terrible sound and sight of exploding shells surrounded our column of half tracks. Several of the halftracks at the head of our column were hit directly and suffered casualties. All of the soldiers jumped out of their halftracks and ran over to an area where a sunken railroad track ran—except for me and 2nd Lt. Harold Hussey. I had just been made the 50-caliber gunner and my duty was to stay with the halftrack, which was why I was still in the vehicle. In a matter of seconds another round of shells burst around our vehicles, so close I could see the dirt hurled upwards by the explosions. I looked at the front left wheel of our vehicle and saw Lt. Hussey crouched there and he was white as a sheet. A piece of shrapnel had hit the stock of his carbine and

firmly praised the attack stating: “At the start of the action, enemy troops were decidedly aggressive and morale was high…”  

Shortly after the initiation of Remer’s assault, the Combat Command B advance began, around 0730, and ran headlong into the attack of the Führer Begleit Brigade in the fog near the town of Flohamont. The initial engagement between the Führer Begleit Brigade and 11th Armored Division played out south of Chenogne. Task Force Pat emerged from the fog near Flohamont after a disorganized departure from their attack line, due in part to a concentration of German artillery on their Line of Departure. The task force was immediately engaged by Panzers of the Führer Begleit Brigade.  

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250 Armor at Bastogne, 171-172.  
252 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 620.
sliced away a big piece of the wood, but had not injured him. He said “let’s get out of here” and so I jumped over the side of the halftrack and ran towards the sunken railroad.”  

The area south of the village of Chenogne was hotly contested on 30 December. The small wooded area south of the town changed hands several times. Both sides reported heavy hand-to-hand fighting. The Führer Begleit Brigade commander, Oberst Otto Remer, had positioned some anti-tank guns in the woods near Chenogne. One crew, manning a 105mm Flak gun distinguished itself throughout the day. Using their Flak gun in a direct fire mode, they knocked out several of the advancing 11th Armored Division’s vehicles. After numerous attempts to knock it out, the American tankers finally resorted to ramming it with an armored vehicle.  

Task Force Poker had advanced along a parallel axis west of Task Force Pat and encountered little opposition, although their progress did not go unnoticed. Passing quickly through Lavasalle, TF Poker took a number of prisoners and continued north. The Task Force pressed their move northward to Brul and Houmont.

The area west of Chenogne, in the Rechrival valley did not see the same level of concentrated artillery fire and small arms fire as did the other areas. None the less, to the tankers and armored infantrymen of TF Poker, they were in the middle of another hotly contested area near Bastogne. Each unit was fighting their own “Battle of the Bulge”.

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Concentrated artillery fire and the threat of American attacks in his sector prompted Remer to request reinforcements from General Denkert’s 3. Panzergrenadier Division to renew the attack on Remer’s left flank. Denkert sent a group of grenadiers who arrived around dusk to assist Remer’s attempts to bolster Chenogne’s defenses.255 Additionally, the 115. Regiment of the 15. Panzergrenadier Division arrived to shore up the defenses of Rechrival in the west side of the valley, but due to excessive casualties assaulting Bastogne on 24 December, the regiment was only at battalion strength.256 Thankfully, the night brought a respite for both sides. Remer used this opportunity to regroup, move up supplies and develop new defensive positions.257

The outcome of the meeting engagement on the 30th caused some concern that the left flank of CCA was too exposed, despite the ground gained by the 11th Armored. As a result, TF Brownfield, CCA, 9th Armored, was moved from its reserve location of Vaux les Rosiers to Jodenville. They took positions there, protecting the exposed flank of Task Force Collins.258

The Attack Continues: 31 Dec 44

The efforts of 30 December were frustrating for both sides. The Germans were unable to reach their objective of Sibret and cut the Neufchateau-Bastogne highway. They made some progress and held the wooded areas northwest of the highway and

255 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 620.
256 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 644.
257 The History of the Panzerkorps Großdeutschland: Volume 2, 483.
258 Armor at Bastogne, 172.
used the cover of the night to regroup. The Americans had gained some ground and frustrated the German advance, but the cost in men and vehicles, particularly for the Americans, was high.

VII Corps likewise regrouped and planned to renew the attacks again on 31 December. General Harmon’s new plans for the 11th Armored Division consisted of a drive up the Rechrival valley to the high ground north of the major highway. His Combat Command A moved during the night from the west side of the Bois de Haise, where it was supporting the 87th Infantry Division’s attack against the Panzer Lehr Division, to join the early morning renewed attack. The division would attempt to clear the valley and seize Flamierge and Mande St. Etienne on the north side of the Marche-Bastogne highway. Maj. Gen. Kilburn’s 11th Armored Division staff boasted to the 101st paratroopers that they would be there by the end of the day. It was an aggressive objective that would not be reached.

It was clear that Chenogne was once again the friction point that would prevent the 11th Armored Division from advancing toward the Marche-Bastogne highway. The Germans realized this as well, and fed enough forces into Chenogne to halt any further advance by the 11th. Since Kilburn had moved his entire division into the Rechrival valley, he reckoned that another northward attempt would meet with success. He directed Combat Command A to advance through the center toward Rechrival, Combat Command B on the right against Chenogne and even brought in Combat Command R on the left flank against Magerotte and farther on to Pinsamont.

Reserve Combat Command, 11th Armored Division received its movement orders on the evening

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259 Corps Commanders of the Bulge, 239.
260 The Battle of the Bulge: Then and Now, 412-413.
261 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 644.
262 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 644.
Figure 7.13 A tanker from the 42nd Tank battalion receives part of his daily allocation of ammunition for his Sherman tank near Jodenville, Belgium during January 1945.

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of Dec 30. Field Order No. 5 directed them to move toward Magerotte (vicinity 454552) and secure the west flank of the division and seize the high ground northwest of the town. By 1000 hours, 31 December, they were in the town and moved towards the woods labeled Bois de Haise de Magery on the map. The infantry found the woods to be mined and booby trapped. They suffered eight casualties. Company A of the 22nd AIB moved in to support. All of the roads were secured and the teams set up roadblocks on all of the east-west running roads and trails into the woods. As they cleared the tree line to the north, they encountered heavy small arms and mortar fire from the direction of Acul. Direct action by several M4 Sherman tanks allowed Combat Command R to breach the defenses and push toward Acul and Pinsamont. These villages sit on a small ridge with a wooded area 500 meters to the south. Remer positioned some of his Führer Begleit Brigade troops on the reverse slope behind the village, supported by indirect fire coverage.263

At 1300 hours, after a decisive preparatory artillery concentration, C Company, 55 AIB and A Company 22nd Tank Battalion moved toward Acul.264 After heavy fighting, the village was secured by 1500. With the village in American hands, the force withdrew slightly to more defensible terrain on the reverse slope south of the village. Thereafter they successfully defeated a counterattack by approximately four tanks and 100 infantrymen.265 In his book, The Ardennes, Cole paints a different view of the outcome stating that Combat Command R was unable to clear this defensive line. They fell back toward Magerotte with heavy casualties.266

CCA was directed to disengage west of the Bois de Haise de Magery and join the assault in the Rechrival valley on 31 December. CCA would attack north, between CCR and CCB to capture Tronle (vicinity 470625). That was a healthy endeavor, given the nature of the terrain, the distance required to move and the tenacity of the FBB defenders. CCA complied and hastily moved, making it to the town of Mohret by 1130 that day. The command was assembled and verbal attack orders were issued to all present at 1210 hours.

Task Force Blue, Commanded by Lt. Col. Ahee would lead with his 42nd Tank Battalion minus A Company. He was supported by A Company, 63rd AIB and B Company 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion. Following 1000 yards behind was Task Force White with Lt. Col. Brady and his 63rd AIB minus A Company supported by A Company of 56th AIB and a platoon of tank destroyers.267 The axis of advance was through Brul/Lavasale, bypassing Task Force Poker and on towards Rechrival.

Combat Command A’s advance was thwarted by a screening force from the 3. Panzergrenadier Division equipped with anti-tank, assault guns and a greater number of machine guns. As soon as CCA made progress to the north, the depleted remnants of the 115. Panzergrenadier Regiment were sent to halt their movement. Combat Command A lost some tanks due to Panzerfaust and anti-tank fire. Since the weather had cleared somewhat, they were aided by ground attack aircraft from the Army Air Corps and eventually reached Rechrival, pushing the 115. back.268 The force dug in the town and held positions vicinity 450590. They received constant

263 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 645.
Figure 7.14 Mid day, 31 December 1944. Combat Command A made progress to the north, but heavy AT fire from the east and north checked the advance. Chenogne held again, with both sides taking heavy casualties. The fighting continued at a bitter pace. Elements of the 3. Panzergrenadier Division retreated north across the railroad tracks into the woods.

mortar fire during the night, along with harassing artillery and automatic weapons fire.²⁶⁹

On the east side of the Rechrival River valley, the attack on Chenogne did not go so well. Several infantrymen of the 29. Fusilier Regiment, the 3. Panzergrenadier Regiment and the Führer Begleit Brigade, assisted by twelve to fifteen Panzerjäger IV, held onto Chenogne with tenacity. Task Force Pat made it to the foot of the village before being ejected with more losses.²⁷⁰

The fighting from the German perspective was described by General Heinz Kokott, Commander of the 3. Panzergrenadier Division:

“For the Division, 31 Dec 44 was a day of very violent fighting. The center of gravity was - as foreseen - near Chenogne. As usual, the enemy employed fighter bombers and artillery reconnaissance planes and, after considerable artillery preparation, attacked with strong armored force... If we succeeded in repelling all the attacks, this was due to a large extent to the above mentioned Mark IV tank destroyers. They were not caught by the artillery barrage laid down by the enemy and were able to fight the tanks at long range. It is a well-known fact that the sight of their own tanks burning has a paralyzing effect on attacking forces and therefore the main reason for the failure of attacks.”

Figure 7.15 Early evening, 31 December 1944. Combat Command R pressed toward Acul. Minefields, heavy fire and an attack on their left flank forced them back to the woods. Combat Command A reached and held Rechrival against heavy counterattacks. Chenogne and Senonchamps continued to hold against repeated attacks.

"The battle was bitter and hard, extremely trying for the troops. They had to carry on their defensive fighting in intense cold, the snow reaching up to their knees during the frequent snow drifts. "Positions" in their proper sense did not exist, the actions took place mostly in the open terrain, important points changing hands repeatedly. The force committed by the enemy were far superior, particularly his artillery and armored vehicles, not to mention his air force. Even though our own losses caused by the inclemency of weather were not very heavy because of our experience during the many years in the East, the losses caused by enemy action were considerable. Each of the two Pz Gren. Regiments represented just one weak Kampfgruppe."271

11th Armored is Spent; 1–2 Jan 45

On 1 January, General Kilburn directed a coordinated strike against Chenogne with Task Forces Pat and Poker. The advance was supported by an unprecedented indirect fire force of thirteen Field Artillery Battalions with sustained fire.272

On the previous night, Remer had recognized the fruitlessness of the effort to continue to hold Chenogne, so he pulled out, leaving only a small defensive shell in Chenogne, in Senonchamps to the east, and in the wooded area, labeled Bois de Valets, that lies between the two towns. With the aid of the concentrated artillery fire and the lack of Germans in Chenogne, Task Forces Pat and Poker easily gained their initial objectives for the day.273


272 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 646.

273 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 646.
To the east, Task force Collins, from the 9th Armored was to attack in force to the north with the mission of clearing the wooded area to the front and right front, then seize and occupy the high ground south of the railroad that connected Senonchamps and Chenogne. Their attack was set to commence at 1100 hours. The Battalion Machine Gun Platoon and Company A, 60th AIB led the attack. It took the combined arms force nearly six hours to clear the woods, owing to the density of trees and the width of the advance. By nightfall, the unit was on their objective and digging in. They found the woods to be lightly defended; the Germans used mortar and light artillery force to interdict the advance. They captured two 88mm guns, noted several abandoned anti-tank positions and discovered the tracks of tanks which had made a northward retreat earlier.274

Task Force Karsteter renewed the effort to take Senonchamps on 1 January. They made initial progress, but were driven back to the line of departure by heavy fire. This pull-back left Task Force Collins’ right flank exposed. Since the attack on Chenogne did not make the planned progress, their left flank was somewhat open as well. To ease the risk, The Commander of CCA, 9th Armored sent in B and C Troops, 89th Reconnaissance Squadron to provide flank security.275

Combat Command A attacked northward toward Hubermont. The attack was met by a fierce counter attack by the Führer Begleit Brigade, which included elements of their Grenadier Battalion, the tank group and the assault gun brigade.276 The

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276 The grenadiers could have come from either the 828th Grenadier Regiment or the 110th Grenadier Regiment. No specific mention of the exact unit could be found. The tanks would have been Panzerkampfwagen IV’s
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Figure 7.17 Initial attack 2 Jan 45. Combat Command A and R left infantry elements in place to secure objectives while the armored elements were withdrawn south. Combat Command B attacked through the Bois de Valet, clearing it easily with the intent of pressing an attack on Mande St. Etienne. Task Force Karsteter cleared Senonchamps.

combined force of Grenadier, Panzer and Sturmgeschutz knocked out a, “considerable number” of tanks during the three hour battle. Only through fierce artillery barrage, aided by fighter bombers, was the counter attack repulsed. Combat Command A finally reached Hubertont by twilight.277

The 11th Armored Division was spent. It had lost a considerable number of armored vehicles and had taken heavy casualties, with little to show for the effort. The terrain between the Marche-Bastogne and Neufchateau-Bastogne highway was dotted with destroyed 11th Armored Division Sherman and Stuart tanks, half-tracks and vehicles. Despite these losses, they did seize some terrain, but more importantly, they continued to deplete the combat power of the units that were about to square off against the 17th Airborne Division.

On the evening of 1 January, Major General Middleton met with the 11th Armored Division Commander and informed him that his unit would be relieved in place by the 17th Airborne Division on 3 January.278 In response to this decision, Colonel Yale, the commander of Combat Command B appealed for and received permission to press a 2 January attack on Mande St. Etienne. The distance was only a mile, and it would provide a vital hold on a portion of the Marche-Bastogne highway for further advances toward Houffalize.279 Yale was unable to get his attack orchestrated quickly; it finally commenced during the early afternoon hours aided by 3800 rounds of artillery fire. Combat Command B finally con-

from the 102 Panzer Regiment and the assault guns would have been the Sturmgeschutz III from the 120 Sturmgeschutz Battalion.

277 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 646.

278 Corps Commanders of the Bulge, 240.

trolled the village by late evening, after heavy house to house and cellar to cellar fighting.280

Over the course of the four day battle against the Germans, the 11th Armored lost over 600 men and 54 tanks with many hundreds more wounded or unaccounted for.281 Although these losses were considerable, the 11th succeeded in further depleting the combat capability of the German forces in the Rechrival Valley. The remaining regiment of the 15. Panzergrenadier Division was near collapse. The 15. had little armor and its ranks were severely depleted. The 3. Panzergrenadier Division had been fighting non-stop since 19 December and had suffered heavy losses. The 26. Volksgrenadier Division, having been responsible for the encirclement and attacks against Bastogne, was showing the signs of fatigue. Its forces were relegated to defensive positions on the northwest edge of the Bastogne perimeter. The Führer Begleit Brigade, also heavily engaged for many days, was getting worn down as well. They only had about twenty-five serviceable tanks and assault guns and fifteen additional armored vehicles under repair. They were unable to tow many of the disabled vehicles in for repair and they suffered from a severe lack of fuel. Many of the companies of the Brigade were down to twenty to thirty men each. Strength reports such as these were dismal indeed.282

These combined losses would prove to be a key factor in allowing the 17th Airborne, including the 139th, to receive its baptism of fire and recover quickly. The troopers of the 139th could count their blessings that the enemy they were facing were less combat effective and had lost a considerable amount of men and armored vehicles. They were nearing fatigue, but their defensive stance, knowledge of the terrain, preparation of the battlefield and exceptional combat experience still made them a formidable foe.

280 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 647.
281 Battle of the Bulge, 227.
282 The History of the Panzerkorps Großdeutschland: Volume 2, 488.
The *Ardennes* Campaign
Combat Engineers in the Ardennes

On the first day of the 1945, the 139th found itself spread along the Meuse River performing general engineer duties. The headquarters element was located in Mohn, France. Capt. Kross’ Able Company men rigged a Meuse River bridge for demolition and prepared road blocks at Charleville. Capt. Pope’s Baker Company engineers guarded bridges on the Meuse River at Sedan. That day they were strafed by enemy planes and Pvt. Charles A. Spradlin received the ignominious title of the first 139th trooper to be injured in combat.283

Newly promoted, Capt. Filimon directed Charlie Company to conduct road reconnaissance missions for the division. They completed an investigation of the road network between Givet, Dinant, Phillipeville, Beaumont, Chimay, Recroi and Fumay. The route comprised more than 100 km of principle road networks west of the Meuse River, well behind the serious action and deepest penetrations of German armor near Dinant that was contained on Christmas Day. Units reported no enemy activity during all of their assigned missions. The battalion’s morale was reported as “Excellent”.284

Throughout the day various reports and memorandums streamed in to the battalion’s command post. Lt. Col. Johnson obtained a detailed copy of the German Minefield Doctrine for review and dissemination. Several Division Overlays and Intelligence Reports were brought to the Command Post (CP). At 1300 Lt. Col. Johnson left the CP and visited all of the engineer companies. He returned in the early evening at 1830. Just prior to midnight, the Division released the daily Countersign Memorandum.285

On 2 January, the 17th Airborne Division received its notice to relieve the battered 11th Armored Division in their sector. The 139th Battalion Headquarters moved to Neufchateau, Belgium, while the

Headquarters and Service Company and the Medical Detachment remained in Mohn, France. The battalion was ordered to relieve the 103rd Engineer Battalion of the 28th Infantry Division. The movement was via motor convoy. The weather was reported as “snowy and cold with poor visibility”. Lt. Col. Johnson alerted all of the line companies to expect further movement.286

The units received a tremendous amount of intelligence on the enemy and information concerning the terrain, obstacles and road networks. The data were studied and disseminated to the platoons. The lack of time made it critical that the engineers knew as much as they could about the situation and the enemy. The Division G-2 issued a Periodic and Special Intelligence Report. Lt. Evans returned from the division with maps of the area. Just before sunset

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284 Record of Events, January 1945, 1.
286 Marches, 2.
Figure 8.2 Pvt. Robert Bell and PFC Charles McCall of the 139th guard a bridge outside Douzy near Sedan, France, 31 December 1944. Note the reinforced M-43 Field Trousers, the M-1 Garand and the M-9A1 Bazooka. The bazooka ammo carrier has been leaned against the wall at the right.

Gathering intelligence to keep the commanders informed was a non-stop process. Information was gathered, consolidated, evaluated and the G-2 had to draft intelligence Summaries and Estimates of the Situation, so that Gen. Miley and his commanders could make sound tactical decisions. With each report that flowed in, the information was reassessed and new summaries written. It was a never ending process of estimation, supposition and sometimes, intrigue. The reports also contained useful information for the troops on the line. They received information about enemy units, their capabilities and limitations, their tactics and their weapons. The engineers were always keen to learn the operation of captured enemy equipment, especially ordnance and demolition equipment.

The engineers received an unending supply of pamphlets, printouts and reports at the Battalion CP. These were promptly sent to the outlying companies for review and instruction. Examples of the type of information include; Special attachments for firing the German MG-34 or MG-42 from a hidden position using an angled firing trigger and a series of mirrors. The system was mounted to the standard infantry squad machine gun and weighed an additional 7 ½ pounds. A similar device was manufactured for the Panzerschreck rocket firing bazooka that enabled the firer to remain below ground level aiming his weapon through a periscope which was clamped to the weapon. Drawings and instruction about the use of the standard grenade launcher for the StG-44 Sturmgewehr was received. It included annotation on the propelling projectile markings and

\[287\] Message Log, 2 January 1945, 1.
Another interesting layer of information was the dissemination of documents about captured, known and suspected enemy saboteurs, spies and collaborators. THIRD Army Headquarters issued continuous updates which included information on each individual, where they were located, what they were suspected of and was usually accompanied by a photograph, when available. The data flowed in an endless stream as they moved forward.

The division began its final movement into the lines on 3 January, in preparation for an attack the next day. The staff had been working without much sleep for the past sixty hours, trying to coordinate logistics, unit movement, and the details of the 4 January attack. This planning allowed the division’s combat troops to efficiently move into the Rechrival sector and relieve the 11th Armored Division in place. General Miley positioned the 194th GIR on the left flank and the 513th PIR on the right flank. The 507th PIR would remain as the division’s reserve. The 193rd GIR was attached to the 101st Airborne Division and moved toward Bastogne to bolster the perimeter.

On 3 January at 0945 hours, amidst the low overcast ceiling and poor visibility, the 139th Battalion Headquarters departed Neufchateau via motor convoy. The H&S Company set up operations in Morhet near the division’s headquarters. Each of the engineer companies were assigned to the division’s regiments working as combat teams. Baker Company was assigned to the 194th GIR for the assault on 4 January. Since they were still in France, they left via motor convoy at 0700 and arrived at the staging area near Lavasalle, Belgium at 1400. The seven-hour ride in open trucks was extremely cold.

Capt. Cornell Pope and his troopers were assigned the task of assaulting the small town of Renuamont, along with the 550th Airborne Infantry Battalion. Pope moved his men onto the line with the 194th GIR on their left and the 550th AIB...

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290 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 2.
291 Marches, 2.
292 Record of Events, January 1945, 1.
293 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 8.
on their right. On 4 January, his engineers would fight as infantry.

Capt. Filimon’s engineers would be spread over Belgium. The 1st and 3rd Platoons departed Verdun for Jodenville, France. The 2nd Platoon was located at Stenay, France, assigned to the 3rd Battalion of the 513th PIR. As of midnight on the 3rd, the 4th and 5th platoons were enroute to Neufchateau, Belgium.294

While the division staff was planning the 4 January attack, the Germans were making similar preparations. At 2015 hours, 2 January, Oberbefehlshaber West directed Army Group B to close the gap south of Bastogne by attacking either from the west side in a south easterly direction, or from the southeast side of Bastogne towards the northwest. There was some discussion between Generalfeldmarschall Walter Model and the Army Group B staff regarding the best method of attacking. Some were of the opinion that an attack from the north, where American armored forces were weaker and the terrain was more suitable to armored attack, would be more beneficial.

Following the discussion, Model directed the 9 SS Panzer Division to attack from the north, the 12 SS Panzer Division from the northeast and the Führer Grenadier Brigade, (not Remer’s Führer Begleit Brigade - the Führer Grenadier Brigade is another unit from the same Division), and elements of the 340. Volksgrenadier Division to attack from the east. The Führer telegraphed his approval of the concept.295 On the next day, OKW concluded that since Army Group B had drawn over half of the friendly forces into its sector, the possibility of success of the original operational plan to strike towards Antwerp would have limited success. Despite this conclusion regarding the overall operational success of WACHT AM RHEIN, the attack to close the Bastogne gap would continue as planned. This decision set the stage for the 17th Airborne Division to be involved in several days of bitter fighting near Bastogne.296 Fortunately for the 17th Airborne, most of the enemy facing them had been severely pummeled during several previous days of fighting.

The Battle for Dead Man’s Ridge

The Attack of the division on 4 January was preceded by a 10-minute artillery barrage that began at 0805 hours. The attack jumped off without much time for the leaders to perform a reconnaissance. The 194th GIR was arrayed with the 2nd Battalion on the left and the 550th AIB on the far right with B Company, 139th in between. Attacking on the division’s right flank was the 513th PIR. The 87th Infantry Division, on the left flank of the 194th GIR initiated their assault at the same time.

The initial movement across the front of the division was met with long-range small arms and sporadic artillery fire. At 1300, the 550th AIB began taking “fairly high” casualties caused by small arms fire on their right flank from Renuamont west to Hill

294 Record of Events, January 1945, 1.
295 Kriegstagebuch, Teilband II, 1345.

296 Kriegstagebuch, Teilband II, 1345-6.
Figure 8.5 On 4 January, the Talon attacked. The 194th GIR attacked on the division’s left flank and the 513th PIR on the right flank. The 550th PIB was attached as the 3rd Bn. of the 194th GIR. Armor and tank destroyers, in support of the 194th, moved toward Rechrival, but did not add to the action due to road conditions. The 513th marched all night to arrive at its line of departure for the morning attacks. 2/513 fought their way into Mande St. Etienne on 3 Jan. The 193rd GIR was attached to the 101st Airborne Division near Bastogne. Parts of the division were still moving forward from France.

460. The 2nd Battalion was attacked by several infantrymen and approximately eleven tanks and SP guns. They suffered severe casualties fending off the attack. In response to repeated attacks, the 194th requested an artillery mission to be fired on Flaminge. Corps artillery filled the mission at 1425 with unknown results. By 1600 the 2nd Battalion, 194th was able to take their objective, Hill 460. After dark, they withdrew a few hundred meters and dug into the reverse slope on the south side of Hill 460 due to the strength of counter attacks. The Remer Brigade attacked with several SP guns that fired into the infantry positions and over their heads. The counterattack was quite heavy, pushing the 194th back from the positions before they could be properly prepared. 297

Farther to the east, the 513th PIR moved through the Bois de Valet in an attempt to gain the high ground along the Marche-Bastogne highway. They made significant progress from their LD and encountered resistance from elements of two Panzer-grenadier units in the woods. The 513th drove them

The 194th was unable to retain Hill 460 or Renuamont. The 550th PIB was severely mauled by repeated FBB counterattacks. The 194th moved south to defensible terrain during the evening. The 1/513th was unable to hold the highway due to strong armor attacks and moved back to the wooded area. After taking heavy casualties, 2/513th moved back south. Col. Coutts brought up 3/513th to hold the line from Mande St. Etienne to the forest. The 507th arrived at Pinsamont, and 1/194th moved to Houmont. C Company, 139th AEB was brought up to fill the gap between the 194th and 513th.

The attack axis of the 194th and the 513th were such that as they advanced on their objective, a gap opened up between the two units. The gap was approximately 800 meters wide and covered the rolling open terrain into the woods between the Bois de Valet and Renuamont. This oversight was potentially disastrous.

While the attack of the division was underway, the 507th PIR moved into their positions near Pinsamont. They took some casualties from antipersonnel mines near coordinates 440560. The Regimental Commander requested engineers to check the area. Lt. Col. Johnson indicated he did not have any available engineers or equipment to do the job.

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*Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 38.*
Two companies were on the line and the others were moving forward.299

The airborne engineers were closing in on their first real battle experiences. The advance towards their objective must have been an eerie experience for the untested engineers of Baker Company. As they plodded through the snow they heard the sounds of distant fighting and artillery fire and occasionally became targets themselves. During their advance, they encountered sporadic fire from their left flank. When the visibility allowed, the troopers saw the unmistakable hulks of destroyed American tanks left by the 11th Armored Division attacks of the previous five days.300 Despite the minor harassing fire, they made steady progress, and by 1300 hours they neared the towns of Renuamont and Rechrival. Here the German defenses stiffened and caused heavy casualties among the 194th and 550th troopers.301

During the fighting to take Renuamont and Hill 460 on the far side, Baker Company took some prisoners. Sgt. Jerry King described the conduct of a group of captured German soldiers. His three prisoners consisted of an officer and two privates. The officer was fairly belligerent with King and refused to keep his hands in the air. Twice he dropped them to his side and when King prodded him with his bayonet, the officer reeled around and the two privates who accompanied him bristled up, ready for a fight. King quickly planted the bayonet firmly in the officer’s posterior. The situation was immediately defused and King double-timed the prisoners to the regimental stockade with no further problems.302

Eventually, the combined force of the paratroopers, glidermen, and engineers drove the enemy occupants out of the hamlets; they succeeded in

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301 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 3.
302 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 8-9.
taking Hill 460 on the far side. The progress was slow going up the slope, due to the enemy fire and the 1½-foot-deep snow. As darkness set in, the regimental headquarters ordered the units on the hill to withdraw back into the villages and hold at all costs until morning. Pope’s Company and members of the 550th AIB pulled back to defend Renuamont. This was going to be a difficult task since the Führer Begleit Brigade was pressing the attack, supported by its own tanks. The men moved back and prepared for the worst.303

Shortly after Sgt. King returned to Renuamont, with his bayonet encrusted with frozen blood, a concentration of various German artillery and mortar shells fell on the engineers’ battle positions. One of the 550th AIB officers, Capt. Floyd M. Paxton, received notification that the enemy was moving some tanks toward the village under cover of the rolling barrage.

Paxton called for some bazooka men. PFC Edward A. Ledonne and PFC James Haagenson from Baker Company went with Capt. Paxton to a position to cover the armor avenues of approach to the town. Ledonne and Haagenson along with bazooka men from the 550th engaged the first enemy tank that approached the village and succeeded in knocking it out.304 Immediately thereafter, an artillery round struck their position wounding the two bazooka men.305

Around 2300 hours, Private Marvin Haines of the 550th AIB was operating the unit’s SCR 300 radio on the battalion net, when reports of another enemy attack came in. The assault included enemy tanks and was again aimed at Renuamont, the easternmost hamlet held by the 139th and 550th. Artillery support was requested as the attack increased.306

The combined attack on the series of small villages south of Hill 460 was quite overwhelming. Later that evening, two more Baker Company troopers were wounded. The 550th was ordered to vacate the village for the more easily defensible positions in the woods to the southeast. Sgt. King’s squad, along with the two wounded troopers and other elements of Baker Company were covering the withdrawal of the 550th. Another artillery round landed in the building, wounding two more troopers. Sgt. King rushed to the company command post in search of a jeep and driver to evacuate the wounded men. At the command post, Pvt. Jerald W. K. Eberline and T/5 Robert F. Bowers volunteered to take a jeep and pick up the wounded. Since artillery was still impacting, it was a dangerous mission. The two stalwart troopers made their way to the wounded men, loaded them into the jeep and returned back to the command post, where the injured could receive medical treatment.307

Additional members of Baker Company were still in the outskirts of the town covering the withdrawal of the 550th. Although the enemy artillery and machine gun fire was intense, they stayed at their positions, buying time for the unit’s retreat. 2nd Lt. Robert Reed, a platoon leader in Baker Company, moved from position to position, directing fire, reassuring the troopers, and taking general control of the situation. Lt. Reed’s men maintained their position in the town, allowing the troopers of the 550th to withdraw from the town. They held their positions at Lt. Reed’s urgings, holding their fire to the last moment when the Germans attacked. His courageous leadership and the determination of the men allowed the 550th to fully withdraw. By 0400 on 5 January, Reed and the rest of the engineers were able to withdraw. They dug into new positions a few hundred yards from the town. For his efforts Lt. Reed was later awarded the Silver Star.308 Reed’s citation reads:

“...for gallantry in action at Rena-
mont, Belgium, on 5 January 1945. Second
Lieutenant Reed’s platoon was cut off by the
enemy in the town of Renamont. Despite ter-
rific artillery and small arms fire, he fear-
lessly moved among the foxholes of his men
bolstering their morale and aiding the
wounded. His cool, courageous leadership
was an inspiration to his men. They fought
their way out of their desperate situation,
evacuating all their wounded and covering
the withdrawal of an infantry battalion. His
outstanding courage and fearless leadership
reflect the highest credit upon himself and

303 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 8.
304 As reported in 550th Airborne Infantry Battalion 1941-1945, several of the bazooka rounds fired by the 550th and the engineers failed to detonate. This could have been either from the cold, malfunctions or because the nervous troopers failed to remove the safety clip.
305 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 9.
306 550th Airborne Infantry Battalion 1941-1945, 74.

307 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 9-10.
308 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 10-11.
upon the military forces of the United States."

Another of Baker Company’s Platoon leaders, 1st Lt. Edward H. Olcott was performing the same selfless tasks expected of a leader. He moved from man to man, directing fire, reassuring them and keeping the defense intact. These are the types of actions that made the difference during battle. Under such firm leadership the young troopers, inexperienced in battle, gained confidence in their own ability to withstand combat. For his actions, Olcott was awarded the Bronze Star as cited below:

“...for heroic action against the enemy from 4 January 1945 to 6 January 1945,  

309 General Order Number 16 (Headquarters, 17th Airborne Division, 1945). 1. Note the spelling of Renaumont is incorrect in this citation as in that of Lt. Olcott.
near Renamont, Belgium. In action during the period cited, First Lieutenant Olcott demonstrated outstanding leadership when his platoon was surrounded by enemy tanks and infantry. Throughout the fight he fearlessly exposed himself to enemy fire checking the position and welfare of his men and aiding the wounded, He and his men fought gallantly covering the withdrawal of a battalion headquarters from a precarious position, His courageous devotion to duty was a vital factor in stemming determined enemy attacks. His conduct is in keeping with the highest standards of military service.”310

The events of 4 January and into the early morning hours of 5 January proved several things to the engineers: they were no longer untested, they had advanced, attacked, defended against armor and infantry and had survived the effects of heavy artillery fire. They had validated their difficult training. Everything they had learned in the past eighteen months was paying off. Furthermore, they had true leaders in their midst. They were confident and capable, but many more difficult days of combat lay ahead. Capt. Pope had every reason to be proud of the performance of his men. Baker Company had advanced, attacked, held ground and allowed several members of the 550th to withstand a counterattack.

What everyone remembered was the winter conditions and the casualties. Cpl. George Nicolle remembers the “bitter cold and snow.” He further recalls not having too many hot meals. A final, difficult recollection was the loss of fellow troopers. Nicolle writes:

“I remember the day Lt. Sowka got hit. The snow turned red. I never knew what happened to him.”311

Levert L. Avery recalls reaching into his musette bag for a pack of cigarettes and found that a bullet had gone through the bag and the pack of cigarettes. He never noticed the impact through all the excitement:

“Everything was moving pretty fast... When you don’t know, it doesn’t make any difference.”

Like most other veterans, Avery’s worst memories were of the bitter cold, which gave him frostbite on his feet. Avery said,

“There was no place to warm up and no tents to sleep in... the soldiers tried to find some place outside to curl up with their bed roll.”312

Fighting as infantry on the line with the 194th GIR, the engineers were not immune from tragedy. PFC Eugene M. Raby was killed in action on 4 January 1945. He was the first engineer to die in combat, but he would not be the last. Seriously wounded were the following Pvt’s; James S. Bouldry, Malon J. Carroll, James G. Haagenson, Lewis A. Laczkozaki and Richard V. Rompot. Sgt. Samuel E. Morgan was lightly wounded in action. Pvt. Mark A. McCarty, Pvt. Gerald C. Rupp and PFC Henry F. 311 George W. Nicolle, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 5. Cpl. Nicolette was referring to Lt. Samuel H. Sowka. He is listed as having been wounded in action on 5 Jan 1945.

312 Mike O'Rourke, “As he Nears 90” Birthday, Baxter Man Reflects on War”, Brainerd Dispatch, May 25, 2009.
Smudzinski were lightly injured in action.\textsuperscript{313} LeDonne’s status was listed as Missing in Action and later changed.\textsuperscript{314} Despite the losses, Lt. Col. Johnson recorded unit morale as excellent.

The casualties suffered by the Germans were not insignificant. Many were killed, missing in action

\textsuperscript{313} Record of Events, January 1945, 1.
\textsuperscript{314} LeDonne’s status as MIA is listed in the battalion’s battle casualties. His status in all other accounts does not list him as MIA or injured, nor does he show ever having been awarded a Purple Heart for injuries.
or wounded on 4 January. One of the known instances is that of German Army Lieutenant and Company Commander Franz Promberger. He served as the commander of the 6. Company of Panzergrenadier Regiment 115, 15. Panzergrenadier Division. Relatively young at 24 years old, he had earned the Iron Cross Second Class, the Iron Cross First Class, the Tank Assault Badge, the Krim Shield, the Wound Badge in Gold, the Close Combat Clasp in Silver and the German Cross in Gold. He was buried in Lommel Belgium.

During the course of the day, the 139th Headquarters travelled on the snow-covered roads from Bercheux to Morhet. The short trip ended at 1400 hours. The H&S Company and the Medical Detachment remained at Bercheux, where they performed normal field duties. Company A, still near Bastogne, attached to the 101st, performed a route reconnaissance and made road repairs. By 0800 in the morning, control of A Company was returned to the 139th.

Filimon’s engineers had a rather eclectic day. The 1st and 3rd Platoons were still in Jodenville. The 2nd Platoon was attached to the 513th as infantry. They were holding near Monty, Belgium, and no doubt saw heavy fighting. Filimon’s remaining platoons, the 4th and 5th engaged in the deadly mission of mine clearing. Around 1400 Filimon’s remaining engineers were eventually assembled in the Bois de Valet for a follow-on mission.

Some time during the day, the 550th reported they had not contacted their neighboring unit, the 513th, laagered in the Bois de Valet. Division headquarters realized there was a dangerous gap in the lines between the two units. Charlie Company, 139th was directed to move between the 550th and the 513th to close the gap. Here again, the 139th was used in their back-up role as infantrymen, holding an 800 meter frontal zone between two infantry units. Filimon moved his engineers from the wooded assembly area into the gap just southeast of Renuamont.

Additionally, the 193rd GIR was released from attachment to the 101st Airborne Division. They moved west and into the line to the right of the 513th PIR with two battalions on line. They established their

Regimental CP at coordinates 524583, near the village of Senonchamps.

Activity on the 5th consisted mainly of troopers preparing positions, distributing supplies and preparing for another attack or defense. Lt. Col. Johnson was consolidating his companies and moving them to more suitable locations. The H&S Company along with the Medical Detachment took a short convoy and arrived at Morhet. The six mile trip took only thirty minutes. Capt. Kross’s Able Company arrived in Mohret also. Two platoons were immediately put to work building a bomb shelter for the divisional headquarters. Immediately after the combat action with their infantry brethren, Pope’s engineers

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315 Message Log, 1 January 1945 1945, 1.
316 Message Log, 1 January 1945, 2.
317 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 3.
318 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 11.
reassembled at Lavasalle, marched to Morhet and reverted to battalion control.\(^{320}\) The men were, no doubt, tired, cold and hungry. Shelling and sniper fire plagued the movements. Morale was still reported as excellent. It almost always was reported so.

As the 507th and the supporting 57mm anti-tank (AT) guns of the 155th Battalion were attempting to dig into the frozen ground, they realized it was a futile effort. Neither the troops nor the guns could be protected as digging with hand shovels was impossible. The 139th was contacted to assist. Using TNT, the engineers blasted holes in the ground in the 3rd Battalion, 507th sector to allow the AT guns to be placed in defilade. The 139th was also directed to lay a minefield running north to south along the division’s left flank in front of Pinsamont. Lt. Col. Johnson advised against that, since the 194th was still withdrawing and some elements of the unit would no doubt pass through the area.\(^{321}\)

Oberst Remer directed an attack by Panzergrenadiere of his brigade against the Americans. The Panzergrenadiere were supported by some of his remaining tanks. Some were captured; one of them held a German operations order from the brigade. From this order, the 17th Intelligence Section con-

\(^{320}\) Record of Events, January 1945, 2.

\(^{321}\) After Action Reports: Summary of Operations, January 1945, 3.
cluded that they had faced elements of the *Führer Begleit Brigade* and that Remer’s unit still had approximately 1500 men and 25 tanks or assault guns available.\(^{322}\)

The 2nd Battalion, 194th GIR suffered heavy casualties during this attack and ceded some ground. To the east, there was another attack of *Panzergrenadiere*, supported by assault guns. The attack made measurable advances toward the lines of the 2nd Battalion, 513th PIR, but was eventually beaten back.\(^{323}\) The elements of Remer’s units and the three other principle opponents in their sector had reacted so audaciously to the attacks that the 17th would spend the better part of 5 and 6 January reorganizing units, redistributing ammunition and improving battle positions. Meanwhile, the engineers tended to their dangerous tasks of minefield placement and clearing.

At 0215 in the morning Capt. Kross, along with Lt. Evans reported to the Battalion CP to discuss the emplacement of friendly minefields in their sector. After ten minutes they left with Lt. Col. Johnson to brief the division and the 194th commander. Capt. Kross contacted the CP and asked them to relay information to Lt. Stolberg. He requested mines and explosive materials for the sector. He was to bring the material to *Houmont* and wait for Capt. Kross. By 0520 a load of 1200 mines and 700 pounds of TNT had been secured. Lt. Evans took a message to Able Company instructing them to assemble one platoon of men and vehicles to transport the material to the battalion area. By 1000 hours 500 mines had been unloaded by the work party. The remaining mines were stored at coordinates 375452 in the town of *Respelle* under the care of the 35th Engineer Battalion. The 35th was in direct support of the 17th during the *Ardennes* Campaign. They were attached to the 1102nd Engineer Group during most of the war.\(^{324}\)

The Battalion CP was very busy on 5 January. At 1400 hours the Chief of Staff of the THIRD Army visited the CP. He was looking for the Division Headquarters. Someone presumably gave him directions. Lt. Ellwood A. Bancroft arrived at the CP and updated the staff on the status of Charlie Company. He pointed out their CP on the Battalion Situation Map. A short time later an unnamed Colonel from the 1102nd Engineer Group visited. It was most likely Col. Henry Douglas. At 1600 hours Capt. Pope checked in and updated the staff on Baker Company’s situation. An hour later the Division called, requesting sand bags to be filled for defensive positions. As night fell, there was a continued flurry of activity; reports and overlays were received and reviewed and vehicles were dispatched on various transportation missions.\(^{325}\) The staff was getting tired. Most of them had labored nearly continuously since the Warning Order was issued in England. The realities of combat were sinking in all throughout the Division.

One of Gen. Miley’s regimental commanders commented after the losses of the 4th and 5th:

> “God, how green we are, but we are learning fast and the next time we will beat them.”\(^{326}\)

Even the THIRD Army Commander Lt. Gen. George Patton commented on the 4th of January, “We can still lose this war.” Patton further reported that the 17th had received a, “very bloody nose” and that one of its battalions had reported 40% casualties. Patton quipped, “When such reports are received it indicates that someone knows nothing of war.” He promptly met Gen. Miley in Bastogne, presumably to discuss the losses and further events.\(^{327}\)

**Appendix C** annotates all 17th Airborne Division combat fatalities during the fighting from 25 December 1944 to 10 February 1945.\(^{328}\) Most fatalities were suffered during the bitter fighting between 4 and 8 January 1945. Whereas the combat fatalities may seem statistically insignificant when compared to the 12,850 troopers assigned to the division, it must be understood that the number of men wounded and captured was always many times higher. On 18 January 1945 the 17th reported a total of 3,722 casualties of all types during the campaign up to that date. That amounts to a 29% casualty rate for just fourteen days of combat.\(^{329}\)

Casualties for 5 January among the engineers were fortunately light compared to those of the regiments but included three seriously wounded troopers; 2nd Lt. Samuel H. Sowka, Pvt. William T. Feducovitz and Pvt. John D. Shay. Pvt. Hollis D.

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\(^{322}\) *Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division*, 3-4.

\(^{323}\) *Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division*, 4-5.

\(^{324}\) *139th Message Log, 5 January 1945*, 1.

\(^{325}\) *Message Log, 5 January 1945*, 2.

\(^{326}\) MacDonald, *The Last Offensive*, 38.


\(^{328}\) *Operational Diary: 17th Airborne Division*, 74. Table 3 does not include the combat fatalities for the 550th AIB or any attached units. The eight fatalities on 25 January were as the result of the crash of a C-47 in France.

\(^{329}\) *Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division*, 9.
Rowe was lightly wounded in action. Pvt. Joseph A. Revon was lightly injured in action.  

On 5 January at 1800 hours, the operations officer of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, Oberst Meyer-Detring, rendered a report on the tactical situation in the Bastogne salient. His report indicated that the Germans recognized the American intent to pinch off the Ardennes salient north of Bastogne in an attempt to trap any remaining German forces. The tactical situation in the vicinity of Bastogne had not changed significantly over the past few days. Nothing decisive had been achieved by either side as a result of the multitude of repeated attacks and counterattacks. Meyer-Detring further reported that, although the German units possessed significant men, artillery and tanks, there was a dearth of ammunition and fuel, which could not be replenished. He blamed these logistical problems on the air campaign which had rendered much of the railroad network ineffective. Furthermore, he stipulated that, on days where the weather was suitable for Allied close air support operations, any daytime movement by German units was sure to meet with certain destruction.  

On 5 January, additional German intelligence reports made their way to the Oberkommander der Wehrmacht. They reported that a regiment of the 17th Airborne Division was in contact with German forces in the vicinity of Bastogne. The Germans now knew they were facing the Golden Talon division.

Gen. Middleton was still focused on clearing the Germans out of the area west of Bastogne and continuing his advance northward toward Houffalize as directed by Patton. The 17th Airborne needed to maintain the initiative via offensive action. That meant a new attack. January 7 would be another bloody day for the 17th.

The divisional staff busied themselves developing the operations order for the 7 January assault. The scheme of maneuver called for an attack towards the north and northeast. The 194th GIR on the left flank was to seize the high ground around Hill 460 and the terrain north of Rechrival-Renuamont. This was ground they held during the afternoon of 4 January and ceded due to strong counterattacks by the Führer Begleit Brigade.

The 513th was ordered to attack northward and seize the high ground along the Marche-Bastogne highway and the village of Flamierge north of the road. The 193rd, newly arrived from the 101st Division

330 Record of Events, January 1945, 2.  
331 Kriegstagebuch, Teilband 1, 990.  
332 Kriegstagebuch, Teilband 1, 994.
sector, was to attack to the north and seize Flamizoulle. The 507th PIR was held as the divisional reserve once again.333 The goal of these attacks was to expand the area west of Bastogne by another two kilometers and gain the high ground north of the highway. Things did not go as planned!

The attack by the 194th GIR met severe resistance. The Germans had been busy reorganizing and dressing the line during the two days used by the 17th for the same purpose. The 194th fought against remnants of the 115. Panzergrenadier Regiment, several units of the Führer Begleit Brigade, and elements of the 29. Panzergrenadier Regiment of the 3. Division. Heavy resistance from these units pushed the 194th back out of the villages of Rechrival, Hubermont and Millamont.334

In the center of the sector, the 513th seemed to making progress. They advanced with the 1st Battalion on the left and the 3rd on the right. 2nd Battalion was kept aft as the regimental reserve. Their attack progressed rapidly, and they gained the village of Flamierge quickly. By 1155 they reported the village in 513th hands.335 The village, held by the 3rd Battalion, was counterattacked around 1200 hours by a force of Panzergrenadiere and tanks; the 3rd Battalion was forced to cede the town. The regimental commander kept the pressure on, and directed the 1st and 2nd Battalions to press the attack towards the woods west of Flamierge. These additional attacks on the defenders allowed the 3rd Battalion to regain the town around 1715 hours, just after sunset.336

It was a challenge for Gen. Kokott to fully understand the tactical situation within his 3. Panzergrenadier Division sector. The thinly manned front lines, the weather and repeated days of combat were adversely impacting his command.

"the first reports about enemy attacks arrived without Division being able to realize fully the situation, when suddenly the advanced Divisional Command Post at Tronle was informed that enemy forces in strength of about one battalion, had taken Flamierge - which was less than one kilometer distant. The situation was: exploiting the advantage of the gloomy weather the enemy had penetrated through the line of our strong point defenses and was in the rear of our MLR, forcing the artillery located near Flamierge to effect a speedy change of position-while the Division was unable to undertake anything against all this seriously. The "second position" still under improvement and thinly occupied by men who were raked together in order to prevent at least an enemy "march through" of the enemy to the north... Counterattacks immediately ordered against Flamierge were repelled, the area all around this locality was occupied by the enemy so that it could not be reached by a surprise attack from any side. Flamierge was defended tenaciously; we gained the impression that the enemy troops which we were fighting there had been especially trained for combat in towns.337

Kokott realized the gravity of the situation, and must also have perceived that this was an opportunity of tactical significance.

"In the basement of a house in Tronle where the advanced Divisional Command Post was located, the conduct of the counterattack against Flamierge was discussed with the commanders who were involved, both of the Div and Kampfgruppe of 9 Pz Div, and the corresponding orders were issued. The first attack took place in snowy weather during which all heavy weapons available to the division were committed. In spite of the most careful planning, the attack was repelled, Kampfgruppe9 Pz Div suffering heavy losses in men and materiel including armored vehicles. "338

The tactical situation created a small salient in the front lines with the town of Flamierge being the point of furthest penetration. The 513th was in a very exposed position, being approximately three kilometers ahead of the rest of the division. The regiment was exposed from the front and both flanks and was a ripe target for envelopment. As a result, the 1st and 2nd Battalions withdrew back into the woods, leaving only the 3rd Battalion in Flamierge. The 3rd's situation was unknown for a period of time, as they were no longer in contact with the division.339 The Regiment had taken heavy casualties once again, with fifty-nine...

333 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 4.
334 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 4.
335 Historical Record of Events for 193rd Glider Infantry Regiment, n.p.
336 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 4.
337 FMS C002 3rd Pzr Gren Dec to Jan, 19-20.
338 FMS C002 3rd Pzr Gren Dec to Jan, 21.
339 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 4.
fatalities and several more times that number in casualties.\textsuperscript{340} They would not be able to sustain the pace for much longer.

Gen. Kokott was not satisfied with allowing this threat to his position to remain uncontested. As was expected, immediate action began. Kokott gathered his staff once again and prepared a suitable response.

\textsuperscript{340} Operational Diary, 17\textsuperscript{th} Airborne Division, 38.

\textquotedblleft A new plan was decided upon: Flamierge was to be encircled entirely during the night and penetrated in a concentric surprise attack from all sides simultaneously before day break... The attack terrain was divided into sectors, passwords and signals of information were fixed in order to prevent mutual firing, tanks were made ready to intervene at focal points in the crucial moment; the entire artillery of the Division with forward observation points at all Kampfgruppen was ready for action, signal communication was secured... But everything remained quiet in Flamierge and when
even the moment which had been fixed for the penetration passed without anything particular happening, everybody began to feel somewhat uneasy. The situation was clarified by reports which came in soon, stating that our spearheads had found the place abandoned by the enemy. 341

To the east, near Mande St. Étienne, the 193rd jumped off with two battalions forward and one back in reserve. The attack began on time with a coordinated artillery barrage at 0800. The 1st Battalion on the left ran into heavy fire from grenadiers in the town of Flamizoulle with heavy casualties. The 2nd made quicker progress encountering only light resistance in the woods to the southeast of the village. As night fell, enemy counterattacks poured heavy fire on the battalion and they withdrew back to Mande St. Étienne. 342 The casualties for the 193rd were the heaviest of the day, and included sixty-three killed in action along with many more wounded men and officers. 343 Prisoners taken during the day revealed the 193rd was up against the 104. and 115. Regiment of the 15. Panzergrenadier Division. 344

341 FMS C002 3rd Pzr Gren Dec to Jan, 21.

342 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 5.
343 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 38.
344 Historical Record of Events for 193rd Glider Infantry Regiment, n.p.
The Engineer’s H&S Company remained in Morhet with the 139th Headquarters. They spent the better part of the morning performing normal engineer field duties. The Medical Detachment was ordered forward to Lavasalle, where they could better treat the battle casualties of the Battalion. The 3½ mile journey took around forty-five minutes. Capt. Kross took his company from Hobert to Houmont, a position of better tactical utility. A seventeen man assault party accompanied one of the Parachute Infantry Battalions on the 7 January assault. Baker Company laid a minefield in the 194th GIR’s sector while Charlie Company marched to Houmont. They dug into new defensive positions there.

During the afternoon, Baker Company had conducted a few probes of German minefields and found empty mounds where they suspected mines to be. The Operations Officer ordered Able and Charlie Companies to check the fields surrounding their positions for safety’s sake.346

During the day, the 507th PIR was given orders to move onto the line for an attack. From their position on the division’s left flank, the 1st and 2nd Battalions were to move to the center of the division on the fighting line.347 The 3rd Battalion was held near Pinsamont and was given directives to attack Hill 500 on the following day. Since the regiment’s original position south of Pinsamont guarded the division’s left flank, Gen. Miley could not leave an open gap. Although the 87th Infantry Division held the ground west of the 17th, the gap between the two divisions could easily be exploited, particularly in the reduced visibility conditions. The weather had been continually bad, with temperatures well below freezing, poor visibility, blowing snow and low ceilings. This type of weather would continue for many days.348

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345 Record of Events, January 1945, 3.
346 Message Log, 7 January 1945, 2.
347 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 5.
348 Refer to Table 5.1 for specific weather conditions.
The only unit available to close the gap was the 139th AEB. At 1155 hours Col. Johnson was called to division headquarters to report to the Division Chief of Staff. Miley ordered the battalion to conduct a relief in place where the 507th was vacating. The engineers would also remain ready as a reserve for the 3rd Battalion if needed. The Warning Order was received at approximately 1900 hours.

At 2250 Johnson met with his staff and Company Commanders to discuss the tactical situation. While the units began the movement, he and the staff conducted a reconnaissance of Pinsamont. It’s likely that they personally walked the terrain and assigned individual positions for the platoons during the recon. Lt. Col. Johnson deployed Able and Charlie Companies on the line and kept Baker Company, ruffled by the fighting in Renuamont, in reserve. The Battalion began movement at 2330 hours, and by 0300, 8 January they were in their assigned battle positions around Pinsamont.

Johnson deployed most of his platoons forward of the town of Pinsamont. Capt. Kross’ Able company was deployed on the left front flank forward of Pinsamont. The 2nd Platoon occupied the few stone buildings of Acul. 1st Platoon was positioned on the forward slope of the ridge that jutted north from the west end of Pinsamont. They had excellent fields of fire in all directions and occupied commanding terrain. Filimon’s Company secured the front and right flank of the Battalion with 2nd Platoon directly in front of Pinsamont, and 3rd and 4th Platoons along the road embankment that led east out of the town and down to the Rechrival stream. Johnson held Filimon’s 1st and 5th Platoons in the town to react to enemy attacks. Pope’s Company dug into the frozen root-bound ground of a small wooded area approximately 500 meters south of the town.

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349 Message Log, 6 January 1945, 1.
351 Message Log, 7 January 1945, 2.
The Division Reconnaissance Platoon held the road intersection that led into the Bois de Haies de Magery just southwest of Pinsamont. Johnson designated four weapons engagement zones in front of the platoon positions; ROGER, SUGAR, NORMAL and TARE. He positioned his forward observers and created counter-attack and withdrawal plans. By the next morning the battalion was prepared for the worst.352 During the day and into the evening, the units reported enemy sniper and patrolling activity. Private Guy E. High Jr., was lightly wounded in action.353

For the battalion, the next two days would be rather uneventful, but extremely cold. Their energy was mainly devoted to staying warm and preparing fighting positions as well as guard duty, patrolling and weapons cleaning. Able and Baker Companies' mess sections and their deuce-and-a-half truck were in the cover of the town of Pinsamont. The mess section provided the first hot meal they had in many days. The mess section from Charlie Company delivered a hot meal of turkey dinner to their brothers.354

On the evening of 7 January, the 3rd battalion of the 507th PIR was tasked to conduct a night assault of Hill 500. The unit was to cut the road that ran from the town of Tillet, in the 87th Infantry Division's sector, and the town of Laval, previously held by the 194th Glider Infantry Regiment. The battalion received priority of indirect fires from the division along with two battalions of artillery from the corps and a towed 57mm anti-tank platoon.355

H-hour for the attack was designated as 0230, 8 January. The unit arrived on their objective by 0600, still under darkness and only engaged in sporadic firefight along the way. As daylight broke, the German artillery began to effectively pound the 3rd Battalion positions. They took several casualties, including the Battalion Commander, who was killed. The German artillery also devastated the AT Platoon, destroying several of its prime movers and guns. At 1500, the Germans counterattacked with infantry supported by about three tanks from the 1500, the Germans counterattacked with infantry destroying several of its prime movers and guns. At 0600, the battalion was prepared for the worst.352 During the day and into the evening, the units reported enemy sniper and patrolling activity. Private Guy E. High Jr., was lightly wounded in action.353

While the 507th was working on Hill 500, the 513th PIR and the 194th GIR defended against strong enemy counter attacks. The 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 513th suffered heavy casualties from two flanking attacks aided by armor. The 193rd was attacked as well, but not in the same strength as the other units. The 17th Airborne troopers accounted for another seven enemy tanks during the day. Troopers captured another twenty-eight German prisoners, bringing the total number to 192.358

During the evening of the 8th of January, the communications line connecting the 139th command post to the 3rd Battalion of the 507th PIR command post went dead. Lt. Col. Johnson directed T/4 Edgar R. Hallock to check the radio net with the 507th. The second he switched frequencies, he heard the call:

“Urgent! Urgent! There is a heavy infiltration of German patrols through our lines!”359

The call from the 507th that they were receiving heavy shelling and meeting heavy resistance came in to the Battalion CP at 2150 hours.360 Lt. Col. Johnson put every single 139th trooper on alert and sent them to defensive positions in and around Pinsamont. Cooks, drivers and clerks were armed and ready. Lt. Col. Johnson ordered the battalion’s vehicles, jeeps and 2 ½-ton trucks to convoy at night to the south to Magerotte.361

Fortunately for the engineers, the enemy counterattack, most likely part of the attack on the 3rd Battalion’s exposed positions around Hill 500, was repulsed before it reached Pinsamont. The division’s organic and supporting artillery proved quite effective in breaking up enemy attacks throughout the Ardennes Campaign. Despite the success in thwarting these counterattacks, the two days of 7 and 8 January were very costly for the 17th Airborne Division. The unit suffered 246 KIA’s and a much higher number of wounded soldiers, again with no significant gains in

352 Situation Map 6 January 1945, 1.
353 Record of Events, January 1945, 3.
354 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 11.
355 Operations of the 3rd Battalion 507th, 8.
356 Operations of the 3rd Battalion 507th, 14-19.
358 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 5.
359 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 11-12.
360 Message Log, 7 January 1945, 1.
361 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 12.
The cost to the enemy was equally staggering. The toll in casualties and destroyed armor vehicles had driven their combat capability to a less than marginal state. Once again, everyone went into a defensive mode, consolidating unit positions, connecting flanking boundaries and improving individual fighting positions. The enemy’s posture for 9 to 11 January was nearly the same. S/Sgt Edward C. Madison, lightly wounded in action, was the only reported engineer casualty for the day.

On 8 January, Hitler authorized a withdrawal from the Ardennes salient. He ordered a defensive line from Dochone to Longchamps, and directed that this would be the furthest eastern retreat line authorized. The SIXTH Panzer Army was ordered to withdraw to St. Vith and Wiltz. On 9 January, the entry in the Tagesmeldung of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht reported, "Der Frontbogen würde zurückgezogen, um Kräfte einzusparen." (The frontal bulge was pulled back to safeguard forces.)

This was the admission that the offensive operation in the Ardennes was over. German forces no longer possessed sufficient forces and materiel to continue. Only a precipitous withdrawal would make sense. With this final action, the Battle of Dead Man’s Ridge ended. This signaled a transition for the 17th Airborne Division. Over the course of the next three weeks, they would advance through Belgium, into Luxembourg and to the very borders of Germany.

While the OKW deliberated over the strategic necessities surrounding the defense of the Reich, life in the German units was a flurry of activity centered around an orderly retreat. Each delay foisted upon the advancing Allies bought time for a more organized defense. Within the divisional headquarters of the German units still opposing the 17th Airborne Division, the pace of work, communication and coordination was bewildering, but there were lighter moments. On 8 Jan 45, the officer in charge of coordinating for the 26. Volksgrenadier Division’s supplies of weapons and equipment (Ib W.u.B.) took time to formally notify one of his staff NCOs that he had been promoted to Oberwachtmeister, with an effective date of 1 Dec 44. Newly promoted Ob. Wachtmstr. Heinrich Siegner must have felt some sense of pride despite the dire situation on the front. Within the staff section where he worked, there must have been a stark realization that any thoughts of a German victory were but fleeting notions. Although

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362 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 38-39. For additional data on casualties in the Ardennes Campaign consult Table 3 also taken form the same reference.
363 Corps Commanders of the Bulge, 292.
365 Details taken from the Soldbuch (paybook) of Siegner. The rank Oberwachtmeister corresponds to the US rank of Staff Sergeant. Ib is the division of the German staff responsible for all supply matters of the division. W.u.G. stands for Weapons and Equipment, a specific section within Ib. (Author’s collection)
the Germans were intent on recognizing the limits of the assault, there would be many more days of action for the airborne engineers. The 139th and the division’s Reconnaissance Platoon executed numerous nightly reconnaissance patrols to probe the enemy’s defenses and determine his posture and strength.

The Battle of the Ourthe River Junction

On the evening of 9 January, Sgt. John F. Petrell was assigned a mission to lead a squad of six volunteers approximately one mile into enemy territory to place a hasty minefield at the approach of a bridge near Laval where much of the enemy tank action had been observed on 7-8 January. The Petrell Patrol left the Battalion CP at 0230 hours on 10 January and returned at 0600. Each of the seven men took two anti-tank mines with them. Upon return, early in the morning darkness, the leader reported to his commanding Officer Captain Cornell Pope that, “…they had laid a mine within spitting distance of a German tank.”

By 10 January, the staff of the 17th Airborne Division recognized the defensive posture of their foe. American patrols were easily able to gain intelligence on the Germans. These night patrols were, “…able to penetrate deep into the enemy’s lines during the first hours of darkness with little or no notice being paid to them, and all reports indicate the enemy apparently inside the villages which it is believed to have been turned into strong points.”

The Division noted a continuation of the enemy’s harassment operations despite the rearward movement. Artillery fire was reported as light with, “…the greatest share of it falling during the early morning hours.” The retreating German units made good use of flares and searchlights thrown into the sky near Amberlon and Salle, coordinates 417613, 469640.

The Air Corps aided in the action by bombing the known strong points of Renuamont and Flamizoulle during the early afternoon. As the bombs fell, observers noted a direct hit on the large building in Flamizoulle where numerous troops were seen. Tanks were flushed out of the town of Flamierge. Observers reported the destruction of three tanks and one vehicle on the road leading out of the town to the northwest into Tronle.

On 11 January, Oberst Remer, the commander of the Führer Begleit Brigade had given orders for the unit to disengage from contact and withdraw to the northeast. The brigade was released.

366 Message Log, 10 January 1945, 1.
367 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 12-13.
368 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 6.
369 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 7.
from its parent corps and assigned to the reserve forces.370

On 12 January, the 17th Airborne Division made another push to the north. The preliminary objectives consisted of seizing the towns of Heropont, Flamierge and Flamizoulle.371 The division advanced about two kilometers, meeting only light opposition. The opponents of the 17th Airborne Division had all but faded back toward Germany. The 17th Airborne Division advanced to the north. The preliminary objectives consisted of seizing the towns of Heropont, Flamierge and Flamizoulle.371 The division advanced about two kilometers, meeting only light opposition. The opponents of the 17th Airborne Division had all but faded back toward Germany. The 17th Airborne Division moved forward, so, too, did the engineers and support engineers as early warning measures for the German outposts.372

The weather for the 12th was reported as partly cloudy with morning fog. By 1000 hours, the fog had cleared, providing a good visibility of between four and six miles. The temperature never rose above 30 degrees. The weather was favorable for air operations during the better part of the day. Scouts and reconnaissance parties reported numerous dogs where the Germans had vacated near Givres, coordinates 500656. These were assumed to have been used as early warning measures for the German outposts.373

The 17th Airborne Division took 17 prisoners during this period bringing their total to 264 for the current operation.372

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The engineers were relegated to their normal role of mobility. They spent a majority of their time performing road reconnaissance, finding and removing minefields and keeping the routes open. One squad assigned to Cpl. Harlin Ratsch was sent to clear mines in front of the 513th PIR. Another squad under Cpl. A.C. “Buddy” Green’s leadership was sent to clear mines from the path of the 507th PIR. As the division moved forward, so, too, did the engineers and most times they were at the front. Pope’s engineers made the first deployment moving from Pinsamont to Brul. The two kilometer trek took an hour and fifteen minutes on the dark and icy roads. They arrived just prior to midnight. S/Sgt Earl A. Goodman left on a reconnaissance patrol. The group returned at 0130 and reported “mission accomplished.” PFC Norman N. Awesh was reported as lightly wounded in action.374

The 12th of January marked the end of the bitter fighting experienced by the division during the Ardennes Campaign. The division continued to advance toward Germany at a steady pace, supporting the American offensive action to close the salient. The division advanced toward Houffalize.

On the 13th, the engineers were on the move. Able, Charlie and the Medical Detachment moved from Pinsamont to Houmont. Capt. Kross sent out a twelve man mine-sweeping team in front of the 193rd GIR. Pope’s men cleared mines near Hubermont and Renuamont. Lieutenants Marion A. Floyd and Eugene Sabin went ahead of the 507th and 513th with their platoons, 1st and 2nd, clearing mines.375

The weather for they day was reported as partly cloudy and cold. In the morning, the visibility was about one mile. By 0900 hours it had increased to two miles and by midday the visibility was at five miles and remained there for the rest of the day. The nights were bitter cold. The division thermometer reported 18 degrees at 0500. It only “warmed” up to 28 degrees during the day.376

Around 1500 hours Baker Company sent some men to repair a bridge at coordinates 501640. This was a small bridge across the Flamizoulle Stream in the town of Givres. Its repair would aid the rapid movement of the division’s vehicles toward Houffalize. The men of the 35th Engineer Battalion assisted in sector clearing another bridge at 483645. This was a bridge that crossed Sivroulle Stream and supported a two-lane paved road that connected the Marche-Bastogne Highway with Houffalize. Abatis, or road obstacles crafted from fallen trees, were cleared at 490658 near Givres and at 483639 near Givroulle.377

Tragedy struck the 139th on Saturday, January 13th near the town of Morhet. Several men were assigned the task of unloading mines from the back of a 2½-ton truck. The Charlie Company truck had just been loaded with mines from a cleared minefield and was driven to the Headquarters Company area near an old chateau in Morhet. Unfortunately the truck parked near the chow line and soldiers were waiting for a hot meal.

371 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 6-7.
372 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 7.
373 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 7.
374 Record of Events, January 1945, 4.
375 Record of Events, January 1945, 4.
376 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 7.
377 Message Log, 13 January 1945, 1.
Figure 8.19 11 Jan 45. Amidst the realization that their forces could not hold the frontal line, German commanders directed a precipitous withdrawal, which took place during the evening of the 11th. The 17th Airborne Division executed vigorous patrols, dressed the lines and prepared for an advance. Only minor skirmishes were reported by patrols and a few prisoners were taken. 2/507PIR pushed forward and occupied the woods south of Flamizoulle in force. During the early evening, 1/513 PIR relieved 1/193GIR.

meal. During the unloading, one of the mines exploded and the entire load detonated. Five engineers lost their lives and a further eleven were injured.

No one knew for sure what happened. Possibly a mine, encased in ice and snow, without a safety clip, was activated when it was moved. Those directly working the detail were torn to shreds, some were unrecognizable. Several men in close proximity were wounded.

Among the dead were: Pvt.’s John R. Anderson, Russell E. Badertscher, Harold E. Coyne, Howard S. Ruch and Frank Zedar. The following were listed as lightly wounded in action: SSgt Herbert A. Sayre, T/5 Melvin R. Cass and Charles L. Wilson, PFC’s Robert J. Beauchamp, Stanley M. Belenson, Clarence E. Hill, Ita Wilbur, John W.

378 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 13.
379 Record of Events, January 1945, 4.
Figure 8.20 Bergepanzer (tank recovery vehicle) on a Panzerkampfwagen III chassis photographed by 17th Airborne Division Photographer Adolph C. Byers, near Hosingen, Luxembourg.

Trooper Vince Mazza was nearby when the tragedy happened. He recalls:

"I don’t know the date but one cold and freezing morning... breakfast was getting ready and the men were lining up putting on the boots with leather laces and a driver with a truck load of spider mines decided to warm up his cab so he could eat a warm breakfast. He got his breakfast and sat in the cab and the load of mines blew and went over the men bending to lace their jump boots ripped into a few tearing muscles from arms. No one killed except the driver. Nothing of him was found and to this day I don’t know his name. The truck was totally destroyed. The hole in the street was much larger than the truck...We believe a frozen spider mine was improperly clipped allowing it to go off and blow the load."

Tragedies such as this one were devastating to the unit. Its one thing to accept that men became casualties in combat, but it was an entirely different matter when soldiers were lost in such an accident which could have been prevented. By the 13th of January, the engineers had been on the move since late December. They had been shot at, shelled, they had lost friends, they were cold, tired, hungry and chafed raw from wearing the same dirty clothes for over three weeks. Such accidents were easier to comprehend given the circumstances of fatigue. Despite the tragedy and fatigue, there were more engineer missions ahead.

There were many sad events that surrounded the daily lives of the men. The pain, loss and suffering were presented in many different ways as one engineer remembered:

"War is a terrible experience for anyone. Many people are killed and many
families are devastated. I still, to this day feel sad about an incident that occurred in Belgium, January 1945.

My company "DUG IN" in a wooded area at night. We posted guards around the area. Charlie [sic] and I took up a position to observe an open field. The ground was snow covered and frozen. We could not dig in. So we brushed away some snow. Placed some pine needles on the ground, and laid down and, watched our assigned area.

Several hours later we saw two figures crossing the field and coming in our direction. We knew they were not Americans. I raised my rifle to shoot but Charlie said "wait until they get closer". When they got about 30 yards from us we stood up, and, fired on them. Charlie hit the first guy and I shot the guy right behind him. The guy Charlie shot, falls down on the ground, and was screaming in pain. The guy I shot ran away wounded, and left a trail of blood on the snow. So now what in the hell are we going to do with this badly wounded German? Charlie said to me, Ray go up and kill him! I replied F.You! You shot him, you kill him! And he did. Charlie went through the dead guys pockets got his wallet, and rings and watch.

The next day Charlie showed me the wallet and some picture he took off the German soldier. One picture was of a young woman and a little child (girl) about 5 years old. Another picture was of the soldier his wife and child. How very sad it makes me feel even today. I do hope that little girl has had a good life all the years growing up.382

The 17th Airborne Division's mission was to continue combat operations toward the Ourthe River area. In two days they had not encountered any appreciable resistance or organized units. Pushing forward, the 507th made contact with elements of the British 51st Division along the Ourthe. Once the division had secured these lines it was cut off from enemy contact by the convergence of operations with the 11th Armored Division, now back in the fight after its late December engagement with the Führer Begleit Brigade. This convergence of the 17th, the 11th and the British 51st necessitated a general change in the Allied Axis of advance in the VII Corps' sector. The 11th Armored was directed to advance to the east. The 17th was placed in a supporting role behind the 11th Armored as they advanced eastward. Primary mission included security and patrolling along the northern flank of the Corps.383

On 14 January, the 139th Headquarters was still near Houmont, but the line companies were moving forward. Staff Sergeant Earl A. Goodman, one of Filimon's stalwart leader-NCOs, took his 3rd Platoon on one of the hazardous mine clearing missions in the forward area, sweeping in front of the advancing doughboys. His men accomplished their mission without incident. Pope's men were in the front also clearing mines and roads near Wigny,

383 Pay, Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 7-8.
Coordinates 485670. The roads to Wigny wind through the forest and hilly area that surrounds the Ourthe River valley. No doubt these were dangerous missions, particularly with snipers, mines and booby traps. These choke points in rough terrain were ideal locations for the enemy to stage harassing operations.

On 14 January the Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon of the 194th GIR reported some enemy activity near Wigny. Approximately 2500 yards northeast of the village they heard:

“...5 or 6 enemy MG bursts, temporarily pinning down the patrol. A flare went up at 490668. Bridge out at 489658. Stream is approximately 8 feet wide, 2 feet deep.
One of the more mundane, but critical tasks for the engineers was to secure Water Distribution points (W.D.p.). This was a daily task that supported the division of over 10,000 men. Daily drinking, hygiene and cooking needs created an immense demand for water. Each time the division moved forward, new W.D. p’s had to be secured, checked for booby traps and the purity verified. In the morning Captain Ray W. MacMullen left the CP with Sergeant Michael Metrick in search of a new division W.D.p. They selected a suitable site in the town of Givry. As the officer responsible for the location of the forward Battalion CP, he was always seeking to find a suitable location close enough to the forward areas to facilitate rapid command and control. Most likely due to the reconnaissance reports provided by Baker Company, he decided to move the forward CP to Wigny, at coordinates 485670.\textsuperscript{386} Despite the nature of the missions that day, the only casualty for 14 January; T/5 Charles L. Wilson, lightly wounded.\textsuperscript{387}

On the 15\textsuperscript{th}, Able Company performed salvage duties near Houmont. These were most likely to recover damaged or discarded equipment from the division, as well as mines placed for defensive purposes. Baker and Charlie Company continued mine clearing in the forward areas. Charlie Company was also tasked with cleaning their equipment in preparation for another forward movement. Thankfully there were no casualties.\textsuperscript{388}

Capt. MacMullen was on the move again, this time ten kilometers back to the west near the Division CP. He set up the forward CP near Fraiture, coordinates 410645. The group arrived at 2200 hours and reported back to the Battalion Main CP.\textsuperscript{389}

At about 1600 hours on previous day, the 193\textsuperscript{rd} GIR, attached to the 11\textsuperscript{th} Armored Division,
received a Warning Order to prepare for movement and attack. The regiment rode in trucks from the vicinity of Bertogne to the woods northeast of Monaville (545638). The regiment arrived around 2000 and awaited further orders. Task Force Stubbs, (194th GIR Commander), was formed. It included the 194th, less the 2nd Battalion, a Platoon of the 55th Armored Infantry Battalion, Company C of the 56th Armored Infantry Battalion and the 811th Tank Destroyer Battalion less one platoon. TF Stubbs was to attack in conjunction with TF Bell to the east toward Vaux, (583661). H-Hour was set for 0800 hours, 15 January.

The attack progressed well and by 1124 hours the TF objective was secured. Later in the afternoon they pressed east again, this time meeting stronger resistance. Over the course of the evening and into the morning they reconnoitered the Vaux Stream for suitable crossing sites. The armored vehicles were having trouble moving forward, due to mine fields and the deep snow. The force took several prisoners in the action.390

By the time the Task Force had completed its mission, it had advanced several kilometers and was holding a defensive position that extended from Houffalize south of Cowan, (623698).391 On the 16th, TF Stubbs was released from its mission and reverted to Regimental control.392 The 17th Airborne was assigned the mission of relieving the 11th Armored and the 101st Airborne of their assigned sector. By 1700 hours, 16 January, the division had, “closed the lines.” Contact with German combat units was reestablished along the entire 17th frontal boundary. Light artillery, mortar and small arms fire greeted the 17th once again. The paratroopers were facing elements of the 26. Infanterie Division, the 9. Panzer Division, the 130. Panzer Division and elements of

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390 Historical Record of Events for 193rd Glider Infantry Regiment, n.p.
391 Historical Record of Events for 193rd Glider Infantry Regiment, n.p.
392 Historical Record of Events for 193rd Glider Infantry Regiment, n.p.
various engineer units. The temperature reached 30 degrees; it began to rain and the snow became wet. Conditions on the front line were miserable. There would be no air support due to overcast conditions.393

Once the division had replaced the 11th Armored on the line, they went into a defensive role. Gen. Miley placed the 507th on the north and the 194th on the south of the frontal boundary with the 193rd and 513th in reserve. The battered 550th was in Bethamont, (509678), rehabilitating. The 507th and 194th conducted “…aggressive patrolling” in order to maintain contact with the enemy. The staff continued to make preparations for offensive operations should the need arise. With every patrol that penetrated toward the German lines, the enemy reacted aggressively with small arms, mortar fire and supporting artillery. On 17 January, patrols of the two regiments brought in nine more prisoners.

For the engineers, the 17th and 18th of January were days of forward movement. The Battalion Headquarters, the H&S Company and the Medical Detachment left the Houmont area for Compogne, (550672). Lt. Col. Johnson selected a bivouac area for the battalion which was in a wooded area several miles from the town. Filimon’s 2nd Platoon swept the area for mines and declared it secure. The line companies arrived over the course of two days. Baker Company cleared the roads in and out of Compogne while Able Company cleared the roads near Mabompré. Lt. James A. Hewitt Jr., took his 5th Platoon and performed forward area mine clearing. Cpl. George E. Hilton and Pvt. Gerard G. Moreau were lightly wounded in action on the 18th.394

On 18 January, the Adjutant for the division reported the following division strength: 598 officers, 15 warrant officers and 7,962 enlisted men, or a total of 8,576 men. The division began the campaign with 12,850 men. Subtracting the replacements received since 4 January, the division sustained 33% casualties during two weeks of fighting.395 The few days of defensive operations and patrolling that followed were a welcome relief to the combat units of the division.

### The Battle of Compogne through Espelier

The 17th Airborne Division sector extended from Houffalize to Hardigny, and covered approximately five kilometers. The 507th and 194th shared the frontal responsibilities each holding about two and a half kilometers of the front. Their contact point between regiments was west of Cowan at grid 609696.

The terrain in this region had grown markedly rougher, being accentuated with many streams and small valleys that cut through the width of the division’s sector. There were outcroppings of woods, and enough open areas with high ground to give the enemy sufficient positions from which to pour fire down on an attacker, or at least call in artillery fire as he attempted to cross the valleys. The many locations where the roads crossed over streams were definite choke points.

The weather, snow and cold kept the vehicles on the roads. The narrow defiles that snaked up through the valleys were not conducive to rapid movement and offensive operations. This was infantry terrain. Any further offensive movement would be difficult. Fortunately, the Germans were short on supplies and willing to cede some ground, since there were several kilometers between them and the German border.

From the 19th to the 21st of January, the 139th remained in and around Compogne, conducting routine engineering missions such as mine clearing, route reconnaissance road repair and securing water supplies for the division. Lt. Col. Johnson reported the unit morale as excellent. There was only one light injury from action, namely Pvt. Angelo DeFilice.396

On the 19th, Filimon sent 1st and 3rd Platoons to reconnoiter and clear the roads into Houffalize. S/Sgt. Robert C. Williams found a blown bridge and improvised a new one out of logs, stone and straw. For the majority of the day, the men of Charlie stayed out ahead of the infantry reaching farther east into Steinbach, (691733), clearing roads, sweeping for mines, clearing away abatis and other obstacles and making themselves useful to the foot soldiers.

“A squad of engineers would come up to a road in a truck, passing infantry on each side of the road who would be warily looking for indications of the Germans. The infantry would look startled at somebody moving up brazenly in a truck and would holler something like “Where the HELL are you guys going?” and the engineers would

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393 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 8.
394 Record of Events, January 1945, 5.
395 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 8.
396 Record of Events, January 1945, 5.
Figure 8.27 On 18 Jan 45 the 17th Airborne relieved the 11th Armored Division and freed them up to replace the battle weary 101st Airborne. The following day, the 11th and 17th completed occupation of their front line positions and conducted aggressive patrolling in sector. G-2 periodic Intelligence Reports identified the opposition as elements of the 130th Panzer Lehr Division.

answer, “You gotta have pull to get a job like this.”

The prime mission of the engineers was mobility. That meant reconnaissance in the forward areas, clearing roads, building and repairing bridges and clearing mines and booby traps. The engineer platoons operated with the infantry, and many times well in front of them. Fortunately for the engineers, the Germans had executed a fast enough retrograde operation that they did not lay many mines in these areas.

The Division continued to make excellent forward progress. On the 21st, they advanced within their zone with the 507th PIR on the left and the 194th

397 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 14.
The 21st, a platoon of engineers from Able Company under Lt. Gordon E. Stolberg reached the town of Limerle (706749) at about 1600 hours. They were nearly in Luxembourg. As they entered the main street of the town with mine sweepers in hand, two German soldiers rushed out and promptly surrendered. Lt. Stolberg turned the prisoners over to the 507th on his way back to the company area. In similar fashion, a platoon from Pope’s Baker Company captured Watermal (7607720). Cpl Skenadore found two medics with their hands in the air wanting to surrender. They cried, “Mercy, Mercy!” He provided first aid and turned the pair over to the 513th that had just entered the town as he finished dressing their wounds.399

On 22 January, Lt. Col. Johnson moved the battalion from Compogne to Steinbach, which had been recently secured by the engineers and the infantry. The headquarters elements left by motor convoy around 1000 hours and arrived three and a half hours later. They travelled the sixteen miles in just over an hour, arriving at 1530. The conditions of the Belgian roads and the lack of daily attacks by enemy infantry and armor made the journey quicker. Baker Company relocated also, arriving at 1530 hours the same day. Charlie Company rotated platoons in the mine clearing mission; 2nd and 5th Platoons relieved the 1st and 3rd Platoons.400 The Medical Detachment motored to Liberaine, arriving around 1230 hours on the same day.401


399 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 14-15.

400 Record of Events, January 1945, 5-6.

401 Record of Events, January 1945, 6.
Mine clearing duties, booby trap removal and road reconnaissance were the constant companions of labor for the 139th troopers. The 25th of January was another day filled with such duties. Able Company drew road reconnaissance and mine clearing tasks near Limerle. Pope’s men spent the better part of the day clearing the mines from the roads near Deiffelt. The 1st and 4th Platoons from Charlie Company cleared snow, debris, obstacles and mines from the roads and repaired bridges. Casualties for the day: 2nd Lt. Robert C. Reed was listed as lightly wounded in action.402

While working in the vicinity of Steinbach, Lt. Robert Reed, who had conducted himself gallantly in the defense of Remimont earning the Silver Star, tripped the detonator for a German anti-personnel mine. The mine, known as a Schützmine or S-mine, as depicted below, detonated and seriously injured him.

Sgt. Arned Ripken, who was accompanying Reed on the reconnaissance mission at the time, ran back to the edge of the woods and yelled for “Doc” Skenadore. Cpl. Warren Skenadore had loyally accompanied Baker Company on every patrol and he was always close at hand. Hearing the call for help, he dashed nearly a mile to the site, right through the mine field to Lt. Reed and rendered first aid. He then carried Reed back to a clearing where some 513th medics were waiting with a stretcher. Cpl. Skenadore was awarded the Silver Star for his actions.403

“…for gallant action against the enemy during the period 19 January 1945 to 30 January 1945 in Belgium. As the only aid man in the platoon during the period cited, Corporal Skenadore worked double duty as his unit, working in shifts, cleared roads ahead of the infantry in the heavily mined areas of the Ardennes. He voluntarily accompanied every mission as his unit worked ceaselessly to clear mine fields and roads. His quick thinking and cool headedness saved the lives of several dazed and wounded men. His gallant conduct under the most arduous campaign conditions is worthy of high praise and was in accordance with the highest standards of military conduct.”404

Skenadore recalls the heroic day:

“Ah, the Battle of Bastogne, a long time ago, (laughs), I recall the day, middle of the night, pitch black in the woods, black. I went down that road and called, ‘Lieutenant, Lieutenant!’ I could hear small arms fire in the distance, you know, and I kept going. I kept calling and finally I came to a fork in the road, and there were three roads leading from the road I was on... I guess by chance I took a road and chose the right one. I went down farther and kept hollering and the farther I went the closer I came to the enemy and small arms fire and I thought, ‘Well, if I don’t get a response I’m getting out of here.’ Finally I got up there and I called, ‘Lieutenant Reed!’ He hollered. I hollered again, ‘Lieutenant!’ He said, ‘I’m in a mine field, and the whole place is loaded with mines!’ So, anyway, I got up there and I put a tourniquet on his leg and gave him some other medication and I said, ‘Come on, we got to get outta here.’ He said, ‘The small arms fire is getting closer and closer, and I can’t walk.’ I said, ‘That’s no problem.’ I picked him up and carried him on my shoulder and went down through the minefield. It was quite an experience. It was cold and the snow was deep. Anyway, we got him back to his unit.”405

402 Record of Events, January 1945, 6.
403 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 15-17.
404 General Order Number 16, 2.
405 Skenadore Interview.
The 26th marked the end of the Battle of Compogne through Espelier. Johnson’s engineers worked continuously to keep the Airborne Division moving forward as fast as their commander would push them. Clearing roads and removing mines and obstacles was part of the dangerous repetitive assignments for the engineers. Despite the weather, the casualties, harassing fire and dangers, they pressed forward, usually as the lead elements of the division. On this day T/5 Edward H. Struchen and Cpl. Vincent A. Mazza were listed as lightly wounded.\textsuperscript{406}

\textbf{The Battle of the Our River}

On the 27th, with orders from the division, the 139th moved into Luxembourg.\textsuperscript{407} The Engineers viewed the damaged shell-pocked stone buildings of Steinbach for the last time as they rumbled out of the town in their trucks. The long bumpy ride in the backs of the unit’s vehicles was probably a welcome respite from the constant threat of booby traps, mines and snipers. If they could keep warm, some of the engineers would get some margin of rest. The terrain continued to change remarkably along the way. The rolling hills near Bastogne were gradually transformed into deep ravines with defiles and valleys carved by the confluence of the Wiltz, Clerf and Our Rivers. Building roads in this region had been a

\textsuperscript{406} Record of Events, January 1945, 6.

\textsuperscript{407} Message Log, 27 January 1945, 1.
challenge for the inhabitants, and the result was a series of winding, narrow channels that climbed slowly up and down the terrain.

The engineer convoy left around noon and arrived around 1530. The Headquarters element set up operations in the town of Wiltz, (707535). Over the course of the afternoon, Lt. Col Johnson, the S-3 Maj. Mason and Capt. MacMullen spent time at the Division headquarters coordinating details of subsequent engineer operations. Johnson directed Capt. Rosswog to establish a Rehabilitation Center in Wiltz so that select soldiers could spend a bit of time away from mines, booby traps and cold. It would be a welcome accommodation.408

The engineers could not put down roots, they could not consolidate positions and they were unable to build a comfortable nest in any of their locations. They were constantly on the move. Again on the 28th they moved locations. The Battalion repositioned a few kilometers away to Eschweiler, (719569). The unit arrived at 0930 hours after a short thirty minute convoy. The Headquarters Company and the Medical Detachment remained in Wiltz. Despite the retreat of the German units, there was plenty of activity for the engineers. Capt. Kross took his Able Company engineers, moved to Eschweiler, where he performed road reconnaissance and swept the roads for mines. Olsons’s boys worked near Wilwerwiltz, (757558), performing the same missions. During the day, they removed a few abatis to keep the routes open. Capt. Pope spread his engineers throughout the entire sector, clearing routes as needed.409

29 January was another busy and dangerous day for Johnson’s engineers. The battalion headquarters element moved again, this time to Eschrange, (749569). The short straight-line distance of three kilometers took over an hour and a half.410 The towns of Eschrange and Eschweiler were connected by a secondary road no more than ten feet wide. Eschweiler is situated on top of a ridge between two narrow defiles which were imbedded with rain and snow-soaked streams. Eschrange is nestled in a defile east of Eschweiler in one of those overtaxed stream beds. It is bordered on each side with steep ridges. The secondary road, linking the two seemingly peaceful hamlets, snaked up and down the ridges and defiles making several 180-degree turns. The trip was understandably slow, which ensured the engineers arrived without incident. The cold icy weather added to the agony of the trip.

Johnson assigned Able Company in direct support of the 193rd. They cleared roads and removed mines in the regiment’s sector, maintaining their base of operation in Wilwerwiltz. 1st Lt. Stolberg took his 2nd Platoon and travelled to Hosingen, (822588), to clear booby traps from the town. They were less than three kilometers from the Our River, to where the Germans had withdrawn. Stolberg’s men worked steadily and carefully, clearing every booby trap they found. The unit returned without incident. Pope was also on the move, relocating well to the north to Clervaux, (779631). They worked in direct support of

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408 Message Log, 27 January 1945, 1.
409 Record of Events, January 1945, 6.
410 Record of Events, January 1945, 7.
the 507th Regiment, clearing the forward areas and roads of mines, also without any casualties.411

Fate dealt Olsons’s boys a different fortune. The 2nd Platoon, under 1st Lt. Olcott, was sent to remove a booby trapped abatis near the town of Drauffel, (761591). The men found the abatis and began working to remove it. While the men worked they activated a fifteen-second fuse which was connected to a Tellermine. It exploded, wounding three of Olcott’s engineers. Sgt. Arend O. Ripken, PFC Elmer R. Barth and Pvt. James W. Peters were lightly wounded in action by the exploding Tellermine.412

The days blended together with the seemingly mundane but nonetheless dangerous tasks of road reconnaissance, field repairs and mine clearing. Cpl. John Petrell was given the luxury of taking his squad to the Rest Camp in Virton. The few days of relaxation would be a welcome change from the cold and nerve-wrenching task of clearing mines. The battalion continued to support the 193rd and the 507th Regiments who were on the line. The following day the 513th replaced the 193rd on the line. The engineers facilitated an orderly change out by keeping roads free of debris and damage. As January came to an end, the engineers had been on the continent since Christmas, racking up thirty-nine days in France, Belgium and Luxembourg and thirty-seven continuous days in combat.413

Early February saw the engineers working in new locations in Luxembourg. The towns of Hosingen, Eschweiler, Niederhausen and Clervaux would become engraved upon the men’s memories. On the 1st, the engineers cleared mines and swept roads in the 513th and the division’s forward areas. Marbourg, Mon Waldberg and Marnach were rendered safe for passage by the men. 1st Lt. Floyd took his platoon to Hosingen and laid a minefield under “threat of enemy fire.”414

The next day Able Company worked in vicinity of Hosingen clearing booby traps and mines. The reports of mine fields became even more specific as 1st Platoon, under the leadership of Sgt. Gatewood, was sent to find a single Schützenmine. They found it and removed it safely with no injuries. The company moved that day from Wilwerwiltz to Eschweiler in continued support of the 513th. Also supporting the 513th were Pope’s engineers. He sent Lt. Roberts and his 1st Platoon out to clear Niederhausen of booby-traps. By the time they had completed their task, they had fully loaded the back of a 2 ½ ton truck with AT, AP mines and booby-trap devices.

411 Record of Events, January 1945, 7.
412 Record of Events, January 1945, 7.
413 Record of Events, January 1945, 7. The author marks the first day of combat as 26 December, the day the battalion took up defensive positions along the Meuse River.

414 Record of Events, February 1945, 1.
The movement of the mines was accomplished without incident or casualty. No doubt the men were very leery of every mine and device they loaded into the back of the truck carefully ensuring there would be no repeat of the disaster of 13 January. Baker Company also moved to Eschweiler, arriving at 2145 on 2 February.\footnote{Record of Events, February 1945, 1.}

Gen. Miley was intent on constant patrolling across the Our River. He wanted to maintain contact with the enemy to ensure there would be no surprises. It was imperative that he secure his divisional sector and to probe for weak spots in the German lines. The Infantry line companies required trained engineer assistance to accomplish this task. The engineers were sent in direct support of the line companies, assisting them with river crossing and patrolling. Many times they accompanied the patrols into the enemy’s sector.

Charlie Company operated from the town of Clervaux in direct support of the 507th Regiment. The engineers cleared the town streets of mines and debris. During the day, 1st Lt. Marion A. Floyd approached Sgt. Charles E. Renner and Sgt. Harlin M. Ratsch, asking if one of the two men would accompany him on patrol. As Ratsch recalls,

\begin{quote}
"Lt. Floyd asked one of us to go out on a patrol out of Clervaux, Luxemburg, the Our River. Renner and I flipped a coin and Renner went on the patrol."
\end{quote}

Lt. Floyd and Sgt. Renner departed. Their route took them near the Our River in search of intelligence on the road nets, enemy demolitions and obstacles. Sniper fire pinned the group down. A bullet struck Lt. Floyd’s rifle cracking the stock and another struck Sgt. Renner causing a compound fracture in two places of his leg. It was a serious injury. It took Lt. Floyd two and one half hours to carry Sgt. Renner over the hilly terrain back to an aid station.\footnote{Record of Events, February 1945, 1.} Renner survived the incident, although he would lose his leg.

On the 3rd of February, the 139th was tasked with more reconnaissance missions and the gruesome task of recovering and burying the numerous carcasses of animals that plagued the surrounding areas. Perhaps he chose wisely on that day, as his patrol returned without incident.\footnote{Record of Events, February 1945, 1.}

Lt. Richard I. Wollam took a patrol of six infantrymen from the 513th on patrol. Their mission was to reconnoiter the trails from Hosingen east toward the Our River. The patrol left at 0430 and returned four hours later. Meanwhile, at 0930, Cpl. Phillips left his platoon to join an Infantry patrol to assist with an engineer reconnaissance of the Our River north of Dasburg. He returned at 1600, rendered his report and promptly left again on another assignment an hour and a half later. Again he helped another infantry patrol cross the Our River near Dasburg.

Filimon’s engineers continued to work with the 507th in the Clervaux-Marnach-Hosingen sector. Cpl. Lawrence E. Foreman and his clearing party

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{blood-on-the-talon-128.png}
\caption{Lieutenant Marion A. Floyd, Camp Mackall, 1944.}
\end{figure}
located a stash of *Telernine 42*, *as depicted at right*, and various booby traps. *Schutzminen* were reported near *Dorscheiderhausen*. Lt. Eugene Sabin, Cpl. Robert J. McGovern and Pvt. Edward R. Knox conducted a reconnaissance of the roads leading to the *Our River*. 2nd Lt. James A. Hewitt, Sgt. Ralph J. Napolitano, PFC Harold H. Capps and PFC Joe Bucci reconnoitered other roads in sector. They were instrumental in clearing debris along the way. The final group covering the road to the *Our* consisted of Capt. Filimon, Staff Sgt. Earl A. Goodman, PFC William J. Hampson and PFC William L. McCon. Despite the dangers of the day’s missions, there were no engineer casualties.

The first mention of the use of a Clark Airborne Tractor (Bulldozer) was made in the Engineer Battalion Record of Events for 4 February, where it cited, “AIRBORNE CLARK TRACTOR damaged by mine. Operator injured.” That day, PFC Leo H. Clendenen, Jr. was injured in action.

The H&S Company and Battalion Headquarters elements continued their normal staff duties, ran the Rest Camp, serviced WDp’s and maintained the flow of information between the Division and the outlying Regiments. Several times each day, numerous reports, overlays, Memoranda, Field Messages and Annexes were coordinated and passed to the line companies. The staff coordinated on such items as: Request for Vehicle USA Identification numbers, preparation of Daily Engineer Situation Report, Teletype letter on Conservation of Roads in the sector, Field Order Annexes, Operations Memorandum, Intelligence Periodic Reports, Report of Civilian Labor in Luxembourg, Movement Orders, Intelligence Data on German Mines, Stream Crossing Reconnaissance Reports, Memorandum on Mess Sanitization, Minefield Reports, and a host of other administrative and bureaucratic requirements.

It was evident that, as the harsh reality of heavy fighting was fading, the “chicken-shit” of daily garrison requirements was bleeding back into reality. No one could escape it. It was important for the staff to sift through the entire compendium of daily items and distill only the most important items to be sent to the engineers in the field. Their lives depended on receiving accurate, timely information on the enemy location, obstacles and booby-traps and intelligence on the handling of enemy demolitions material. Sorting through the minutiae of the rest of the communications could be left to the rest of the officers.

The infantry line companies continued their heavy patrolling near the *Our River* and beyond. Able Company assisted the 513th in attempting to cross the *Our*. They also cleared mines near *Hosingen* and prepared a barrier plan for their sector. Baker Company convoyed from *Eschweiler* to *Consthum*, while remaining in direct support of the 194th Gilder Infantry Regiment. They performed reconnaissance missions and swept the roads for mines. They submitted their barrier plan for their respective sector. Charlie Company remained in *Clervaux* supporting the 507th PIR. They were able to send fifty men to the Rest Camp in *Virton*. The remaining engineers continued their missions. They performed three special river and road reconnaissance missions in the forward sector. They found and cleared some *Stockminen* near *Roderhausen* and Cpl. Vincent Saliewicz and three engineers cleared more *Schützenminen* from a field near *Dorschied*. Sgt. Richard E. Preston led a patrol to the *Our river*. They were able to see enemy pillboxes on the far side of the *Our River*. Sgt. Louis Duriez, T/5 Francis J. Logandice, PFC Edward W. Reich and PFC Devan E. Zolman performed another recon of the *Our River* area in a different sector. They were able to capture

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419 *Record of Events, February 1945*, 2.
420 *Record of Events, February 1945*, 2.
one German prisoner at around 0930 hours. As the patrol was returning, they were pinned down by enemy machine gun and machine pistol fire for well over two hours. Sometime later, they were eventually able to withdraw under friendly artillery and mortar fire.

Later in the morning, Sgt. Earl Goodman and Sgt. George C. Landers were assigned to assist a 507th patrol to cross the Our. After two hours of work, they finished a rope crossing; by noon, the infantry patrol was able to cross and finish their mission.\footnote{Record of Events, February 1945, 2.} Despite the dangerous nature of the reconnaissance, mine clearing and river crossing missions in close proximity to the enemy, the only reported casualty for 5 February was Pvt. William J. Deen, who was lightly wounded in action.\footnote{Battle Casualties, Ardennes-Rhineland Campaign, 2.}

February 6 was a deadly day for the engineers. While clearing mines in their sector, Able Company lost two men when a “British Bouncing Betty Mine” detonated. Pvt. Robert M. Flannery and Pvt. First Class Joseph F. Silvestri were killed in that incident. Capt. Kross would have to write two more agonizing letters that evening.

While attempting to assist the 513th in crossing the Our in one of the small inflatable boats used for reconnaissance operations, one of the boats capsized, sweeping the occupants downstream. PFC Robert H. Strudwick was carried as Missing in Action. His body was never recovered. Downstream at the ferrying site, the tending unit reported damage due to the boats floating downstream and tangling...
with their equipment.\footnote{Record of Events, February 1945, 2-3.} Listed as lightly wounded in action for that day was Pvt. Jack H. Rushlieu.\footnote{Battle Casualties, Ardennes-Rhineland Campaign, p2.}

On 6 February, 1945, while still engaged in combat in the Luxembourg area of Clervaux, the staff of the 17\textsuperscript{th} Airborne Division was called to the headquarters of Brereton’s FIRST Allied Airborne Army (AAA) to receive a briefing on Operation VARSITY. The Allies were going to cross the Rhein River as an airborne armada! They discussed the plan, troop requirements, glider and plane availability and assigned airfields. The FIRST AAA staff notified the G-2 and G-3 that the 17\textsuperscript{th} would be relieved in place and was to proceed to Chalons sur Marne, France to begin preparations for VARSITY.\footnote{17\textsuperscript{th} Airborne Division Historical Report of Operation VARSITY, 10.}

With the deadlock along the Our River, Lt. Col. Johnson saw no need to move the headquarters and medical elements; they remained in Enschrange while the H&S Company kept the Rest Camp running in Wiltz. They continued to do their utmost to keep the battalion day-to-day requirements fulfilled. They cleaned and replaced equipment, delivered rations, cooked meals, maintained equipment and grappled with a tangle of paperwork.\footnote{Record of Events, February 1945, 3.}

Because of the massive amount of precipitation and melting snow, the rivers in the area were at their highest levels in years. River crossings were dangerous in the flooded and swift defiles where the water flowed. The town of Clervaux is dissected by the Clerf River. As the River steadily rose, it overflowed its banks and Clervaux was becoming less and less a suitable location to work from. The water point maintained at Clervaux was under two feet of water. Lt. Col. Johnson ordered it moved to Mecher. Able Company kept busy. Two squads worked near Hosingen cutting construction timber and clearing debris. The engineers supported the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion of the 513\textsuperscript{th} with a cross-river assault. They delivered assault boats and explosives to the paratroopers. In addition, Capt. Kross sent a four-man patrol with the infantry. Baker and Charlie Companies performed standard Engineer duties assisting the 194\textsuperscript{th} and 507\textsuperscript{th} Regiments.\footnote{Record of Events, February 1945, 3.}

On the 8\textsuperscript{th} of February, the 139\textsuperscript{th} again felt the deadly sting of their missions. While clearing minefields and conducting patrols near the Our River, Able Company lost three men. PFC Carl J. Frigone, Pvt. Charles L. Bednarik and Pvt. Harold L. Griffith were killed in action.\footnote{Bednarik is listed as seriously wounded in action in the Report of Battle Casualties, and also listed as Killed in Action in the Record of Events for February 8. Thunder from heaven carries him as Died of Wounds (DOW) 429 One of the 513\textsuperscript{th} infantrymen accompanying the team was also killed. Sgt. Frank H. Thorman was lightly wounded in action while PFC Cecil R. Balcom was lightly injured.\footnote{Record of Events, February 1945, 3.}} One of the 513\textsuperscript{th} infantrymen accompanying the team was also killed. Sgt. Frank H. Thorman was lightly wounded in action while PFC Cecil R. Balcom was lightly injured.\footnote{Record of Events, February 1945, 3.}
To assist the time-consuming mission of route reconnaissance, Capt. Filimon took to the skies in an L-4 light observation aircraft. There were a handful of these observation aircraft assigned to the division, primarily to aid artillery observation, but also for reconnaissance. During the flight, Capt. Filimon assessed the area around Dasburg, many of the river crossing sites and roads, and located a road crater in the sector. While he was airborne, his men transported the first vehicle belonging to the 17th Airborne Division across the Our River.\footnote{431 Record of Events, February 1945, 3.}

February 9th marked the last day that the engineers would perform missions in Luxembourg. Able Company’s 2nd Lt. Earl A. Ventura and Sgt. Robert E. Franchini, of Able Company, took their 1st Platoon to lay minefields. Sgt. Franchini took some men to Wiltz and picked up 600 mines. He met up with his cargo and the rest of 1st Platoon at 0300 and they left to place the two minefields. He later received a battlefield promotion to 2nd Lieutenant, one of the few in the battalion. Baker was placing mines as well. Lt. Roberts took the 1st Platoon and a squad from 2nd Platoon and placed 515 mines near Wallhausen. Neither group suffered any casualties that day. Filimon’s men continued to maintain the roads leading to the Our River in the Division sector and they transported two infantry battalions across the Our while under sporadic fire from the opposite bank.\footnote{432 Record of Events, February 1945, 3.}

The mission of the 139th during the final phase of the Battle of the Bulge was primarily that of patrolling, detecting and removing minefields, clearing obstacles and defusing the booby traps left by the retreating enemy.\footnote{433 History: 139th Airborne Engineers, 14-19.} The individual engineer platoons continued to operate as part of the Parachute and Glider Infantry Regiments, accompanying wherever they were needed. The many seemingly innocuous missions were not without hazard.
Casualties still mounted for the engineers. While clearing an abatis to assist forward movement near Eschrange Luxemburg, Sgt. Arend O. Ripken was seriously wounded by an anti-personnel mine. During the preceding events and even on the day he was wounded, Sgt. Ripken exhibited strength of leadership among his men. His Bronze Star citation reads:

"...for heroic and meritorious achievement during the period 3 January 1945 to 26 January 1945. During the period cited Sergeant Ripken showed outstanding courage and leadership in directing the operations of his engineer squad on many dangerous missions. On one occasion his squad was surrounded by the enemy while acting as flank protection to an infantry unit, but as a result of superior leadership he and his men reached safety. While clearing an abatis near Enscherange, Luxembourg, he was seriously wounded by an anti personnel mine explosion. Throughout the campaign, Sergeant Ripken’s leadership and personal courage inspired his men to their utmost capabilities. His actions were in accordance with the highest standards of military conduct."434

As they prepared to move to France to begin their preparations in support of Operation VARSITY, Lt. Col. Johnson took the opportunity to write letters of condolence to the relatives of the fallen, to complete his after-action reports, and to submit recommendations for awards for some of the heroic actions during the previous battles. There were several remarkable actions by individual troopers as the campaign came to a close.

After forty-seven days of continuous combat in contact with the enemy, under constant threat of artillery, machine gun and sniper fire, constantly facing the dangers of exploding mines and dangerous booby-traps, the engineers were pulled from the line. Despite access to a front-line rest camp, most of the engineers had not had a change of clothing for weeks, some for more than a month. Although meals were more plentiful as the combat proceeded, the steady diet of cold K and C-rations took its toll on the troops. Gastro-intestinal ailments were commonplace. The incessant cold and wet conditions resulted in many cases of trench foot and frostbite.

The degraded physical and psychological state of the battalion, following these many weeks of death and fatigue was about to change. On the 10th, the Battalion, with the exception of 1st Platoon of Charlie Company, was relieved by the 1137th Engineer Group. The official relief in place was at 0730 hours. The engineers travelled in trucks to Arlon, France and then rode in trains the remaining distance to Chalon-sur-Marne, France to a Rest Camp. 1st Platoon stayed with the 507th assisting them with ferrying operations across the Our River. They also kept the roads in suitable condition to allow a constant flow of traffic from the rear areas to the river. They remained in place until the 11th. Since Lt. Floyd was unable to recover the ferrying equipment he scuttled it in place. It was no doubt a relief to the engineers that they would not have to extract, maintain and transport the ferrying equipment. They were transported to Chalon-sur-Marne, arriving on the 12th. Lt. Col Johnson now had his entire battalion with him in France.435

With this final action, the engineers’ part in the Ardennes and Rhineland Campaigns were over. By all accounts they conducted themselves honorably, showing courage under fire. They had benefitted from their many months of arduous training and were led by a demanding, yet compassionate cadre. They were confident in their leaders, both officer and NCO. They had established themselves as a battle-hardened unit that accomplished every mission assigned to them. In the true spirit of the Engineer Corps, they lived up to their motto, “Essayons...let us try!” Not only did they try, they succeeded, but not without cost.

The engineers suffered at least eighty-five casualties; killed in action, missing in action and wounded/injured. This amounts to a 15% casualty rate.436 The data, no doubt, fails to include many of the unreported injuries from frostbite and the many cases of mental trauma and anguish caused by the day-to-day stress of near-death experiences and the loss of dear friends. No one envied the commanders of the companies and battalion as they performed their most difficult war-time task; writing the painful letters to the families of the eleven engineers listed as killed or missing in action.

434 General Order Number 16, 4.

435 Record of Events, February 1945, 3-4.

436 Battle Casualties, Ardennes Campaign, 1-2, Strength, 1. Unit strength reported on 1 Jan 45 as 478 enlisted, 33 officers and 2 warrant officers. Unit strength reported on 1 Feb 45 as 458 enlisted, 29 officers and 2 warrant officers.
Planning Operation VARSITY

Allied Strategy

In light of the deep penetration achieved by three German Armies in December of 1944, Eisenhower and his staff set aside any notion that an airborne crossing of the Rhein River would come to any near-term fruition. They spent thirty days or so halting the embarrassingly unforeseen lack of foresight, driving out the remnants of the attackers, and returning the front line to its pre-invasion status. At the end of January, they regrouped and turned their sights again to the Rhein. Eisenhower mulled over a three-phased plan: a broad advance to the Rhein, an assault to cross and establish sizable bridgeheads on the east bank of the Rhein River, and a dual thrust drive into Germany to end the war.437

During the early strategy discussion concerning renewing the Allied attack, Field Marshall Montgomery envisioned a greater role for his forces in the pending operations. He lobbied heavily for the major role, and practically demanded the assignment to him of the preponderance of the forces to cross the wide open northern plains of Germany and seize the Ruhrgebiet. Discussion, planning and political maneuvers continued, until finally Eisenhower decided on the three-phased plan. The plan included the main effort to the north near Wesel, with an eye on seizing the resource/industry rich area of the Ruhr. The Ruhr area accounted for 65% of Germany’s crude steel production, 56% of the coal, and it was Germany’s last remaining source of power.438 Eisenhower’s decision to move the main focus of the assault to the North was not necessarily a matter of yielding to Montgomery’s insistence; rather, it was an acknowledgment of the importance of that region.439 The British would receive the bulk of the support. This strategy was approved on 2 Feb 45 by the Combined Chiefs of Staff.440 The crossing of the Rhein would include an amphibious crossing of the river proper to secure a suitable bridgehead, and an airborne assault commencing after the east bank of the Rhein was secured.

The planning for the amphibious portion of the assault, Operation PLUNDER, involved Canadian, British and American coordination. After a minor realignment of priorities and a more equitable allocation of resources such as supplies, bridging material, and amphibious assets, Operation PLUNDER began to take shape.441 Montgomery’s 21st Army Group staff began final planning for their role. Monty’s area of control was expanded southward, encompassing the US NINTH Army, which was commanded by Lt. Gen. William H. Simpson.442 Responsibility for the planning of the airborne portion of the assault was borne by Brereton’s FIRST Allied Airborne Army (AAA) staff.

On 10 Feb 45, the FIRST AAA met to coordinate the details of Operation VARSITY. They essentially dusted off the original staff study, which

438 The Last Offensive . 294.
439 The Last Offensive . 294.
440 USAF Historical Studies: No. 97, 156.
441 The Last Offensive . 295-6.
442 USAF Historical Studies: No. 97, 156-157.
was developed in early November, and reissued it with a few changes. One of the changes was to add a third airborne division to the force composition. The only other available unit was the untested 13th Airborne Division. Every other airborne unit in the ETO was refitting and reorganizing following continuous combat in Holland and Belgium since September.

As the planning continued, the staff realized that a massive airborne drop on one single day was impossible given the numbers of operable gliders and tow planes. The three-division plan called for tow planes to haul two gliders simultaneously to ease the burden on the Troop Carrier Command. Despite this economy of effort measure there simply were not enough aircraft available. The 13th was stricken from the plan and would sit in reserve.

The mission of the 17th Airborne Division for Operating VARSITY was:

“To drop during daylight, 24 March 1945, beginning at P Hour; seize, clear and secure the Division Area with priority to the high ground in the general area (160475 - 163468 - 170461), the town of Hamminkeln, and the bridges over the Issel River at (218497) and (222485); protect the left (North) flank of the Corps; establish contact with the 12th British Corps, and the 17th U.S. "Airborne Division. Objectives to be held at all costs.”

In terms of numbers of troops and tonnage of materiel, the massive build-up for PLUNDER/VARSITY rivaled the preparations for Operation OVERLORD. The 21st Army Group went to great lengths to conceal the preparations and mask the pre-invasion build-up of men and materiel. They made extensive use of camouflage, dummy positions and installations and stepped up patrolling in non-assault sectors in an effort to confound German intelligence.

It is doubtful that these efforts concealed more than the actual target date and the precise location for the crossing. German planners made a similar assessment of the strategic situation and
Planning for Operation VARSITY

Concluded that a likely breach of the Rhein would occur between Emmerich and Dinslaken. The forces that fled across the Rhein in the Wesel area had been preparing for this eventuality since early March.\textsuperscript{447} Already on 9 March, the Germans were mindful of the Allied preparations. Via message to the high command, they reported the Allied preparation in the NINTH Army sector around Nimwegen-Dinslaken.\textsuperscript{448}

\textbf{German Situation}

The commander of German Army Group H, General Blaskowitz expected an airborne assault in conjunction with the Rhein crossing, and he correctly surmised it would occur in the area between Wesel and Emmerich, where the terrain was more suited to parachute and glider operations. He also concluded that an assault in this region could quickly open the front for a successful Allied breakout into the openness of the North German plain.\textsuperscript{450}

In preparation for the anticipated Rhein crossing by the Allies, Blaskowitz assigned the defensive tasks for the Emmerich-Wesel sector to General Alfred Schlemm’s FIRST Fallschirmjäger Army.\textsuperscript{451} Schlemm had three corps available for defense in this sector. The II Fallschirmjaeger Corps, commanded by General der Fallschirmtruppen Eugen Meindl, consisted of elements of the 6., 7. and 8. Fallschirmjäger Divisions. Their defensive locations were in the areas designated for the British 6th Airborne Division’s landing and drop zones, although some isolated Fallschirmjaeger forces would meet up with 17th Airborne Division forces. Schlemm’s XLVII Corps consisted of the 84. and 180. Infanterie Divisions. The 180th was stationed south of Wesel, outside of the assigned area of responsibility for the 17th Airborne. The LXIII Corps was positioned much farther to the south of Wesel in opposition to the crossing sites of US NINTH Army.\textsuperscript{452} Elements of the XLVII Panzer Corps were also available to Schlemm to be used as a strategic reserve. Calling it a Panzer Corps is a stretch, since the entire force could only muster about 200 tanks and assault guns.\textsuperscript{453} Another source estimated a significantly lower combat effectiveness for the XLVII Corps’ two units, the 116. Panzer Division and the 15. Panzergrenadier

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\textsuperscript{447} The Last Offensive. 301.
\textsuperscript{448} The Last Offensive, 301.
\textsuperscript{449} The spelling of German commander’s names is obtained from Ken Ford’s book The Rheine Crossing 1945 (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2006), 18.
\textsuperscript{450} The Last Offensive, 301.
\textsuperscript{451} The Last Offensive, 301.
\textsuperscript{452} The Rhine Crossing 1945, 26, 34.
\textsuperscript{453} The Last Offensive. 301.
Division. The estimated combined tally of tanks and assault guns was between 100 and 150 vehicles.\textsuperscript{454}

Additional reserve forces consisted of a replacement training division, which would be pressed into combat in this sector.\textsuperscript{455} Within the Wesel area, numerous Landschutz, Sicherheits and Volkssturm Battalions were positioned.\textsuperscript{456} The conglomeration of units from various commands and services, including civil organizations made command and control of the gaggle an insurmountable challenge.

Artillery proliferation and effectiveness was the only bright spot in terms of forces available to Schlemm’s FIRST Fallschirmjäger Army. They had a, “reasonable compliment of artillery,” including the feared Nebelwerfer batteries. Many anti-aircraft artillery batteries were moved into the Wesel area to counter the anticipated airborne operation.\textsuperscript{457} The city of Wesel was declared a Festungsstadt and many of the anti-aircraft units were positioned around the city. The result of this was a higher than normal density of Flak weapons; there were approximately 80 heavy and 250 light AAA guns in the area.\textsuperscript{458}

There was much discussion among the German command regarding the Allied crossing. The commander of the 84. Infanterie Division, Generalmajor Heinz Fiebig was of the opinion that the Allies would initiate the airborne landing at some considerable distance from the Rhein. General Alfred Schlemm was in total disagreement. His correct assessment was that the location of the landings and parachute drops would be closer to the proximity of the Rhein. His conclusions regarding Operation MARKET-GARDEN correctly noted that the airborne forces which dropped too far from their tactical objectives were simply ground up. As a result Schlemm intended to position his mobile reserve, as meager as it was, in the region between Bocholt and Erle. Schlemm was countered by Blaskowitz, and the reserve force was placed farther north. To mitigate this questionable decision, Schlemm placed a small Kampfgruppe closer to the anticipated landing areas between Borken and Dorsten.\textsuperscript{459}

Since the Germans anticipated that the Allied crossing of the Rhein would consist of an amphibious and an airborne assault, they undoubtedly began anti-landing and other defensive preparations. To aid in their defense, the Germans spent the better part of March preparing the battlefield. They had learned many valuable lessons from the Allied airborne operations in Normandie and Holland. Allied intelligence, gleaned from reconnaissance photos, identified numerous German gun positions, fortified areas and entrenchments under construction on the east bank. Preparations were commencing in earnest.

Many of the farm compounds and hamlets were turned into defensive fighting positions, each containing between five and fifty German soldiers armed with small arms, grenades and Panzerfaust anti-tank weapons. The headquarters elements from the platoon to the division level adopted similar

\begin{itemize}
  \item Die Luftlandungen, 12.
  \item The Last Offensive, 301.
  \item Alexander Berkel, Krieg vor der Eigenen Haustür (Wesel: Selbstverlag des Stadtarchivs Wesel, 2004), 61.
  \item Landschutz: territorial protection. Sicherheits: security. Volkssturm: peoples assault troops.
  \item The Last Offensive, 301-2.
  \item Krieg vor der Eigenen Haustür, 61. Festungsstadt: Fortress City.
  \item Krieg vor der Eigenen Haustür, 65.
\end{itemize}
defensive measures.\textsuperscript{460} This resulted in a co-mingling of civilian and military personnel throughout the entire VARSITY area of operations. Only the civilians who had lost their homes in the heavy bombing that preceded the operation left their homes. That was generally only in the built up areas such as Wesel. For the most part, those who lived in the farms, hamlets and small villages that dotted the landing zones remained in the combat area.\textsuperscript{461} Many of them would become casualties. Anecdotal evidence suggested that some of them would pick up arms and fight with the infantry.

Morale of the remaining combat force east of the Rhein in the Wesel-Emmerich area was near its end. Despite the existence of isolated fanatics, the average German fighting man and his civilian Volksgrenadier (VG) counterpart was not sucked into the myth of invincibility in the final battle for Germany. Many put up only minimal resistance and gave up their fighting position by surrendering or slipping away under cover after a brief fight. Many of the VG units were only issued twenty rounds for their bolt action rifles. They could not have much impact against the overwhelming firepower of two airborne divisions armed with large capacity semi-automatic weapons rather than bolt action rifles (the exception being a percentage of the British 6\textsuperscript{th} Airborne Division armed with SMLE .303 caliber bolt action rifles.)\textsuperscript{462}

Despite Hitler’s insistence on victory, the senior German staff was realistic in their assessment of the combat capability of the combined units. They surmised their forces would only slow the advance of a Rhein breach. They saw no real chance to stop the inevitable outbreak into the German flat-lands.\textsuperscript{463}

On 15 March 1945, the British 6\textsuperscript{th} Airborne Division G-2 section issued an Intelligence Summary outlining their best estimate of the disposition of the enemy forces in the area of Operation PLUNDER/VARSITY. The information obtained for this report was gleaned from intelligence gathered from newly captured documents and interrogations of prisoners and deserters captured immediately prior to the operation. Much of the data was sketchy, and the exact strength of each unit could not be fully ascertained. The disarray in the German ranks caused by the months of continued retrograde fighting reduced the normal record keeping efficiency of the German Army. Flow of information to the masses of troops was not forthcoming. Few soldiers knew much tactical information other than that which concerned their squad or platoon. Regarding the German fitness to fight; the Intelligence Summary declared that their,

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{One of the few mobile Flakpanzer that dotted the Landing Zones of Operation VARSITY. Most antiaircraft artillery was towed into position.}
\end{figure}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{460} Die Luftlandungen, 12.
\item \textsuperscript{461} Die Luftlandungen, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{462} Die Luftlandungen, 12-13. The SMLE (Small magazine Lee-Enfield) was the mainstay bolt action rifle of the British Army during WWII.
\item \textsuperscript{463} Die Luftlandungen, 11.
\end{itemize}
“...morale has been permanently undermined and it will not again reach the fever pitch of last fall when German soil was first fought over...their means to resist are slipping.”464

The Intelligence Summary provided some specific tactical information about the forces in the vicinity of LZ N where the 139th AEB gliders would land. LZ N and the Diersforter Forest to the west would be defended by the 84. Infanterie Division. The 84. had recently taken part in the defense of the Reichswald area while attempting to hold a sector in the Waal River defense region. On their retreat from the Reichswald and across the Rhein River, they suffered additional casualties which further depleted their ranks. While they moved eastward into new defensive positions, the unit was hastily refitted around the remaining divisional cadre. Already by 9 March, elements of the division’s artillery group were positively identified in the Wesel area and the movement of the division’s remaining elements proceeded.465 As more units of the 84. arrived near Wesel, the defensive preparations increased while the meager reinforcements trickled in. The 84. was rebuilding itself for the third time since 1944.

The reconstituted 84. consisted of three Grenadier regiments, the 1051., the 1052. and the 1062. The 1051. and 1052. each had two Grenadier battalions; the composition of the 1062. was unknown. The divisional artillery, the 184. Artillerie Regiment, consisted of four artillery battalions of mixed guns.466 Anti-tank forces were organized into the 184. Panzerabwehr Battalion, whose commander had been missing since 22 February. Interrogations of prisoners revealed he was most likely a deserter.467 Signal, engineer and headquarters elements rounded out the tattered composition of the 84. Division.

The Intelligence Report also placed Kampfgruppe (KG) Karst (Battle Group Karst), which consisted of approximately 1000 troops and 7 armored vehicles of unknown type, near Wesel.468 KG Karst fought in the vicinity of LZ N and was somewhat intertwined with the 84. Division. KG Karst sprang from Replacement Training Division 466 and was commanded by Generalleutnant Friederich Karst. General Schlemm was openly critical of the unit stating:

“Recruiting depots, that were combed by the Army under General Karst and by the Luftwaffe under General Barentin, were no substitute for a combat capable reserve. These units were armed in such an insufficiently meager manner, that their employment even as a defensive force in rearward positions could hardly be excused.”469

The commander of the 84. Infanterie Division, Generalmajor Heinz Fiebig, was tasked with defending the wooded area west of the village of Diersfort on the east bank of the Rhein River. His description of the attitudes and observations of the other German commanders is poignant. He remarked that it was impossible to obtain any intelligence on the enemy disposition in the days preceding the air landing. The Allies covered the entire Rhein area near Wesel with a thick bank of artificial smoke, making direct observation impossible. There was a total Allied communications blackout that prevented signals intelligence gathering.470

As D-day approached it became apparent to the Germans that the crossing was close at hand. The Allies stepped up daylight bombings of countless towns and villages in the Wesel area in an attempt to isolate the battlefield. Communications centers were disrupted and supply routes were broken.471 The following summary of Army Air Corps sorties shows the

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465 6th Airborne Division Intelligence Summary No. 34. Local Reserves, 15 March 1945, 1.
467 6th Airborne Division Intelligence Summary No. 34. Local Reserves, 15 March 1945, 2. Panzerabwehr is the German term for anti-tank.
Planning for Operation VARSITY

On 22 March, the EIGHTH Air Force continued preparatory attacks east of the Rhein. Again, over one thousand heavy bombers hit four airfields, three marshalling yards, ten military encampments and two cities. The NINTH Air Force sent nearly 800 A-20, A-26, and B-26 bombers to attack nine communications centers and one marshalling yard east of the Rhein. They also struck seven towns, numerous Flak positions and conducted further interdiction to impede movement of troops and supplies.473

On the 23rd of March, 1240 heavy bombers attacked ten marshalling yards east of the Rhein and four other marshalling yards and power stations. NINTH Air Force sent 800 light and medium bombers to strike seven communications centers, a factory, and Flak positions.474 Finally, on 24 March, 1033 heavy bombers struck targets in support of the VARSITY and PLUNDER crossing. The NINTH Air Force tasked 700 light and medium bombers to strike communication centers and other targets in support of the crossing. Fighters attacked targets of opportunity before the airborne drop, and bombers carpeted the landing zones with fragmentation bombs in order to immobilize Flak batteries. An additional 235 B-24 bombers dropped supplies on the LZs and DZs and were supported by 85 fighter sorties.475


473 *U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II*, 605.

474 *U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II*, 606.

475 *U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II*, 607.

Figure 9.6 The damage to the village of Dinslaken is evident in this photo. Bombing was quite effective in tying up the road networks.

Figure 9.7 More visible damage in Dinslaken.
The bombing had devastating effects on the civilian population. On 23 March, bombs fell on Dinslaken, a small village in the VARSITY area. The citizens of that town called it “Black Friday”. One inhabitant described the attack where nearly 190 citizens died in that air raid.

“It was a nice sunny spring day. Now and again the American artillery fired across from the other side of the Rhein. But one was used to that. Housewives stood in long lines along Neu Street in front of the food stores... suddenly the air raid warning alarm sounded, but the women who wanted to purchase butter were not interrupted by this... The planes flew again toward the city. I was barely in my doorway when the air rumbled, then it crashed terribly.”

Dinslaken was bombed non-stop from the morning until around 1800 hours. Repeated waves of bombers came in ten minute intervals. Amidst the high explosive bombs, incendiary bomblets were interspersed. The smoke-filled village glowed bright red at night from the fires. An additional 511 civilians died in the combined attacks.

Nearly everyone in a command or staff position on the German side could see how futile their efforts would be. In a post-war interview regarding the situation in March of 1945, the Chief of Staff of the II Fallschirmjäger Corps, Oberst Ernst Bleunsteiner reported on the discouraging state. Vehicle readiness stood at 20%. Stocks of artillery ammunition for light guns stood at about fifty rounds per gun. The heavier guns were even less well supplied. Fire Direction Centers had to scrutinize every call for fire. Delays such as these could be a matter of life and death for soldiers under heavy attack. Things

476 Krieg vor der Eigenen Haustür, 66. Quote translated by the author.
477 Krieg vor der Eigenen Haustür, 66.
478 Krieg vor der Eigenen Haustür, 63.
looked exceptionally bleak for the German defenders east of the Rhein River, but nonetheless, they integrated their positions into the surrounding farms and countryside. The defenses in the vicinity of LZ N were taking shape; the preparations were impacting the farmers and their families in nearly every hamlet.

The tow vehicles of a heavy artillery unit were placed in the barn of the Köppen Family. Their 150mm guns were positioned immediately to the west nearer to the Diersforter Forest. A week prior to the Allied landings, a company of men, regular soldiers and Volksturm recruits joined the artillery company. There was also a medical unit which set up a treatment facility in the home and basement area of the Kortenauer Family.479

Heinrich Joorman reported that an armored vehicle and crew was lagered in his farmhouse and one with the Stegmann family. The crew and vehicle in Joorman’s farm moved a day or so prior to the landings. Photographic evidence shows a destroyed Panzerspähwagen 251 in the area of these farms. That was perhaps the same vehicle to which Joorman referred.480

The headquarters element of an artillery unit was encamped in the home of the Witzenkath Family. One of the batteries with three medium caliber guns was positioned near a small wooded area near the Röpling Farm. Another battery of artillerists was quartered in the home of the Perreth Family who lived along the Diersforterstraße. The Battery Commander, Lieutenant Schulz was killed in the fighting on 24 March.481 These were elements of the 184. Artillerie Regiment of the 84. Infanterie Division.

479 Die Luftlandungen, 28-29.
480 Die Luftlandungen, 240, 259. Panzerspähwagen is the German equivalent of the American armored half-track.
481 Die Luftlandungen, 254.
On the morning of 24 March, a group of artillerymen with two tow vehicles and two guns showed up at the Witzenkath compound. The two guns were the short barreled 150mm type and were set up on one of the small paths near the home. The barrels were pointed westward. The soldiers were instructed to destroy the barrels of their guns in the event of an airborne landing. Shortly after the landings the artillerymen complied; pieces of the exploding barrels struck the Witzenkath home. Thereafter the artillerymen fought as infantry until captured.482

The 184. Pionier Battalion was equipped with standard demolition and engineer equipment and had horse-drawn wagons to move their men and equipment. The unit set up amidst the rural areas. Since they were laden with explosives, they were prohibited from locating any of their wagons near any of the farms or buildings. They encamped several meters away from the farm compounds under the cover of trees or in orchards. Replacements to the engineer unit consisted of recruits with four weeks of training. Most were Austrians directly from the Kazerne in Donau or from the south Rhein area. and wore the Edelweiß on their caps.

482 Die Luftlandungen, 254.
The engineers laid mines mainly in the Diersfordt Forest to the west. The few veterans were amazed that they were being ordered to lay mines immediately behind German troop’s positions in the woods. One engineer, Valentine Klopsch reported that they placed the mines, but failed to arm them. They threw the fuses in the bushes to avoid killing any other fellow comrades in the artillery unit.\footnote{Die Luftlandungen, 125.} Figure 9.15 depicts the locations of some of the units and farm compounds.

Once again the 139\textsuperscript{th} would fight against elements of units whose combat strength and morale were sapped by many days of continuous combat. The 84. was severely under strength; more than five years of war had taken a toll on the fighting spirit of the average German soldier. The numbers of veterans filling the ranks of the 84. were small and the replacements they received were under-trained, poorly equipped, and not of the early war fighting caliber that characterized the forces that achieved victory upon victory in Poland, France and Russia.

**Operation VARSITY: Preparations**

On 10 February, the 139\textsuperscript{th} left its combat positions in the Belgium/Luxembourg area and proceeded to Chalons, France to begin preparations for VARSITY. Troops moved either in the motor convoy of the division or rode in 40 & 8’s. These were the European style box cars that held either forty soldiers or eight horses. With this trip, the engineers entered into a long lineage of doughboys dating back to the Great War who rode to and from combat in 40 & 8’s.\footnote{History 139\textsuperscript{th} Airborne Engineers, 19.}

Encampment for the bulk of the paratroopers and glidermen was in tents that were hurriedly set up in neat rows, but not fully staked down. The work to prepare “tent city” at Chalons was dirty and arduous. It had rained and, along with the melting snow, the entire area was a virtual sea of mud. The engineers worked feverishly to stake down the tents, build
wooden walkways and tame the mud. “A good many of the men said they got more rest up at the front than they did at the rest camp.”485 That was a poignant comment considering they had been shot at and mortared on a daily basis at the front.

The division had just completed forty-seven days of continuous combat in Belgium and Luxembourg and was in need of rest, reorganization and refitting. Into the depleted ranks flowed a few thousand replacements that needed to be quickly trained and incorporated into their new units. Internal reorganization also impacted the engineer battalion.

The 139th AEB was originally assigned three glider companies, Headquarters and Service, Able and Baker Companies, and one jump company, Charlie. Lt. Col. Johnson designated Baker Company as a new jump company. This action was to comply with the Table of Organization and Equipment which was revised on 16 Dec 1944. Using many of the men from the other three companies who were parachute qualified, he reorganized the battalion. The 139th now had two jump companies, Baker and Charlie. Capt.

485 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 19.
the individual level, building on basic soldier and engineer skills, and progressed to the squad level, followed by platoon and company level training. All of these training efforts came together in the form of a battalion night training exercise. Additional areas of focus included familiarization and qualification with the CG-4A glider, including loading, unloading procedures, parachute practice for the new replacements and routine jumps for pay for the veterans. Mass tactical glider and parachute drops and command post exercises to meld the staff back into a fluid and efficient machine were part of the regimen of the division.

Additional training was accomplished with wire and radio communications to ensure that critical information and orders would pass efficiently and accurately between units during the heat of battle. Weapons familiarization and qualification were scheduled along with training on the new 57mm and 75mm recoilless rifles. Two new events were introduced and exercised; double glider tows and parachute procedures from the two-door C-46. It was a very busy time for everyone.

Aside from an occasional furlough or pass to Paris, the men trained incessantly. Training began at

Olson would command and 1st Sgt. Fretina would serve as the “first shirt”. Everyone assessed that Baker Company, “promised to be a crack outfit.”

![Figure 9.16 139th troopers await the trip aboard “40 and 8’s”.

![Figure 9.17 Approaching the new home for the 139th AEB.

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486 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 19-21.
487 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 21.
488 17th Airborne Division Historical Report of Operation VARSITY, 10.
While the preparations for VARSITY were underway, the War Department had been grappling with the administrative issues surrounding the eventual end of the war in Europe, such as how to get the men from Europe to the Pacific Theater of Operations or to the US. There was also the question of occupation duty and determining which soldiers would fall into what category. The Army adopted the point system whereby those with “high points” were more than likely to be sent home. Points were awarded for number of days in combat, number of days overseas or for combat awards or battlefield injuries. Vincent Mazza was privy to the early information which had not yet been disseminated at the troop level.

"While in Chalon sur Marne I knew the secret information about how the Army would handle transferring men when we would defeat the Germans. It was a point system based on months of service and awards. 80 points would send you home and discharged. 50 points would stay for occupation. Less than 50 would send you to the CBI or Pacific and it reminded me that my old A Company platoon never reported injuries and acceptable wounds. I told them to do so because it was important for them but they said they would not."

Following the initial drops during previous airborne operations, particularly those executed at night, confusion reigned supreme. Units could not readily find commanders or objectives. Communications were sporadic and each element, if not each individual, had to rely on audacity, personal courage and their knowledge of the concept of the operation. Operation OVERLORD accentuated these lessons and identified the need for even further changes to airborne operations. The airborne planners took note of the lessons learned and made significant changes between Operations OVERLORD and MARKET-GARDEN. The drops in Holland in September 1944 were much more successful during the day with far fewer incidents of troop dispersion and missing elements. Units landed, quickly organized and moved towards their objectives. MARKET-GARDEN, however, suffered problems as a result of troop, glider and resupply deliveries that spanned several days. There

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Vincent Mazza, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 4.
Planning for Operation VARSITY

were simply not enough aircraft to deliver more than three airborne divisions into combat on the same day and provide resupply operations as well. Lost was the principle of mass.

To further reduce the possibility of unit dispersion and to capitalize on mass and surprise, planning for VARSITY dictated that all units would be carried to their DZ/LZ on the same day. Each battalion landed within minutes of one another. In the case of the 139th they would all land within a seven minute span from first to last glider. The mission of the 139th AEB was to clear and defend LZ N from armored attack from the North.

The staff deliberated throughout the late hours of the night to study the terrain, obstacles and enemy dispositions so that the best landing and drop zones could be selected. With similar diligence, the staff tackled the excruciatingly painful task of creating a realistic timetable. They had to assign all of the troops and their equipment to the proper glider or cargo plane at the appropriate airfield and they had to de-conflict the time table for moving the units to the correct planes and loading them on time to ensure the elaborate timetable would work. Air routes had to be drawn up to ensure planes and gliders took off, rendezvoused at a specified point and followed a route that converged on the landing/drop zones at the appointed time. All of this had to be accomplished with an eye on de-confliction to prevent massive numbers of planes taking evasive action or climbing to avoid a near miss. Orchestrating a timetable for thousands of planes and tens of thousands of troops was no easy task.

In addition, the timetable for the ground convoy of the non-air deployable assets such as trucks and heavy equipment had to be developed. Loading and movement was planned from their staging areas in France to the jump-off points on the west bank of the Rhein River. From there, the division’s vehicles were interspersed with those of several other divisions involved in the amphibious portion of Operation PLUNDER. Thousands of vehicles had to be sequenced so they could cross the river on the few bridges that were to be constructed as soon as the east bank was secured.

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490 Organization, Equipment and Tactical Employment of the Airborne Division (Headquarters, United States Forces European Theater of Operation, 1945), 4-7.
491 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 22.
492 17th Airborne Division Historical Report of Operation VARSITY, 27.
494 17th Airborne Division Historical Report of Operation VARSITY, 11.
Field Order No. 5 was issued for the IX Troop Carrier Command (TCC) and subordinate units on 16 March. It outlined their role in transporting troops and gliders for Operation VARSITY. The drops were to begin at 1000 hours on 24 March. It would take more than two hours for the continuous line of planes to cross the target and drop their paratroopers, gliders and supplies.495

The mission of the IX TCC was to lift glider and paratroop elements of the 17th Airborne Division, to supply it from the air, and to provide their remaining planes and gliders to lift the British 6th Airborne Division into battle.496 They would deliver the entire load of paratroopers and gliders to the DZs and LZs spelled out in the plan.

The 440th Troop Carrier Group (TCG) was assigned the task of carrying the entire 139th AEB into battle using C-47s towing CG-4A gliders to LZ N. The 440th would operate 2 serials of 45 tow planes with gliders in single tow. Of those 90 gliders the 139th would ride in 69 of them.497 Serial A-16 would carry the Headquarters and Service Company of the 139th along with Company B. Serial A-17 would carry Able and Charlie Companies.498 The remaining 21 gliders of the two serials were filled with other elements of the 17th division. The 440th was assigned Airstrip A-50 at Bricy, France, near Orleans.499

Serial A-16 was composed of 22 C-47s of the 95th TCS, 22 of the 97th and 1 from the 95th. The crew of the lead ship would be Lt. Col. Cannon, a member of the 440th TCG staff, and Col. Frank Xavier Krebs, the 440th TCG Group Commander. They would fly in a formation of groups of four tow planes and four gliders flying in echelon-right as depicted in Figure 9.17. The serial flew in this four-ship formation with each group of four flying in the trail of one

495 DZ Europe: The Story of the 440th Troop Carrier Group (n.p., 1946?), 95.
496 DZ Europe, 97.
497 17th Airborne Division Historical Report of Operation VARSITY, 66, 68.
498 17th Airborne Division Historical Report of Operation VARSITY, 68.
499 IX Troop Carrier Command. IX Troop Carrier Command Activities: Final Phase European War, 64.
another. Serial A-17 was arrayed in similar fashion with 45 tow planes and gliders consisting of 21 C-47s from the 96 TCS, 23 from the 98th and 1 from the 95th. Lt. Col. George M. Johnson, Jr., the commander of the 96th Troop Carrier Squadron, and Capt. James R. Roberson would crew the lead ship. LZ N was divided into two separate LZs; LZ 1 and LZ 2. The gliders of the first serial, A-16, would land in LZ 1 and the second serial, A-17, would land in LZ 2.

On the last few days prior to D-day for Operation VARSITY, the engineers were given several briefings. These briefings were very detailed and covered every aspect of the operation from final equipment preparations, glider loading, to operations and specific missions in the landing zone. The briefings were exceptionally thorough and made use of maps, aerial photos, elaborate sand tables and copies of the operations orders. William Murphy recalled the briefings:

“We were at an airfield in France where the US Army Air Corps were to show us pictures of the town of Wesel, and how it looked before they bombed it and after they had bombed it. They sure leveled it. Also they showed us where we (139th Eng) would land…and stay the night by some railroad tracks.”

Figure 9.22 LZ N as depicted on photo reconnaissance map. Recon photos were taken on 11 Sept 44.

500 DZ Europe, 98.
501 DZ Europe, 98.
502 William F. Murphy, to Ozzie H. Gorbicz, n.p.
By the time they boarded their gliders, each troop was well familiar with their individual role in the mission and that of their unit. Each officer and NCO knew his role and that of his superior and subordinate in the event they should be killed, wounded or missing. Confidence must have been very high.

On 23 March, at 1000 hours, the C-47 and CG-4A crews received their mass briefing by the 440th TCG staff. Later that afternoon, the 90 gliders and their tow planes were marshaled into their proper position on the airfield. Final loading of equipment and ammunition was then completed. The final weather decision was made by 1700 hours on 23 March. The weather was good and approval was granted by the Commanding General of the IX TCC.

Within 24 hours the largest single-day airborne operation would be underway. Thousands of aircraft, consisting of C-47s, Waco and Horsa Gliders, British tow planes, and Allied fighters and bombers, were airborne with the goal of breaching the Rhein River at Wesel and opening the door to the Ruhr Gebiet.

For the men of the 139th AEB, and the pilots of the 440th Troop Carrier Group who towed the engineers into combat, these twenty-four hours of waiting were most certainly filled with numerous emotions, thoughts and prayers.

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503 DZ Europe, 98.
504 DZ Europe, 98.
505 IX Troop Carrier Command. IX Troop Carrier Command Activities: Final Phase European War, 65.
Engrossed in their own thoughts, members of the 17th Airborne Division walk to their assigned gliders on 24 Mar 45.
The 440th Troop Carrier Group

Early History

While the Army was forging the concept and the structure of the Airborne Corps, the Army Air Corps was developing the theory, organization and equipment of the Airborne’s delivery mechanism. On 30 April 1942 the Air Transport Command was formed and shortly thereafter re-designated Troop Carrier Command to more adequately describe what the organization’s mission was. Troop Carrier Command (TCC) was assigned the mission of transporting the paratroopers and gliders into combat, and to execute resupply missions in support. With their headquarters in Stout Field, Indiana, the command functioned as the parent training organization for the Troup Carrier Groups (TCG) which served overseas.\footnote{DZ Europe, 7-9}

The 440th TCG was activated on 1 July 1943 at Baer Field, Indiana. Members of various Air Corps units arrived in July to fill the ranks of the new organization. The 440th TCG consisted of Headquarters Element whose mission was to coordinate and orchestrate all of the training, planning and preparations for mission of the Group. The headquarters contained the staff, a Mess Section, a Communications Section, Flight Operations Section, an Intelligence Section, the Personnel, Command and Statistical Sections, the Transportation Section and the S-4 and Supply Section.

There were four Squadrons assigned to the 440th; the 95th TCS, the 95th TCS, the 97th TCS and the 98th TCS. Each of these squadrons was assigned a Command and Staff Section, a Communications Section, a Technical Supply Section, an Orderly Room Staff, a Transportation Section, an Intelligence Section, an Operations Section, a Mess Hall Section and a Personal Equipment, Parachute and Chemical Warfare Section. Each of the Squadrons was organized with three or more flights of pilots, co-pilots, flight engineers, radio operators and crew chiefs. There was a final element containing all of the glider pilots.

The number of planes assigned to a TCG varied during the war. At its height, the 440th was assigned 90 C-47s. Each Squadron was assigned approximately twenty aircraft. Each Squadron was given a two-character code name that was to be painted in large font on either side of the nose, just forward of the wing root. This was to aid in easy recognition of one’s squadron when rejoining in the air. If you can imagine the confusion of hundreds of different planes trying to make sense of one another over a DZ or LZ after evading flak and small arms fire. A quick glance at the nose would confirm the two-characters belonging to the right squadron. In the case of the 440th, the following designations were assigned:

- 95th TCS: 9X
- 96th TCS: 6Z
- 97th TCS: W6
- 98th TCS: 8Y

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{image.jpg}
\caption{A stalwart C-47 mechanic works diligently to keep the operational rate of the Group’s planes at its highest level.}
\end{figure}
Training of the cadre began immediately and shortly thereafter the unit was moved to Sedalia Army Air Field, Missouri where training began in earnest. By September the unit was moved again to Alliance, Nebraska where it trained with the various airborne units stationed there. The men of the 440th trained rigorously for the next several months. The crews devoted their energy to the fundamentals of flying. Emphasis was placed on formation flying, navigation and instrument procedures. As they gained proficiency in the fundamentals, the regimen was expanded to encompass glider towing, dropping parachute bundles and eventually troops. Those who remained on the ground were not idle. Mechanics were continually busy not only with honing their skills of aircraft maintenance; they were pressured to keep a heavy number of aircraft operable for the demanding schedule of training sorties. Being members of the Army meant that each airman also needed to know basic soldiering skills. They qualified on the firing range, performed road marches and absorbed numerous lectures on subjects such as first-aid, field sanitation and basic defense.

On 17 December 1943 the 440th was reassigned to Pope Field, North Carolina. There they joined with three other TCGs to practice the fundamentals of mass formations to deliver an entire airborne division. This is where the 440th and the 17th first worked together. The Group delivered members of the 17th during large-scale practice airborne operations. These massive missions of para-drop and glider deliveries were flown during the day, and eventually at night.

Training in England

When the TCGs completed their state-side training, they were reassigned to a Troop Carrier Command. The 440th TCG was assigned to the 50th Troop Carrier Wing (TCW) under the IX Troop Carrier Command, headed by Maj. Gen. Paul L. Williams. Their journey from the United States to England was by way of South America, Africa and eventually to Army Air Forces Station No. 481 near Bottesford, Nottinghamshire, England.

The town of Bottesford was rather small with a population of about 200. It was described as:

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507 DZ Europe, 11-12.
508 DZ Europe, 12.
509 DZ Europe, 12-13.
510 DZ Europe, 27.
...just a typical old English farming village with old stone cottages and great barns and a towering church steeple, rather picturesque to the visitors."

The airfield had three asphalt runways, each about a mile long arrayed in a criss-cross triangular fashion. There were a few rows of stucco huts and maintenance hangars for conducting operations and the crews and maintenance men slept in either stone huts or metal Nissen huts. The conditions were relatively primitive compared to the facilities in the United States.\textsuperscript{511}

**Operation NEPTUNE**

The primary raison d'être for the 440\textsuperscript{th} was to support Operation NEPTUNE; to deliver members of an airborne division to the continent of Europe in support of the big invasion. All of their training energies were devoted to perfecting their role in the operation. On 2 June 1944 the Group Commander, Col. Krebs unfolded the unit’s role in the mission to members of his staff. Under the veil of darkness he briefed them on the details of Field Order Number One. Detailed planning had to be carried out quickly and in total secrecy. The staff drew up further plans and details, the crews prepared themselves and the maintenance men readied their aircraft. This included painting alternating black and white identification stripes on the wings and fuselages of their planes.\textsuperscript{512} This was a direct result of the tragedy that struck when Allied ships opened fire on the tow planes and gliders during operation HUSKY.

The 440\textsuperscript{th} was assigned the task of carrying the entire 3\textsuperscript{rd} Battalion of the 506\textsuperscript{th} Parachute Infantry Regiment and the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} Platoons of Company C, 326\textsuperscript{th} Airborne Engineer Battalion. Among the precious cargo were members of the now famous “Filthy Thirteen” The 440\textsuperscript{th} would deliver these elements of the 101\textsuperscript{st} Airborne Division onto the Cotentin Peninsula near the village of St. Mere Eglise.

Horrible weather forced a delay in the date of the invasion and it was slipped to 6 June 1944. In the darkness of the evening on 5 June, the crews donned their flight uniforms and protective gear and reported to their machines. At 2350, Col. Krebs, in the lead plane, broke ground en route to France. The 440\textsuperscript{th} formed into their “V of Vs” and then headed towards the drop zone.\textsuperscript{513}

In an effort to provide a measure of concealment from the German Würzburg and Freyus radars, the formation was preceded by numerous aircraft which dropped large amounts of “Window” or diversionary strips of aluminum foil used to cloud the enemy radar devices from aircraft flying behind the wall of foil. As the C-47s made their final turn toward their Drop Zones, the intensity of Flak increased. According to the unit history,

“Without wavering, however, the 45 planes of the first serial stuck to the course, nosing down toward the 700 feet at which the jump would be made and slowing in the

\textsuperscript{511} DZ Europe, 27-29.
\textsuperscript{512} DZ Europe, 37-38.
midst of that deadly fire to 125 miles an hour.514

According to the pilots, the mist and clouds that enveloped the DZ made it difficult for all aircraft to identify their exact release point. Only a few of the pilots were able to see the lights placed by the pathfinders which marked the exact DZ. As the green jump light illuminated it was 0140 hours, 6 June 1944.515

The following day, the men and machines of the 440th took again to the air to deliver supplies to the troopers in the fields of Normandie. Sixty-two planes and crews departed on 7 June with parachute bundles of ammunition, K-rations and gasoline to be dropped at Landing Zone “E”. During that mission eleven of the planes required extensive repairs due to withering Flak. There were notable losses in crew members as well. Missions were flown in support of the fighting paratroopers as late as 23 and 24 June. Numerous planes returned with serious damage even on that late date. During the missions of 23/24 June twenty-three aircraft returned with battle damage.516

Operation DRAGOON

In an effort to create an envelopment attack into the continent of Europe, the Allies mounted Operation DRAGOON. On 15 August, the 440th TCG delivered 720 paratroopers from the 517th Parachute Infantry into southern France in the vicinity of Le Muy as part of the larger ground and air invasion. In addition to the paratroopers, the planes were laden with several para-bundles of supplies and combat equipment for the paratroopers. The drop was accomplished without incident and all planes returned around 0600 hours. No Flak or ground fire had been encountered by the 440th crews according to the debriefing.517

514 DZ Europe, 40 – 41.
515 DZ Europe, 41.
516 DZ Europe, 41-45.
517 DZ Europe, 53-56.
Shortly thereafter, the planes were refueled and readied for towing gliders carrying members and equipment of the 602nd Field Artillery Battalion and the 442nd Anti Tank Company into the same area used to drop the 517th. Again, the delivery was performed without interruption from enemy ground fire. The forty-eight planes returned without incident. The glider pilots found the landings a bit more challenging. The fields selected for the Landing Zone were covered with stakes from the vineyards. A total of four glider pilots were killed in the operation.518

**Operation MARKET-GARDEN**

Without fail, the 440th would be assigned another mission in support of Operation MARKET GARDEN. Ceding to Montgomery’s insistence on opening a breach to the north German plain, Eisenhower approved Montgomery’s plan to drop three airborne divisions deep into Holland to seize crossings over key waterways while an armored assault made their way to Arnhem to secure the corridor.

The 440th was assigned the mission of delivering 627 men of the 508th PIR and several para-packs of supplies and 529 artillerymen and their equipment from the 376th PFAB and 42 tons of equipment into combat. On 17 September 1944, the 440th crossed Drop Zones “T” and “N” from an altitude of 500’. The delivery was markedly different from that in southern France. The ground fire was exceptionally heavy. Almost every one of the ninety-two planes received some Flak damage. The accuracy of the drop, however, did not suffer. It was calculated that 97.7% of the 508th PIR was delivered on the DZ. A few minutes later, at 1333 hours, the 376th PFAB was delivered with 96.6% accuracy onto DZ “N”.519

Some of the unit’s planes were shot down, among them that of the Group Commander, Col. Krebs. Forty days after the mission, Col. Krebs and his crew appeared unannounced in the officer’s mess wearing Dutch clothing. He and his crew had evaded capture and returned to the unit. The story was quite exhilarating. Only the crew’s navigator, Lt. Sullivan was captured. He would spend the rest of the war in a German POW camp.520

**Supporting the Battling Bastards**

The rich history of the 440th would not end with the Holland mission. The attack by the Germans through the Ardennes region created a desperate situation for elements of the 10th Armored Division and the paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division. Hemmed in at Bastogne, without resupply and running low on ammunition, fuel, rations and medical equipment, the 440th was called to assist. As soon as a break in the weather allowed, the 440th delivered the much needed supplies.

On 26 December, a single glider piloted by Lt. Charlton W. Corwin and Flight Officer Benjamin F. Constantino of the 96th Squadron of the 440th was towed and released over a make-shift LZ near Bastogne. The glider was loaded with medical supplies and an advanced surgical team. The glider cut loose at 1313 hours at an altitude of 300 feet and made a perfect landing. A few hours behind the lone glider was another load of ten gliders carrying 2975 gallons of gas. At 1720 the gliders cut loose and

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518 DZ Europe, 57.  
519 DZ Europe, 59-66.  
520 DZ Europe, 66.
landed. One of the gliders had over seventy bullet holes in it with the loss of many gallons of gas. An additional armada of planes departing from bases in England, from other Groups, delivered an additional 320 tons of food, clothing, ammunition and other supplies into Bastogne via parachute.\textsuperscript{521}

The next day the 440\textsuperscript{th} was again tasked with another glider supply delivery mission. This time the load was not so benign. The Group was slated to tow thirteen gliders and many tons of high explosives into the cauldron. Already alerted by the previous day’s mission, the German gunners were more accurate on the 27\textsuperscript{th} of December. One plane was hit and its load exploded in air pulverizing the entire glider instantaneously. Five of the eight C-47s from the 95\textsuperscript{th} Squadron were shot down and nearly every one of the crews were either killed or captured. Sgt. Londo was one of the lucky crew members shot down that day, who lived to report his exploits.

Technical Sergeant Robert Londo was on board aircraft 42-100916 on 27 December during one of the Bastogne resupply missions. He reported that the Flak was very heavy. One of the ships he was watching was hit by Flak and burst into flames, crashing. He did not observe anyone bail out of the flaming torrent. Shortly thereafter, Londo’s plane was hit by Flak and machine gun fire. The Pilot instructed everyone to get out. Londo reported:

\begin{quote}
“I immediately went back and kicked out the door with emergency release. It didn’t go out the first kick so I kicked it again and it went out. The radio operator was directly behind me with his chute on. I then turned around and the pilot and co-pilot were in the companion-way and Lt. Maeder again gave the command to bail out. I bailed out and after pulling my rip cord another chute opened below me and to the left of me.”
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{521} DZ Europe, 77-79
I followed him down and I found the chute but the person had already left.\textsuperscript{522}

Eventually Londo evaded capture, and reported to an American unit. He was back with his unit by 29 December. Londo’s full report is provided in \textbf{Appendix D}.

One additional plane made it over friendly lines before making an emergency landing. The remaining two planes were very heavily damaged. Three of the five planes from the 96th Squadron were shot down. Seven of the crew members were killed and two taken prisoner. The remaining two planes were also badly shot up. The gliders being towed landed relatively undamaged and delivered their cargo of ammunition and explosives. This was the most costly mission for the 440th during the entire war.\textsuperscript{523}

Following their support of the Battle of the Bulge, the 440th was tasked with preparing for Operation VARSITY. They received replacements for those lost in Holland and Belgium and began once again to train for a mission of great importance.

Throughout February and March the 440th trained with the 17th Airborne Division, striving to perfect the techniques of delivering troops and gliders to their assigned LZ/DZ. Eventually the Air Operations order assigned the 440th the task of towing gliders, loaded with the 139th AEB, across the Rhein River and into Germany.

\textsuperscript{522} Robert Londo, \textit{Statement of T/Sgt Robert Londo 36423562, 96th Troop Carrier Squadron, 440th Troop Carrier Group, (HQ 440th Troop Carrier Group: France, 1945)} n.p.\textsuperscript{523} \textit{DZ Europe}, 82.
Into Battle Again

The Armada Departs

At 0700 hours on 24 March the troopers of the 139th AEB began loading onto the gliders. Planes began taxiing at 0819. It took nearly an hour to get all ninety of the gliders from their parking spots and into the air. Thereafter, the tow planes would execute a series of standard maneuvers to allow the ninety planes and ninety gliders of serial A-16 and A-17 to form into one cohesive formation.\(^{524}\)

The lead ship with Lt. Col. Cannon and Col. Xavier Krebs rolled down the A-50 runway at 0831 towing Maj. Wilson’s lead glider.\(^{525}\) Each plane departed in twenty second intervals until all elements of Serial A-16 were airborne.\(^{526}\) At 0848 Lt. Col. George M. Johnson pushed up the throttles of his C-47 while Capt. Robertson performed his duties as copilot. In thirty-eight minutes, all forty-five aircraft of Serial A-17 were airborne along with their forty-five gliders. The time was 0909.\(^{527}\)

The launches were not without complications. On the ground, aircraft 731 developed problems. The crew could not get the propeller control which governed the pitch of the blades to respond to controls. The crew had to abort 731. On board the glider was the Battalion Commander of the 139th, Lt. Col. Stanley T. B. Johnson. He “…raged and fumed…” since it looked like his battalion was rolling into combat without him. Maintenance crews from the 440th responded quickly to the abort. The spare tow plane was quickly hooked to Lt. Col. Johnson’s glider and within thirty minutes he was relieved to be back in the air. Catching up to the lead serial was no easy prospect since they could not vary their speed significantly because of the slower limiting speed of the glider in tow.\(^{528}\)

The flights proceeded on course and crossed the final navigation point, “YALTA” on course and on time. They were seventeen miles from the glider release point. From here, the flight descended to 700 feet above the ground.\(^{529}\) Once the serials crossed the Rhein the enemy unleashed its torrent of small arms and anti-aircraft artillery fire. The crews referred to this as *Flak*, a term that comes from the shortened version of the German word *(F)lieger(ab)wehr(k)annonen* (anti-aircraft cannon) or *Flak*. According to the 440th veterans who dropped paratroopers over Normandie and Holland the *Flak* over the Rhein was, “...the heaviest they had ever seen.”\(^{530}\)

As the first tow plane approached the release point a, “...withering hail...” of *Flak* and small arms fire ascended upon the flight. Serial A-16 suffered two aircraft shot down and fourteen heavily damaged. That equates to a 36% loss/damage rate. Despite the heavy fire, all forty-five gliders were released on time and on course and were able to descend to their

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\(^{524}\) *DZ Europe*, 101.

\(^{525}\) The author was unable to ascertain the full name of Major Wilson. Neither the unit’s history, nor the accompanying photos indicate the first name and middle initial of Major Wilson. Given the several Wilsons listed in the unit roster, which does not contain ranks, it was difficult to determine which one was the lead glider pilot.

\(^{526}\) *DZ Europe*, 100.

\(^{527}\) *DZ Europe*, 100.

\(^{528}\) *DZ Europe*, 101.

\(^{529}\) *DZ Europe*, 101.

\(^{530}\) History 139th Airborne Engineers, 22.
intended landing spots. By the time the second serial, A-17, arrived over the Eastern Rhein River bank the Flak gunners were ready and sighted in. The enemy’s fire was much more effective. Their loss/damage rate was twice that of Serial A-16.

Some of the glider riders were wounded as Flak and small arms fire penetrated their craft. At 700 feet above the ground, a fifty-three foot canvas crate flying as slow as 110 mph in a straight line made a fine target. One of the crates, glider number 42 of serial A-17, which carried a heavy load of demolitions equipment, was hit by Flak and exploded in the air obliterating it and killing all on board. It was the 139th’s only airborne loss in the operation.

Amazingly, despite the heavy Flak, only one C-47 pilot was wounded in addition to those who were killed when their C-47s crashed. The glider pilots suffered a far worse fate. Of the ninety glider pilots, five were killed and six were wounded; a 12% casualty rate for a single mission.

Criticism leveled at the flight crews following the Normandy mission contended they had veered off course due to weather and heavy Flak. During VARSITY the 440th would prove the critics wrong. General William Miley cited the 440th stating:

“...damaged and burning aircraft continued to their assigned areas in spite of the fact that the crews well understood that continuing on course destroyed any probable chance of survival...”

According to the 440th historians, the mission, “...could stand as a textbook model of sound airborne doctrine...” Such were the views at the macro level. The perspective on board the individual gliders was far more realistic.

Glider 47

On 24 March 1945 Sgt, John F. Petrell boarded a CG-4A “Waco” glider as part of Operation VARSITY. After a few hours flight the tow rope

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531 DZ Europe, 101-102.
532 DZ Europe, 102.
533 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 22.
534 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 22.
535 DZ Europe, 102.
536 DZ Europe, 101.
537 DZ Europe, 103.
538 DZ Europe, 103.
Into Battle Again

connecting his aircraft to its tow plane was released and the glider began a left-hand 270 degree turn to Landing Zone “N” where Petrell and the rest of his squad completed their assigned mission as part of the 139th AEB. John Petrell and his squad rode on board a glider; serial number 42-46332. In his squad leader’s notebook Sgt. Petrell wrote the names of the men assigned to his squad. Most of them would ride on the same glider on that historic day in March. The enclosed image lists the names of his second squad, which was assigned to the first platoon of Baker Company, 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion.

The glider in which Petrell and his squad rode was piloted by Alfred A. Boyce, of Oregon City, Oregon. He was assisted by his co-pilot Benjamin F. Constantino of Kansas City, Missouri. Constantino and Boyce were members of the 96th Troop Carrier Squadron commanded by Lt. Col. George M. Johnson, Jr. of Macon, Georgia. Together the pilots were responsible for delivering Petrell and his squad from Field A-50 near Orleans, France to Landing Zone “N”, just north of the city of Wesel, Germany. It would be the first time Allied gliders and paratroopers would land in Germany, less than two months before the end of the war.

Each glider was usually towed into combat by a twin-engine tow plane. The plane tasked to tow glider 42-46332 was assigned to the 97th Troop Carrier Squadron of the 440th Troop Carrier Group based in France. The plane was a C-47 “Dakota” cargo aircraft manufactured by the Douglas Aircraft Company in 1943. Its serial number was 43-15654. On board was a crew of five; the pilot, Maj. Warren B. Howe of Cleveland, Ohio, the co-pilot, 1st Lt. Roger J. Sonneborn of Detroit Michigan, the navigator, 1st Lt. Francis L. Perry from Denair California, the Crew Chief, T/ Sgt. Jeremiah A. O’Connell of Boston, Massachusetts, and the Radio Operator, Sgt. Arthur R. Heggerty of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. O’Connell and Heggerty were last minute additions, replacing Sgt. Arthur E. Schultz of Chicago Illinois and S/Sgt. Richard H. Wilson of Liverpool West Virginia.

All of the crew of 43-15654 was also assigned to the 97th Troop Carrier Squadron.

The C-47 and CG-4 made up a chalk assigned to a serial. A serial was a grouping of aircraft in a formation with the same mission objective and time table. Loading, starting, taxiing, take-off and glider release times were grouped by serial. 43-15654 and 42-46332 made up Chalk 47. It would be the 47th aircraft in Serial A-17 which was tasked with carrying part of the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion into Germany on 24 March. The term “chalk” came from the method of marking the aircraft’s order number in the serial on the fuselage. A piece of industrial chalk was used to write a large number on the sides of the aircraft fuselage and the nose so that the crew and occupants could be assured they were in the right aircraft. It was easier than remembering the aircraft’s serial number and trying to find it on the airfield during the hectic last minute early morning rush to board.

Further research on the glider uncovered that it was involved in a landing accident on South Plains Army Air Field, Lubbock, Texas on 19 June 1943. The pilot at the controls was Louis A. Herbert.

540 The names of Schultz and Wilson were crossed out and the additions of O’Connell and Heggerty are written in pencil indicating a last-minute change to the typed details of the manifests.
541 Operation Varsity. 68
during WW2. 42-46332 most likely conducted many more training flights from its field in Texas before being shipped to Orleans, France for its flight in support of Operation VARSITY. After landing in the fields of Landing Zone N, it was most likely disassembled and transported to another staging area in Europe. Since VARSITY was the last mass-glider operation of the war, most gliders were scrapped or sent back to America. Some were kept in the ETO and used to allow glider troopers to earn their continuing glider pay by making the required numbers of glider flights each ninety days. This practice was also soon discontinued.

C-47 43-15654, made several flights during WW2 in the European Theater of Operations. After the war, it was purchased by a civil organization and received the Federal Aviation Administration registration number NC66006. At some later time, it was transferred to another private individual or company and was flagged N16774. The aircraft was later sold to the Ecuadorian Air Force where it was registered as aircraft number FAE-20120. It is now preserved at Guyaquil Airport in Ecuador.

The enclosed document shows the original troop manifest for the glider and aircraft tow combination labeled Chalk 47, Serial A-17. These documents were given to the chalk commander for his use in pre mission briefings and to verify the presence of all passengers. Thereafter the document was to be destroyed. It was not to be carried into combat. Perhaps Sgt. Petrell saved his copy in his tent at Orleans, or stuffed it in his field jacket pocket and forgot to destroy it. Nonetheless, this valuable document was preserved to verify the roster of 139th troopers who rode together into combat.

543 [Accessed 16 Oct 10]
544 [Accessed 16 Oct 10]
The weather at Orleans, France on the morning of 24 March was bright and clear with a ten-mile per hour wind blowing across the field. Serial A-17 started its take-off roll at 0848. The serial was lead by Lt Col. Johnson, the commander of the 98th Troop Carrier Squadron. Assisting him as co-pilot was Capt. Roberson.  

Seventeen miles from the target, the formation descended to 700 feet above ground level for the glider release. At 1202 Serial A-17’s lead ship released the first glider. The remaining tow aircraft in the serial followed in quick succession. Each glider pilot maneuvered the GC-4A into a left-hand 270 degree turn to the landing zone, while the tow planes made a 180 degree right hand turn away from the landing zone area. The conjoining of 43-15654 and 42-46332 was over. One would make a controlled crash landing in the fields north of Wesel amidst a hail of German Flak and small-arms fire, the other would continue to weather the Flak and return to Orleans, France, having successfully completed its mission. By all accounts, the glider landed undamaged, disgorged its occupants and lay silent in the field. There is no account of the number of shell holes or other damage suffered by the Dakota.

Over thirteen years of research have been devoted toward the full identification of the occupants of Glider 47, the crew and the crew of the tow plane. The author has pored through numerous photographs, unit rosters, group photos and with the help of

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545 DZ Europe, 98-99

546 DZ Europe, 101.
members of the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion the images of these soldiers and airmen has emerged. The collages that accompany this vignette display the available photographs of most of the occupants of glider 42-46332 by their position on the manifest. Numbers 1 and 2 are reserved for the pilot and copilot respectively and 3-14 for the engineers. Four names have yet to be connected with their pictures; in time that may be possible. Depicted above are the photographs obtained from the author’s collection, as well as other sources such as unit year books.

The photos of the crew of Dakota 43-15654 are not complete. Images, although not very detailed,
of the pilot, Maj. Howe and the navigator, First Lt. Perry were obtained from the unit’s post-war yearbook. Also depicted are the Crew Chief Schultz and Radio Operator Wilson, who were scrubbed from the mission before launch and replaced with O’Connell and Heggerty, whose photographs could not be found.

These were the men who crewed the C-47 and rode in the CG-4 glider with the chalk number 47 on its side. But what was it like on board? The thoughts and actions of those who rode in the gliders ran the gamut from apprehension and silence to total fear and gut wrenching sickness. An Associated Press reporter, who rode in one of the gliders of the 17th Airborne Division on 24 Mar 45 recorded his experiences:

“You prayed from the moment the silken rope stretched taut from the tail of the two-engine C-47 up ahead and the flimsy fabric craft started breaking down the runway. And while you were praying you heard tires singing over the concrete, reminding you that there was no engine in this contraption - that it was just a big crate with wings.

You felt something akin to horror as you read the label on a case lashed by heavy rope to the floor - “five antitank mines – five.” And you wondered why they had to go in this glider with a bunch of medics, a radio operator, a lineman a photographer and a war correspondent. You wondered just how much of a bump it would take to set them off as the glider rocked and jerked and swayed in the slipstream of the powerful ship ahead.

You thought of landing and you remembered the pictures of gliders in Normandy and Holland, all smashed and splintered – and you prayed some more.

You looked off to the left and watched the right wingtip of a sister glider, tied to the same C-47, swinging perilously close. What would it be like, you wondered, if the two locked wings and you plummeted to the green fields below? Why don’t they give you parachutes in gliders? Or would it do any good?

You gritted your teeth and turned your head away as the man across the aisle vomited in his helmet, partly from the pitching of the glider and partly from the nausea induced by fear, which he admitted unashamed.

The wings of your glider vibrated violently – almost shook you out of your seat, and you knew something was wrong when the pilot began maneuvering desperately to break up a “tail flutter,” a malady that shakes these things to pieces in a matter of seconds. And you closed your eyes and clenched your teeth and prayed.

Then without an instant’s warning, your seat dropped from under you. Your
helmet flew off and you were on your knees on the floor. That’s just the way a glider rides. The man next to you wasn’t wearing a helmet and blood is streaming down his ashen face. He’s a casualty even before we’ve been landed – his head bashed against the metal framework.

For three agonizing hours it went on this way. You’d watch the Seine and Maas Rivers slide past and new the next big stream would be the Rhine. Before you were ready, it shown below, snaking broadly across the shell pocked plain.

Things happened fast – too fast. Above the sustained roar of wind ripping past cloth-covered ribs of the glider, you began to hear crack! Pop! Snap!

It wouldn’t last long said the sergeant. And in the same breath, “If anything happens to me, will you take these papers out of my pocket and destroy them? They’re top secret.” He was the intelligence man...Bursts of rifle fire were accompanied now by the popping of machine guns and the guttural whoomph of 88-mm flak shells. You unconsciously lift off your seat and brace as if to meet hot metal singing through the smoke. You find yourself dodging and weaving from something you can’t even see.

Then the pilot’s hand goes up and forward. “Going down!” he shouts and the nose pitches forward steeply. The speed slackens and the roar of the wind dies down and the battle noises suddenly are magnified into a terrifying din.

“Now,” says the sergeant, “is when you pray.” The right wing tilts sharply as the shadow of another glider flits past. It almost hit us.

The smoke is thick and acrid – almost like you were inside a burning house. You can see half a dozen buildings aflame on the ground. Dozens of gliders are parked at crazy angles on every field. Every one with a weapon has it cocked and across his lap.

Then before you know it the ground is racing underneath. You are in a pasture, crashing through a fence, bounding across a gulley, clipping a tree with a wingtip. You’ve made it – landed and nobody hurt.”

Operation VARSITY

The brunt of clearing and defending LZ N was borne by the 139th AEB. Although most of the gliders landed on LZ N as planned, there was wide dispersion. After landing, each company was to travel along pre-designated routes to their assigned defensive positions. As soon as their gliders hit the German soil, the three combat companies and Service Company were engaged by the enemy strongholds that were entrenched in and around the farmhouses and hamlets. Assembly of engineers occurred by small groups of one or two squads.

“It doesn’t last long said the sergeant. And in the same breath, “If anything happens to me, will you take these papers out of my pocket and destroy them? They’re top secret.” He was the intelligence man...Bursts of rifle fire were accompanied now by the popping of machine guns and the guttural whoomph of 88-mm flak shells. You unconsciously lift off your seat and brace as if to meet hot metal singing through the smoke. You find yourself dodging and weaving from something you can’t even see.

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Able Company’s experiences on the LZ were typical of those of the other companies. PVT William F. Murphy was sitting next to T/5 Adrian L. Lynn on one of the A-17 serial gliders that was slated for landing in the Eastern side of the LZ. The force of the landing propelled Murphy from his seat against the

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547 Associated Press, Landing in Glider in Germany is Grim, Terrifying Exploit. The Washington Post, 1945, newspaper clipping from author’s collection.
548 Die Luftlandungen, 297.
549 Die Luftlandungen, 297-298.
550 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 28.
551 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 29.
Figure 11.5 View looking to the west at the southwest edge of LZ N. Troopers stand by for further action. Note the dead paratrooper still hanging from his harness to the rear just below the horizontal stabilizer of the glider.

back of the co-pilots seat. Aside from a cut chin, he and his fellow troopers were unharmed. While the others piled hurriedly through the glider’s access doors, he and Lynn dove between the tube frames of the glider’s fuselage, through the canvas and onto the “safety” of the ground.552

Lynn and Murphy low-crawled to a nearby road embankment, where a fellow trooper was setting up his M1919A4, air cooled, .30 caliber machine gun. The trooper was PVT Joe Scalco. Scalco had his machine gun set up, but lacked any belted ammo for the gun. Apparently Scalco’s Assistant Gunner, a recent replacement to the 139th, had forgotten the ammo in the glider amidst the confusion and excitement of the crash landing.553 The fighting in Belgium and Luxembourg during the Battle of the Bulge had taken a significant toll on the ranks of the 17th and they relied heavily on replacements to fill the gaps. Despite the level of training they received in the U.S., they still lacked many of the essential skills and experience necessary to make them immediately combat effective in some cases.

Once the situation in the DZ stabilized somewhat, Murphy, Lynn, Scalco and the recruit headed for their assigned positions along their pre-designated routes which they had studied intently in the few days preceding the invasion. Along the way, they made contact with some British Paratroopers from the 6th Division. Murphy reports,

"It was about 2 or 3pm and they were boiling water...Joe asked them what they were doing and they told him it was TEA TIME. (Murphy’s emphasis).” 554

Baker Company gliders landed in LZ 2 on the east side of LZ N and were in immediate contact with the enemy. Most gliders landed close together, which aided rapid assembly of the platoons. While clearing their area, they encountered heavy fire coming from the nearby houses and barns. Using fire and maneuver, they were able to, "...completely neutralize" these positions.555

The Headquarters and Service Platoon and 1st Platoon of Company B engaged a battery of Wehrmacht 105mm guns, probably from the 184. Artillerie Regiment. The battery was set up in a defensive firing position in and around a farmhouse. The successful assault netted twenty enemy killed and ninety-five prisoners. They captured the entire battery of equipment including four guns, loads of ammunition, three half tracks, three 1 1/2-ton trucks, one sedan, one land car, two VVs and two motorcycles.556

First Platoon of Charlie Company was among the first to land in LZ N. They quickly assembled and knocked out a Flak gun that was harassing other gliders and tow planes. The 1st platoon leader, Lieutenant Bancroft gathered a bazooka team and several riflemen to silence the gun.

552 Murphy, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, n.p. 553 Murphy, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, n.p. 554 Murphy, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, n.p. 555 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 28. 556 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 28.
The group rushed from cover to cover using fire and maneuver to get into a decent firing position from which to employ the M-9A1 bazooka. With quick and accurate fire, Lt. Bancroft’s team silenced the gun and removed the threat from their assigned sector.  

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The platoon regrouped and moved out along the designated route to their objective area on the West side of the LZ. Along the way, they repeated their feat of fire and maneuver to engage subsequent strongholds that were used as defensive positions on the LZ. 558

Meanwhile, the 3rd Platoon of Charlie Company assembled quickly and began attacking the various strongholds in their sector. They immediately attacked two houses and killed, wounded or captured several troops, most likely elements of the 84. Infanterie Division. 559 When the platoon attacked a third farm house, PFC Charles Shinn was wounded, but was able to crawl back to a position of comparative safety. The Platoon Leader, Lt. Earl A. Goodman learned that PFC Howard V. Dowlan had also been seriously injured in the same attack and was still within the enemies’ sights. Lt. Goodman, who had a few days earlier received a battlefield commission for his actions in Belgium, solicited two volunteers to assist him in an effort to retrieve PFC Dowlan. Accompanying Goodman were PFC Edward R. Knox and PFC Louis Zerby. 560

The rescue effort was extremely dangerous and well within the sight and range of the enemies’ automatic weapons’ fire. The men must have realized their chance for success was very slim, yet for the benefit of their brother, they were willing to risk their lives. In the ensuing rescue attempt Goodman and Knox were mortally wounded and Zerby was seriously wounded but returned. PFC Dowlan did not survive the ordeal. 561 All three would receive the Silver Star for gallantry in action, along with the Purple Heart. The action of Goodman and his men resulted in the capture of thirty of the enemy. 562 Trooper Grooten also confirmed the rescue attempt made by Lt. Goodman, PFC Knox and PFC Zerby and indicated the farm-house they assaulted was heavily fortified. 563

Later, during a respite in the action, Lt. Col. Stanley Johnson was able to attend to the sad task of writing letters of condolence to the next of kin of all of the 139th troopers who were killed in battle. Mr. and Mrs. Goodman would receive a similar letter. His very personal letter glowed with positive comments about their son’s character, his leadership and the gallant actions that led to his death. Days later, the Division Commander Lt. Gen. William Miley delivered similar letters. For the hundreds of 17th troopers who died in Germany, this was no small task. Along with the letter, Lt. Col. Johnson included a copy of Lt. Goodman’s Silver Star Citation which reads:

“For gallantry in action against the enemy near Wesel, Germany on 24 Mar 45. After landing behind enemy lines during the airborne crossing of the Rhein River, Second

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558 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 24.
559 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 24.
560 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 24.
561 Thunder From Heaven, 119, 132, 179.
562 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 24.
Lieutenant Goodman and his men came under heavy enemy fire. One of his men was laying wounded very near an enemy position. With utter disregard for his own safety Second Lieutenant Goodman attempted to rescue the man, but enemy fire proved too intense to overcome.  

Within thirty minutes of landing, Charlie Company had assembled nearly all of its forces, had established intra platoon communications with BC-611 Handi-Talki and the SRC-300 Walki-Talki radios, and they had cleared most of their assigned company areas. They selected one of the positions vacated by the enemy to set up the company command post. The location was identified earlier during the pre-mission planning as a suitable location and was picked after studying the aerial photos provided by the staff.

Charlie Company was responsible for the left flank of the engineer battalion. Their position was on the west end of the DZ and butted up against the railroad tracks that ran from Wesel in the south to Enmerich in the north. It also meshed up with part of the forest known as Diersforterwald, where the 507th would heavily and successfully engage the enemy to the west. There would most likely be a constant trickle of enemy forces attempting to retreat eastward, through the 139th positions to rejoin the depleted ranks of the 84. Infanterie Division. The Wesel/Enmerich railroad tracks that ran from south-southeast to the north-northwest defined the western limit of the defensive position and served as the holding line for any potential retreat of the 139th in the event of an overwhelming armored attack. If needed, the 139th would make its final defensive stand on the tracks and use the limited retrograde operation to buy time and coordinate indirect supporting fires to impede the enemies’ attack.

Members of the battalion’s medical detachment were not immune to enemy fire. The Red Cross armbands and markings on their helmets did little to shield them from flying metal. One glider carrying a load of troopers from the battalion’s medical element landed right next to a house fortified with approximately forty German grenadiers. The glider was struck numerous times with rifle and machine gun fire and received a direct hit from a mortar. The glider was struck numerous times with rifle and machine gun fire and received a direct hit from a mortar. The driver was killed and the mortar ignited a fire that burned the driver, the jeep and all of the medical supplies. The officer and NCO escaped with their lives and presumably only those medical supplies that they carried on their
Into Battle Again

Figure 11.8 One of the nine engineers killed on 24 Mar 45 was PFC Norbert G. Reed, (right). This photo was taken while at “tent city” near Chalons prior to VARSITY.

Despite this tragic setback, the two men were able to move to a more safe location, and set up a hasty treatment station.\(^{568}\) It must be pointed out that none of the medical gliders received any special Geneva Convention markings and it was therefore difficult for the German defenders to know that the occupants of these gliders were medics.\(^{569}\)

The Battalion Medical Officer, Captain Horace T. Lavely Jr. and Staff Sergeant, Paul E. Totten gave first aid to many of the wounded troopers despite the heavy small arms and mortar fire on the DZ. In one instance, Totten ran across open terrain to aid a wounded man and was unmercifully fired on by a sharpshooter. The wounded soldier was hit two more times and Totten was wounded as well. For his actions he was awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart.\(^{570}\) Totten’s actions undoubtedly saved the soldier’s life. He was later promoted to 2nd Lieutenant.

Medics from the second glider set up a temporary aid station within fifty yards of where their glider came to a halt and immediately treated the wounded. As the situation stabilized, they moved their aid station to a nearby house. Some of the medics were dispatched to the Division Clearing Station and worked there. Landing Zone N was also shared with the 224th Airborne Medical Company. Their medical aid station was set up in the middle of 139th’s defensive areas. The 224th medics reported that they “felt safer in the midst of the engineer area.”\(^{571}\)

\(^{568}\) History 139th Airborne Engineers, 26-7.

\(^{569}\) IX Troop Carrier Command, IX Troop Carrier Command Activities: Final Phase European War, 48.

\(^{570}\) General Order Number 32 (Headquarters, 17th Airborne Division, 1945), 3.

\(^{571}\) History 139th Airborne Engineers, 27.
William H. Alford, a medic with the 139th, although wounded by shell fire, continued his duties rendering aid to the many wounded glidermen. He did so without complaint and worked well into the night. It was not until the casualties were treated that he reported to the medical clearing station for treatment for his wounds.  

PFC Ralph Grooten and his squad landed in their glider on LZ N and were immediately engaged by German gunners. They were pinned down by heavy MG fire. They lay as close to the ground as possible to keep from getting hit. When another glider came crashing in, it too was engaged by the same team. This diversionary opportunity allowed Grooten and the rest of the squad to make a full sprint for the safety of a ditch. Grooten dove into the water filled ditch. The cold March nights kept the water near freezing. Despite the inconvenience of the frigid water Grooten thought, “It felt good to find safety while we planned our next move.”

Grooten must have landed near the western edge of the DZ, as assigned, as the ditch was near the tracks described above. Grooten’s squad leader decided that his team should engage a nearby AA gun. They assaulted it with grenades and rifle fire. Three men, armed with rifles and grenades silenced the gun. The 184. Artillerie Regiment had several depleted batteries of 150mm howitzers stationed on the eastern edge of Diersfort Forest near the railroad tracks. There was also a battery of Flak guns slightly south and west of the tracks.

Several loads of Charlie Company’s gliders ended up landing nearly 700 yards north of the LZ in the British sector. These two squads established

\[ \text{Figure 11.9} \] Approximate locations of the defensive positions taken up by individual companies of the 139th AEB at the end of 24 March 1945 on Landing Zone N.

572 General Order Number 33 (Headquarters, 17th Airborne Division, 1945), 3.

573 Ralph Grooten, Untitled Editorial. Cape Coral Daily Breeze.

574 17th Airborne Division Historical Report of Operation VARSITY, 66, 68.
contact with elements of the British 6th Airborne Division in LZ U. This unexpected oversight allowed the 17th and 6th divisions to coordinate inter-unit contact along the boundaries and reduced the potential for fratricide.575

Meanwhile in Able Company, the men were busy clearing their assigned objectives on the LZ. Pvt. Thornton E. Heise ran from his glider soon after landing and a shot from the enemy struck the stock of his rifle and knocked it from his hands. Not dismayed by the setback, he continued to rush toward the enemy. The first German he encountered was armed with a pistol and Heise struck him with full force, knocking him and the pistol to the ground. Heise quickly snatched it up and aimed it at the other four Germans who, in a state of shock, surrendered.576

Not all of the gliders hit near the LZ. One squad of nine men came down nearly three miles off course in close proximity to a German 88mm Flak or artillery battery. The men immediately dove for cover. One man was killed outright and two others were seriously wounded. The squad leader sent two more troopers on a short patrol to assess the situation and fix their position, but they never returned. This lost squad continued to fight a small engagement with the Germans from the battery that lasted for three hours.

575 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 28.
576 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 29.
The squad moved from position to position firing continuously and trying to conserve ammunition. The Germans lost twenty men in the engagement and had many more casualties. Dejected, they finally surrendered. The engineer squad had tied up an entire German “88” battery for several hours and they killed, wounded or captured eighty Germans. In a captured Kubelwagen they loaded their wounded brothers and marched the German prisoners off to LZ N. In this battle, the engineers suffered five casualties.\(^{577}\)

By mid-day, the 139\(^{th}\) had killed at least twenty of the enemy, captured ninety-five prisoners and captured an entire 105mm howitzer battery and all of its equipment. The 139\(^{th}\) CP was set up in the building the commander had designated from pre-D-day aerial photo studies by 1630 hours. By 1730, each of the companies had accomplished their subordinate missions as assigned. The 139\(^{th}\) was able to occupy all of their assigned objectives by nightfall of the 24\(^{th}\).\(^{578}\) With that, they issued their daily situation reports. Wire parties ran communication wire from the battalion to each of the companies and to the 513\(^{th}\) PIR CP, which was nearby.\(^{579}\) As a back-up, radio contact was confirmed. For security reasons, wire would be the primary method of communications.

**Night Action**

During the night and into the early morning hours of 25 March, there were numerous attempts by the Germans to infiltrate through the 139\(^{th}\) lines and there were a few deliberate counterattacks. At 2300, the Command Post of Baker Company reported to the Battalion CP that there was approximately a platoon of enemy moving towards the left of the battalion’s position. The early alert was timely. The attack began

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\(^{577}\) History 139\(^{th}\) Airborne Engineers, 30. Kubelwagen is a less rugged equivalent of the American Jeep.

\(^{578}\) Die Luftlandungen, 298.

\(^{579}\) History 139\(^{th}\) Airborne Engineers, 28.
Into Battle Again

at 2315 and was immediately confronted with fire from the company positions. Despite numerous enemy casualties they,

"...continued advancing in fanatical fashion until several white phosphorous (WP) grenades fell in their midst." 580

The WP grenades broke the enemies’ will and the assault abated with the survivors in retreat. The enemy lost fifteen killed, twenty-three wounded and thirty captured, with no losses to B Company. 581 Judging from the casualties and evidence of others retreating from the attack, total enemy was most likely around 100 troops. This was the strongest counter attack of the evening.

Sgt. Nick Valerio and his buddy were in their defensive position on the perimeter when Valerio heard noises approaching. His call to, "Halt!" was answered with a rifle shot and he responded by emptying his rifle from the safety of his fighting position. His return fire convinced four Germans to surrender. Valerio was not convinced these were the only infiltrators, so he fired two more shots over their heads, whereupon sixteen more Germans came forward with their hands over their heads. His bag for the evening was twenty prisoners for the enemy holding area. 582

PFC Ralph Grooten reported that prior to nightfall each trooper was assigned a position and was required to dig in. The positions corresponded to the perimeter of C Company and faced the likely enemy avenues of approach. Grooten manned the .50 caliber M-2 Heavy Machine Gun along with,

"...a Mexican-American. I can only recall his nickname of Poncho and a lad from New York called the Duke." 583

The three dug their MG pit along the unit’s perimeter. It provided an over watch on a prominent road intersection. The .50 cal was capable of halting any infiltration attempts by vehicle, provided their armor was no thicker than that of a half track. Anything else would require artillery or bazooka fire. It is quite possible that the 139th had available the new 57mm recoilless rifle. The effectiveness of that weapon would have sufficed against medium tanks. Nonetheless, the men’s orders were to remain in their position, "...no matter what happened." 584 Unnoticed by Grooten and his MG crew, PVT Raymond T.

Cleeland was assigned to a listening post (LP) in front of their position. He was armed with an M1 Garand semi-automatic rifle and two grenades. He had no specific instruction detailing his actions in the event of an attack. 585

Around 2400 hours, the Germans attempted to infiltrate the C Company lines in front of Grooten and Cleeland’s position. Upon hearing the enemy Grooten and his crew opened fire with the .50cal. Cleeland heaved his two grenades and returned fire.

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580 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 29.
581 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 29.
582 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 27-28.
583 Ralph Grooten, Untitled Editorial. Cape Coral Daily Breeze. Duke was the nickname for Private Lowell W. Dufrene but the author was unable to identify Poncho.
584 Ralph Grooten, Untitled Editorial. Cape Coral Daily Breeze 1995?
585 Ralph Grooten, Untitled Editorial. Cape Coral Daily Breeze.
Both groups did so from the comparative safety of their dug-in positions while the Germans were in the open on relatively flat terrain. For a few hectic minutes the groups exchanged fire with the Germans until a battery of guns from the 17th DIVARTY delivered a deadly salvo of WP rounds on the enemy lighting up the night sky. Grooten reported that, “The Germans grabbed their guns and fled across the field in the direction from which they came.” The return fire on Grooten’s position from the enemy was quite intense. When daylight broke he found that one of the wooden handles on the back of the MG had received a direct hit. He was happy it took the bullet for him.586

Throughout the night several German defenders attempted to infiltrate A Company’s position in the South of LZ N, presumably in an effort to return to their units who had retreated east across the Issel Canal. Most were captured by 2400 hours. Able Company reported an additional thirty prisoners had been taken.587

At 2400 hours Lt. Col. Johnson submitted the battalion situation report for D-day. For their efforts, the 139th had landed sixty-eight gliders, recovered most of their men and materiel, and accounted for sixty-three enemy soldiers killed, twenty-three wounded and 315 captured along with the twelve vehicles mentioned earlier.

For their efforts, the cost was seven troopers killed in action, fourteen seriously wounded, fifteen

586 Ralph Grooten, Untitled Editorial. Cape Coral Daily Breeze.

587 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 28.
slightly wounded and three missing in action. The three missing were PFC Louis N. Karich, S/Sgt Wayne Leichliter, and PFC Robert H. Strudwick.

588 History 139th Airborne Engineers, 28.
Pressing the Attack

The XVIII Airborne Corps assumed control of the British 1st Commando Brigade on 25 March at 0930. The Brigade was attached to the 17th. The 17th launched an attack with the 194th and 507th at 1500 hours to seize Phase Line (PL) LONDON. Encountering only light resistance, the 194th reached PL LONDON by 1800. The 507th, which was on the right or south flank of the advance, encountered stiffer resistance from elements to the rear and near Wesel. They continued a fighting advance, reaching PL LONDON just before midnight.

Intelligence assessments of the German capabilities were ongoing tasks for the G-2 section. It was important to identify specific units and their capabilities and then to quickly pass that information on to the front line combat units. As the 17th moved forward towards the PL PARIS, the Germans were attempting to consolidate a defensive line from Brunnen to Bravenack. It wasn’t a well-established defensive line, rather a series of small unit defensive positions dug in and supported by the remnants of artillery units. These defensive positions were manned by the remnants of the 84. Infanterie Division and members of the 180. Infanterie Division that had been defending the line from Wesel to the south. The defensive line was characterized by hastily dug positions in an effort to mount a delaying action. As the reports filtered forward, the G-2 was able to identify elements of the following organizations:

- 180. Infanterie Division
- 1221. Grenadier Regiment
- 1223. Grenadier Regiment
- Kampfgruppe Karst
- Kampfgruppe Becker
- Kampfgruppe Norckus
- Kampfgruppe Kobelinsky
- Kampfgruppe Ivers

Figure 12.1 G-2 Message Log of radio transmission in which German unit identification of prisoners are annotated.

- 286. Abteilung
- 883. Flak Abteilung
- 824. Flak Abteilung
- 581. Flak Abteilung
- 374. Panzer Artillerie Abteilung
- 276. Infanterie Abteilung

590 XVIII Airborne Headquarters, Operation VARSITY, 7.
With the restless night of counterattacks behind them, the 139th received word of new missions. The Company Commanders reported to the combat teams that they were directly supporting to receive their engineering missions for the day. Lt. Col. Johnson directed available engineers from A and C Companies to scour the LZ for uncollected or discarded equipment and para-bundles from the gliders. Although additional days of air dropped resupply were planned, these were cancelled due to the rapidity in which the Rhein River bridges were built. Cross-river resupply by vehicle negated the need of so many aircraft for resupply.\textsuperscript{592}

One of Able Company’s squads, under the direction of Sgt. Frank Sutto Jr., repaired a road near the Division CP. Lt. Evans led a reconnaissance patrol to the Issel Canal to ascertain the condition of the bridges. At one location they removed the wires which connected the charges placed under a concrete arched bridge which the Germans had prepared for demolition. Thankfully, the charges were not detonated and they had an intact bridge from which to continue the advance.\textsuperscript{593}

The Battle of the NEW YORK to PARIS Line

Allied forces continued to cross the Rhein River to reinforce the eastward advance. On 26 March, orders were issued to continue the advance toward PL NEW YORK. The 17th was arrayed in the same manner as the previous day’s attack. The morning brought another swift advance encountering


\textsuperscript{593} History of the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion, 20.
only light resistance. The division reported only two counter attacks of company strength.\textsuperscript{594}

On the same day, the Allies opened a Class 40 bridge ahead of schedule, and two more Class 40 bridges at Wesel. These allowed tanks to traverse the Rhine and join the fight. That evening, the British 6th Guards Armored Brigade was attached to the XVIII Corps with orders to support the advance. Their mission was to attack and seize the line from Dorsten to Rhades, (4740 – 4450). The 513th PIR was attached to the 6th Guards Armored Brigade for the attack. Paratroopers rode on board the British Churchill tanks as they moved to the front. The remainder of the division was assigned the mission of seizing the next sector up to PL PARIS.\textsuperscript{595}

During the evening of 26/27 March, the division sent patrols forward of their positions to reconnoiter PL PARIS. The patrols found limited resistance between the division and the PL. The attack schedule was moved up and by morning the division had reached their objectives.

By the 27th, the 139th CP, Able Company and Baker moved to the hamlet of Sorgflie at 252432 and Charlie moved to 201471 still near the old LZ. The engineers spent the greater portion of the day moving to their new locations. By 1430 the Battalion (-) was in place. Baker sent an element to 221424, just north of Wesel, to clear an abatis. When they arrived British troops were already engaged in the task, so the engineers lent a hand. By 1500 the path was clear.

Each of the companies supported their Combat Teams by performing route reconnaissance and by looking for suitable WDps. Baker Company received advance notice to conduct mine sweeping on 27 March, as the 507th ran into some mines placed at 351430 and the 194th encountered hastily constructed booby traps in the woods at 325475. These were made of small explosive charges with attached trip wires.\textsuperscript{596}

On a lighter note, the lucky Sgt. Bernard Kubiak went to Paris to participate in a press inter-

\textsuperscript{594} XVIII Airborne Headquarters, Operation VARSITY, 7.
\textsuperscript{595} XVIII Airborne Headquarters, Operation VARSITY, 7.
\textsuperscript{596} G-2 Periodic Report, 27 March 1945, 2.
view on Airborne Operations. The Battalion suffered no casualties or injuries for the day.597

On 27 March, two additional units were identified in the 17th sector; elements of the 752. Pionier Abteilung and parts of the 56. Flak Regiment. The various Flak units were being pressed into a ground defense role with soldiers from general headquarters units being funneled in as well. The main resistance to the 17th Division’s forward advance was fielded by the named combat teams and elements of Kampfgruppe Karst.

Work with the Combat Teams provided a more dynamic environment. The Teams were moving forward in rapid fashion. The engineers worked hard to keep up with the reconnaissance, mine clearing, mobility missions and the incessant movement of unit locations. B Company sent an officer and 6 engineers

597 History of the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion, 20
to help the division with burial details. It had been three days since the devastation following the landings, and the longer this morbid task was delayed, the worse the situation near Wesel would be. It was a thankless duty, but a necessary one, not only to maintain field sanitation through the removal and burial of so many enemy bodies and animals, but also to provide temporary burial of fallen comrades. The entry in the daily unit journal for 27 March read:

“Send 1 officer + 6 E. Men + 2 ½ T. truck to remove dead from certain area – AT ONCE.”

Lt. McNamee and 6 engineers worked in front of the 513th to sweep and clear mines. Lt Floyd and ten engineers rode on British tanks with the 507th

PIR. Lt. Evans reported to the Corps supply point and signed out a quantity of maps for use by the division.

The most welcome addition was the assignment of thirty-six 2 ½ ton trucks to assist the rapid forward movement of the engineers. On this day, the battalion’s vehicle convoy, which left from France and crossed the Rhein River, arrived with their remaining engineer equipment, the air compressor to operate their pneumatic tools, the “mounted bulldozers” and the engineers’ personal gear. More importantly, the kitchen arrived!

The Battle of Dorsten

The division had moved so rapidly forward that Gen. Miley ordered them to ignore PL PARIS


599 History of the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion, 20
and proceed to, “advance aggressively” along an axis that ran from Dorsten to Lembeck (4741 – 4951). The units’ instructions were to:

“push the attack relentlessly day and night in order to obtain maximum exploitation with minimum delay.”

The 6th Guards arrived a bit late, being delayed at the Rhein crossing due to the overwhelming numbers of vehicles crossing the bridges. They joined with the 513th and by 1500 pressed their attack. During the evening, they executed a passage of lines with the forward elements of the 17th. By 0600 the following day, the combined force reached Dorsten. The continued rapid advance, aided by the speed and protection of the British tanks yielded new orders to advance. At midday, their new orders were to continue on toward Munster (9273). Near Lipprams-

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600 XVIII Airborne Headquarters, Operation VARSITY, 8.
The unit encountered resistance from several self-propelled guns. When night fell, the guns were bypassed.601

On 28 March, Lt. Col. Johnson had set up the CP with the Intelligence and Operations Sections near the Division at 312417. He sent Maj. James Mason with the rest of the Headquarters forward to XVIII Airborne Headquarters, Operation VARSITY, 8.

Sgt. John Petrell took his squad to clear a road block near the town of Schermbeck. Lt. John McNamee continued his work with the 513th PIR performing reconnaissance and mine clearing tasks. They found a string of mines at 359429. The other two line companies performed road reconnaissance and mine clearing duties within their sector. The Battalion established a second WDp near Maas at 404458. Company A located and removed a road-

601 XVIII Airborne Headquarters, Operation VARSITY, 8.
“cruised throughout the area.” Five of them were neutralized, but three continued firing harassing artillery missions into the 17th sector during the night. Disconcerting to the 507th PIR and the 194th GIR was the use of 20mm guns in anti personnel roles. The retreating Flak units were hastily employed to fill gaps in the defensive lines rather than against Allied aircraft. 603

By the 29th, the Battalion had moved over twenty kilometers east of the Lippe Canal. They were deep into Germany, aiding the Division’s mission of exploitation and pursuit. Company A was attached to the 194th GIR. Company C was attached to the 507th PIR and B Company was held in a general support role applying engineer squads where needed across the entire division front. Both of the line companies constructed and reinforced a bridge within their sector to allow tanks to cross the canal. The supporting companies moved their CP forward within their sector. Able Company moved to Dulmen and Charlie moved to Haltern along with Baker Company, the H&S company and the Battalion CP. Later in the day, Baker Company was directed to clear the MSR from Schernbeck towards Haltern. Lt. Floyd found a German ammunition supply dump and a machine shop which had been booby-trapped with two 26-day time delay devices. The devices had been placed by the retreating units and were set to detonate that day at 1800 hours. The timely discovery of the two large charges no doubt averted many casualties.

602 History of the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion, 20.

603 G-2 Periodic Report, 28 March 1945, 1.
Figure 12.6 Newly constructed pontoon bridge across the Rhein River at Wesel.

Figure 12.7 Primary engineer mission number 1!

Never forgetting their stand-by role as infantrymen, Company A entered Dülmen with the 194th on the line. Perhaps as an unforeseen reward, or simply fate, the men discovered a distillery.

Ralph Grooten, who volunteered as a truck driver for C Company made the trip from France in a glider, then joined his 2½-ton truck. Another engineer drove it in the Division’s convoy overland, across the newly constructed pontoon bridge over the Rhein River and to the unit’s laager. He clearly remembers that day.

“We came upon one town and the Engineers found a wine cellar filled with all kinds of booze. We loaded the back end with case after case of good schnaps, cognac and champagne. That night when we holed up in some village all the engineers got smashed. The night every one got smashed, one engineer was hanging his head out a second story window throwing up. Since we were not supposed to show lights for fear of getting shelled by the Krauts, every one was supposed to keep the houses dark. Well this chap could care less he just wanted to chuck up what ever he had drank too much. He stuck his head out the window with a light bulb showing in the room and one of the engineers on guard started shooting at the bulb thru the open window. He did not hit the light and thankfully did not hit the GI either, you see the guard was too drunk to take good aim. Next morning the CO found out about all this and ordered me to get rid of the good stuff.”

As always, Lt. Col. Johnson reported the morale of the Battalion for 29 March as: “Excellent.”

The deterioration of the German front line became more apparent. Approximately 70% of the PWs were deserters. Morale was extremely low among them. Many were amazed at the slow advance of the 17th stating, “There is nothing behind us; why didn’t you break through?” They commented that communication between units was nonexistent, there were no links above the platoon level there was tremendous confusion in the ranks and some troops were sent into the lines with no ammunition for their Danish bolt-action rifles.

604 Ralph Grooten to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 2.
605 History of the 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion, 20-21.
The Battle of Munster

The 507th PIR continued to advance. By 2100 they had seized Wulfen and were ordered to board the division’s trucks for transportation to meet the British 6th Guards at Haltern. Upon arrival, the 507th secured Haltern and sent out security patrols to the east.607

On the 29th, the British tanks with their American paratroopers pushed through Haltern and on to Dulmen, which they captured at 1000 hours. The advance came to a halt due to the massive amounts of rubble in the streets and due to the marshy ground at the city’s outskirts. The 194th GIR was ordered to move to Dulmen via motor convoy, while the remainder of the division laagered at Haltern.608

Grooten recalled the events near Munster:

“I carried members of the 3rd squad, third platoon of C Company. As I recall the first thing we hit on the road to Munster was some minefields that had been cleared and a handmade roadblock under an underpass. This consisted of two large spools standing maybe ten feet tall similar to the ones you see along the road when they install new wires for a high tension line. I’d say they were six or eight feet wide and were filled with large stones. We usually did not use demolitions to blow these things up, it just took a lot of hand work to pry the wood off and load the stones in the trucks, to be hauled out of the way. It was slow going, but if we blew them up the stone would still be...

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607 XVIII Airborne Headquarters, Operation VARSITY, 8.  
608 XVIII Airborne Headquarters, Operation VARSITY, 9.
there only scattered all over hell. We removed several of these in the coming weeks...”

The unit’s Clark Airborne Bulldozers (CA-1) were getting quite a workout clearing roads and the streets of debris from the bombing and artillery fire. Each of the line companies had a CA-1 and the battalion was supplemented with two or more D-4 bulldozers. A Company’s CA-1 cleared the streets in the town of Dulmen so that the traffic would flow more freely. Baker Company employed both their CA-1 and a D-4 to clear the streets of Haltern. The D-4 in Charlie Company began clearing the roads leading east out of Haltern. The addition of the dozers and the trained operators to the unit’s revised T O & E was paying off:

Lt. Warren E. Hopkins and Lt. Arthur E. Childs from Able made a complete reconnaissance of the perimeter and roads of Dulmen. Baker Company investigated a report of six SS soldiers dressed up as civilians. They could find no such persons. Baker also sent a squad to the Division CP to remove booby traps. When they arrived they were told they were not needed. It was another case of, “hurry up and wait.”

Each of the companies was directed to prepare a detailed report of the exact location where each glider landed, and the condition. For some reason Lt. Marion Floyd returned to the ammunition dump and machine shop where he found the detonation devices the previous day and found yet another set to explode. He defused it, “just in the nick of time.” The Battalion CP was “bombed” on the 29th, but fortunately there were no casualties... for that matter, the Battalion’s luck was holding out. There had been no fatalities since the 24th and no injuries since the 25th.

PFC Edward Reich related that on the road to Munster, their column was strafed by a German Messerschmitt. The column was intermingled with British troops, and together they were, “... having tea with the Brits”. While everyone dove for cover, an American P-47 Thunderbolt pounced on the ME-109 and began pumping .50 cal into the enemy plane. It climbed vertically and after taking a fatal hit plummeted into the ground and exploded not a half mile away from the men. They were no doubt elated at the fate of their attacker and Ed commented that the entire event was like, “…watching a movie at the theater.”

Despite the lack of casualties, there were tense times where the men came under fire. Grooten recalled one such event:

“...we came under fire while moving thru the deserted city streets strewn with rubble. We jumped out of the truck grabbed our rifles and started a search of the remaining houses looking for the sniper. As I recall we searched every where and turned up no

Figure 12.9 Edward Reich at home after the war.

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609 Ralph Grooten to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 1.
611 The data for glider condition are annotated in Tables 11.1 and 11.2
613 Interview with Edward Reich, 4 December 2012.
Figure 12.10 “Somewhere in Germany a G.I. prepares coffee or soup.” An unidentified 139th trooper whose image was taken by Ralph Grooten.

one. When we were about to leave I heard a noise in the basement of a house and went to investigate. My training told me to throw a grenade in first and ask questions later, but I for some reason did not. I kicked in the door and came face to face with a German holding a hammer in his hand. I ordered him to drop it which he promptly did and raised his hands and begged for his life. The German was a senior citizen at least 65 or 70 and I would have thought he was our sniper except for one thing. He was building a coffin out of wood and in the process of nailing it together when I arrived. On the couch lay a small German girl of 6 or 8 years that was dead. He told me it was his grand daughter. To this day I don’t know if this was the sniper or just an old man trying to give a decent burial for the child. If the latter is true then I’m glad I reacted the way I did and let the old man live.”

That day the Division Commander contacted Lt. Col. Johnson and asked him to supply some men to, “help crack two safes”. Sg t. Francis C. Cassidy Jr. was in that team. They rigged the safes with so much C-4 that they blew the entire building down in the process.

31 March was a relatively uneventful day filled with mine clearing, route clearing and forward movement. The engineers could see the end was near, and some of them turned their sights on future things. The discipline of the men began to show the effects of fatigue. Drinking and looting were addressed. A few drunken engineers discharged their weapons in close proximity to others and there was a duel between two engineers resulting on one being shot in the hip. One of the two was court-martialed.

As the 17th pushed farther towards Munster, the number and type of units they encountered increased, but the quality of the defense withered along with the number of troops assigned to them. Elements of Luftschutz Battalions, artillery units, replacement battalions, fortress units, barrage balloon artillery units and headquarters/general staff elements were encountered among the prisoners of war. The defense was truly crumbling.

An examination of one of the Schweresflak Battalions illustrates the futility of the attempts to thwart the Allied advance. One of the batteries of the 524., the 10485. Batterie zür besondere Verfügung, had 100 men fighting as infantry. They were supposed

614 Ralph Grooten to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 1.
616 Patrick Cassidy, email to the Author, np.
617 Patrick Cassidy, email to the Author, np.
to have four 88mm guns, but never received them. The unit was equipped with only rifles and Panzerfaust weapons. Another unit, the 7529, Reichs Arbeit Dienst Batterie, had five small platoons of fifteen to seventeen men armed only with rifles. In the 63576, Batterie, only twenty men remained.619

The Battle of the Ruhr Pocket

The activities during the closing weeks were beginning to be less marked by shooting and sniping, and more filled with the dirty work done by engineers such as filling craters, removing obstacles, and clearing the roadways. There were still the hazards of mines and booby traps, although these became less frequent. Trooper Harlin Ratsch remembers:

"...back to Essen where I picked up a muzzle loader in a bombed out museum. We stayed in this area of Mulheim and Duisburg clearing roads and bridge barriers. When fighting stopped, we monitored people crossing bridges and even fumigated them for fleas with D.D.T. Some of us worked on streets, using DPs mostly from Poland to fill in bomb craters, clear up debris, etc."620

On 3 April, the 17th had limited contact with the enemy until the afternoon when they attacked the city of Munster in force. Enemy resistance consisted of small groups of troops occupying houses in the outskirts of the city. They employed small arms and automatic weapons fire with support from a limited number of SP guns and a few tanks. As the division moved deeper into town, they encountered tougher resistance as stated in the G-2 Periodic report:

By the end of the day the 17th occupied two-thirds of the city and continued forward. Only three to five tanks were identified, two were destroyed and one was reported as a Royal Tiger.621

The fighting for Munster intensified throughout the night of the 3rd. The defenders had been forced into a small area in the north central part of the city. Effective resistance was employed by a group of 150-200 troops supported by four to six 20mm guns and three to five tanks. By late afternoon,

619 G-2 Periodic Report, 1 April 1945, 3.
620 Harlin M. Ratsch, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 8. DPs are Displace Persons or foreign refugees held in Germany.
621 G-2 Periodic Report, 3 April 1945, 1.
this, too, was overcome as Germans began to surrender in larger numbers. Twenty-four officers and 500 men surrendered in one group. It was not uncommon to see officers bringing in their small units in surrender.622

Tank reports consisted of six Tiger tanks in the northwest sector of the city at 1000 hours. Three to five tanks were reported at 881757 at 1930 hours. One tank was fired on by artillery at 887738 and one tank was reported moving on the road at 878750. Of interest is the report of a Sherman tank being used by Germans, although this report was not confirmed.623

The problems encountered with Displaced Persons (DPs) were growing rapidly as the Allies overran larger cities such as Munster. There were thousands of forced workers, captured soldiers and foreign citizens sent into Germany for various reasons. As the Allies entered cities and encountered factories, labor camps and prisons they had to contend with the care, feeding and evaluation of the DPs. The predominant nationalities of the DPs near Munster were French, Belgian, Russian and Polish. The Allies were well aware of the infusion of Geheime Staatspolizei or Gestapo agents into the ranks of the DPs.624 The G-2 reported that large numbers of the German agents were of French, Belgian or Polish decent. From 24 March to 4 April, seven such agents were apprehended in the ranks. They were performing espionage missions in an undercover role. The troops were warned not to readily accept the stories of the DPs and ensure that all received appropriate evaluation and not to release them based on an initial interview. The troops were told to,

“Consider every one of these people a potential German espionage agent. Their true status will be determined by trained personnel at the read following their evacuation.”625

Those on the front, constantly advancing, were not of the notion that the war was over. They were still being shot at and shelled throughout the day. The 17th continued to take casualties, although at a diminished rate. Gen. Miley did not want the troops to relax their vigilance or to get complacent. Reports of such attitudes began to increase among the Allies. The greatest concerns were mines and booby traps. Souvenir seekers and complacent rear echelon troops were getting injured. It was also those who were well trained. A higher headquarters bomb disposal squad was killed when attempting to remove a pile of four boxes of explosives. The group of boxes was inspected, but, some time later when the unit returned to remove it, had been booby trapped. The plea from FIRST Army Headquarters stated:

622 G-2 Periodic Report, 4 April 1945, 1.
623 G-2 Periodic Report, 4 April 1945, 1.
624 The Gestapo were the German Secret police.
625 G-2 Periodic Report, 4 April 1945, 2.
“Casualties such as these will continue unless all troops realize that we are in a hostile country, surrounded by a hostile people who are still our enemies.”626

The 507th reported that one of their paratroopers was found dead in a home in the city. He had been apprehended and was severely beaten and bruised before being killed. This was a sobering report that no doubt resounded within the ranks, as did the reports of the murder of American prisoners in Stavelot during the Ardennes Campaign.627

A new threat had emerged as the Allies labored to protect their forces from becoming non-combat casualties. The G-2 reported the assassination of an Amtsbürgermeister (mayor) in the town of Kirchenlegen. A small note was left which said, “Verräter! Die Werwölfe.” This was one of the first report of the German resistance movement known as the Werewolves.628

The placement of booby traps behind the retreating Germans was becoming more refined. Aside from mines and grenades being affixed to pull and pressure devices, the enemy was using increasingly more sophisticated methods. An officer of an Infantry Division found a Leica camera. The body of the camera was designed to conceal an explosive device within. The dials of the lens were fixed, but from all outward appearances it looked like any other camera. Fortunately it had not been armed.629 These types of incidents would provide plenty of nervous work for the engineers.

Gen. Miley continued to press for aggressive patrolling. It was imperative for the division to have as complete a picture of the enemy disposition, location, strength and capabilities as possible. Daily and nightly patrols rotated forward, capturing

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626 G-2 Periodic Report, 5 April 1945, 1.
627 G-2 Periodic Report, 6 April 1945, 2.
629 G-2 Periodic Report, 12 April 1945, 2.
prisoners and feeding intelligence information to the Division G-2. The reports were analyzed and included in the daily intelligence summaries. On 10 April, the G-2 Periodic Report stated:

“Previous reports of defense of city of ESSEN by Volksturm and miscellaneous units were proven unfounded, as engineer patrols reached RR station by 1200 and further reconnaissance and patrols revealed city entirely clear of enemy.”

The 139th was very active in sending reconnaissance patrols in front of the regiments. Their prime purpose was to report the enemy’s disposition, conditions of the roads and bridges and identify impediments to the swift movement of the Division. Two notable patrols yielded Bronze Stars for each of the four-man teams. The citations for the awards list the dates as having been on 10 and 12 April 1945. The unit history of the 139th lists one of the patrols as having been on 9 April. The G-2 Periodic Report lists the patrol that declared Essen clear of enemy as having taken place on 10 April.

Sgt. Francis Cassidy rarely spoke of his wartime experiences, but when pressed by his family for information about his past he mentioned the patrol on 10 April that he went on. He was accurate in recalling the date as well as the name of the leader of the patrol and indicates all members were submitted for the Bronze Star, but he never received the award. Normally composed of at least four men, it is interesting to note that on 12 April, four men received

\[630\] G-2 Periodic Report, 10 April 1945, 1.
the Bronze Star, but on 10 April, only three received the Bronze Star.\textsuperscript{631}

The most notable patrols were conducted on 10 and 12 April, garnering the Bronze Star Medal for the volunteers. SSgt Robert Bentzien’s Bronze Star citation and that of the other enlisted patrol members on 10 April reads as follows:

“... for heroic action against the enemy at Essen, Germany on 10 April 1945. Staff Sergeant Bentzien, with three others of his unit, made their way far ahead of friendly front lines to reconnoiter the town of Essen. The information they obtained by advancing deep into the heart of an enemy held city aided materially in the occupation of the city in force a short time later. The initiative and aggressiveness of Staff Sergeant Bentzien and his comrades was in keeping with the highest standards of military conduct.”\textsuperscript{632}

Capt MacMullen’s Bronze Star Citation reads as follows:

“...for heroic action against the enemy at Warden, Germany on 12 April 1945. Captain MacMullen voluntarily advanced beyond friendly infantry outposts into enemy territory in order to carry to completion an engineer reconnaissance mission. His unhesitating action helped to gain information vital to the success of military operations in the sector. His aggressiveness and devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the armed forces.”\textsuperscript{633}

For the enlisted members of the 12 Apr 45 patrol the citation reads as follows:

“...for heroic action against the enemy at Warden, Germany on 12 April 1945. Private First Class Burns volunteered as a member of a reconnaissance patrol that made its way far ahead of infantry units surveying engi-

\textsuperscript{631} Patrick Cassidy, email to the Author, np.
\textsuperscript{632} General Order Number 36, 2. Bentzien discusses the Bronze Star award for the patrol in Appendix D.
\textsuperscript{633} General Order Number 360 (Headquarters, 17th Airborne Division, 1945), 1.
neer structures in line of the advance. Although they were subjected to heavy enemy fire, he and his small party heroically carried out their mission. His aggressiveness and unhesitating devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest standards of military conduct. 634

As the paratroopers moved farther east, the defenses became increasingly weaker. The only defensive measures encountered were small groups of riflemen supported by a machine gun. The Germans continued to use roadblocks and barricades, which were lightly defended by a few men, in a futile effort to impede the advance. The number of prisoners taken each day was increasing steadily.635

The General Summary of the capabilities of the German Army as seen by the 17th Airborne Division became bleaker with the passing of every day. On 18 April the summary read:

"In the early part of the period the enemy showed some activity as their last gesture before complete collapse. A reconnaissance patrol received MG fire from A335037 at 1800. MG fire received from house at A33750436 at 1930. Vehicular movement heard vic. A546102 at 2345. At 0145 an estimated two enemy platoons were engaged in a fire fight at A348135 which died down by 0235. All enemy resistance collapsed by 1200 and troops began to surrender by the easiest possible means, large numbers pouring into the 194th Gli. Inf. Lines just S of DUISBURG... The 17th Airborne Div announces with pleasure that the 194th Gli Inf captured General Oberst JOSEPH HARPE, Commander of the Fifth Panzer Army vic. A360119 at 0630. (The General was not pleased with his fate)"636

On 21 April, the fighting for the 17th Airborne Division essentially ended.

"Elimination of the RUHR pocket has completed the tactical phase of this division for the time being. Henceforth, formal G-2 periodic Reports will be issued by this office when sufficient intelligence to warrant publication is received."637

634 General Order Number36, 4.
635 G-2 Periodic Report, 11 April 1945, 1.
636 G-2 Periodic Report, 17 April 1945, 1.
Figure 12.18 Lying at the foot of a camouflaged German vehicle, amidst the debris of a recent battle, is the image of Nazi Germany’s Führer. Thankfully, his image, his vision and his dreams of a thousand year Reich lay in ruins.
NEW MEXICO ATOMIC BOMB FACTS RELEASED

Alamogordo, New Mexico—The fantastic facts about the Atomic bomb crater, a saucer shaped depression 25 feet deep and a half mile across where the top inch of New Mexico’s red soil boils, bubbled and cooled in a pool of jade turquoise glass, were revealed for the first time on Japanese TV.

WAKE ISLAND CO REPORTED ALIVE

Omita, Japan—Lt.-Col. James P. Devereux, commander of the heroic Marines who early in the Pacific war held gallantly on Wake and until swamped by superior numbers of Japanese, Monday reported alive and in charge as a prisoner of war camp in Japan. He reported thin but healthy. This will be the first time on Japanese TV.

TOJO’S AIM BAD, MAY SURVIVE

Tokyo — Hideki Tojo, first of Japan’s three wartime dictators, lay as an ashen faced, tight lipped, ordinary patient in the American evacuation hospital Tuesday night with a previous wound, an attempt to shoot himself at 3:15 p.m. (3:15 a.m. EWT) at a hospital in Tokyo and then home groaned repeatedly, wanting to die.

General MacArthur ordered that Tojo be arrested, tried, along with 10 ministers who helped destroy Pearl Harbor and win the war. But he thought he was a war criminal and should do the self instead of ditional harsh.

He was still alive Tuesday and things were better a few days ago, to survive.

Ten members of the Tokyo Economic Aid, which helped the Japanese, had to plunge Nippon into the United States war against the Japanese. Steady expansion of the American zone continued. It was announced that two more Adlakas would be made short of 81st Infantry Division. The leaders go ashore at western Honshu at last.

A few days ago, the Japanese
Going Home

VE-Day and Beyond

As April blended into May, the duties of the Engineers became more predictable and less tense. It was apparent to most that the war was nearly over. VE-Day was close at hand. The main duties of the engineers consisted of bridge building, debris clearing and “routine field duties”. The H&S Company saw to it that there were nightly movies, hot showers and swimming facilities.638

Keeping the men occupied as they contemplated a return home was a constant challenge. Having braved the dangers of combat, clearing mine fields and booby traps, it was hard to maintain focus when things became routine. Minor looting, fraternization, gambling and alcohol consumption were some of the distractions facing Lt. Col. Johnson’s command. Although not commonplace, these indiscretions were a drain of the officers’ time and attention. In recognition of the stress of combat and to cope with the monotony, some of the men were given passes or furloughs to let them unwind.

Sgt. Harlin Ratsch recorded the events of his furlough which was supposed to begin on 4 May:

“Found out I have a 7-day furlough on the French Riviera, located on the Mediterranean Sea. Leaving tomorrow. Left for the airport at 9:00 a.m. Wrong airport. Planes didn’t arrive by 2:00 p.m. so we came back to camp. Try again tomorrow. No luck today. Try again tomorrow. Finally got the planes and we left for our vacation. (R&R – Rest and Recuperation). While we were enroute the pilot announced that V.E. Day was proclaimed...Our planes flew down the coast to Marseille, and then past along the coast toward Nice. Pilot buzzed some small fishing boats. Landed around 6:00 p.m. and got as-
signed a room in a hotel with Saliewicz”.

For the next few days, Ratsch enjoyed his time away from combat, visiting the sites in town, taking bike rides and even visiting the Chanel Factory where he purchased a bottle of Chanel #5 for his fiancée, Betty. A few days into the furlough he became ill, contracting jaundice. It would be nearly 6 weeks until he was well again, having lost a good percentage of his body weight to the illness. It was not until 28 June that he rejoined the engineers at Vittel, France.639

For the rest of the battalion, VE-Day came and went. The mundane duties of the engineers continued. On 7 May 45 the unit was still located near the city of Essen. They worked on a fixed bridge near Kettwig. B Company performed bridge maintenance and guard duty on the bridge and erected prefabricated barracks for the growing number of DPs.


639 Harlin M. Ratsch, to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 9-11.
Charlie Company remained on the airfield, continuing to improve the condition of the strip. Lt Col Johnson sent an officer on a 200-mile journey to get a ration of Coca-Cola. Each trooper received a ration of three bottles.\footnote{After Action Report: May, 13}

While the battalion was in the city of Mülheim, the Engineers were conducting a reconnaissance of the airfield so that they could repair the field for further Allied use. Grooten took his truck and went to the DP Camp where he selected several men who looked suitable to the task of runway work. Along with the DPs and a squad of engineers, the men worked to repair the craters in the runway.

“Along mid afternoon a German JU 52 tri motor began to circle the strip and the pilot must have been determining if it was fit to land. Several of the engineers who had stacked their rifles raced over to get their weapons. Seeing the type of plane it was I tried to convince them to hold their fire as this was not a warplane but a transport. It eventually landed and taxied up close to where we were. The door opened and German Officers started piling out with their hands raised. One officer came over to me and wanted to know who was in charge. He refused to surrender to us because we were mostly privates or PFCs. Finally we got word back to our C.P. and Capt. Filimon arrived and accepted the surrender... I believe there were fifteen men and one woman on the plane and it had flown out of Berlin, rather than face the advancing Russians.”\footnote{Ralph Grooten to Ozzie H. Gorbitz, 3.}

On 12 May the battalion moved from Essen to Mülheim and billeted themselves in a residential area. The next night the men watched a War Department film entitled, “Two Down and One to Go.” The Athletic Officer began to organize an athletic program, creating teams for softball, baseball and volleyball. Competition would be against other units in the Division, with some teams competing against members of other Divisions. Later in the month, the
The division opened tennis courts and a boathouse on the Ruhr River with beer served a few days later. An entry in the journal for 18 May 45 stated,

"Companies heard lecture on VD and were told taking a prophylactic would not be used as evidence of fraternizing."

In the midst of these morale sustaining activities, the men were still grappling with mine fields. It was imperative that the officers and NCOs create the necessary environment to ensure that no senseless injuries or deaths would occur. By the end of May, a stricter regimen of training and discipline was enacted. Lt. Col. Johnson directed the Companies to establish training schedules. These included training in basic engineer skills, demolition tasks and mine safety. Some men were able to attend various military courses of instruction or enroll in continuing education courses in anticipation of returning to the civilian work force.

Despite the command’s best efforts, a serious discipline problem surfaced. A few weeks after the end of the war on 23 May 1945 in the German town of Broich, Pvt. Edward J. Rollinson, in a fit of drunken stupor, killed a German citizen. With pistol in hand he shot Hermann Wolk and killed him. He furthermore shot and wounded Johann Leipertz by shooting him in the shoulder. The outcome of his final court martial was

\[\text{After Action Report: May, 13.}\]
serious. He was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until dead.

“The court was legally constituted and had jurisdiction of the person and the offenses. No errors injuriously affecting the substantial rights of the accused were committed during the trial. In opinion of the Board of Review, the record of trial is legally sufficient to support the findings and the sentence and to warrant confirmation thereof. The death penalty is authorized upon conviction in Violation of Article of War 92.”

Some of the German witnesses to the killing testified that Rollinson appeared to have been drinking heavily. Apparently Rollinson burst into the home of a German named Reibe and demanded to see his identification papers. He spoke to those present in German. In the ensuing argument the shootings took place, Wolk was killed and Leipertz was wounded. There was no definitive conclusion as to what possessed Rollinson to take the actions he did, other than the alcohol. This serious incident highlighted the need for continued regimen of discipline and structure and to ensure the men were occupied as much as possible.

On 25 May, the Battalion held a parade and review. Gen. Miley presented many awards for heroism and gallantry to members of the unit. Following the parade, the men staged a track meet at the local athletic field. A few days later, another retreat ceremony was organized and Purple Heart medals were handed out to those injured prior to 7 May. On 3 June, Capt. Pope organized a memorial service for Sgt. Vincent C. Ryan and PFC Wilfred O. Money, who were killed in action on the opening day of Operation VARSITY. The fixed bridge built in Ketwig by the Battalion was dedicated in their honor. The remaining days were filled with training, parades, routine engineer work, more training, sports and recreation. Everyone was getting itchy to return home.

At the direction of Lt. Col. Johnson, a small red colored booklet was published. It outlined the Battalion’s history from 1943-1945. Copies were handed out to everyone in the unit. The last page had a section wherein the engineers could sign autographs for one another. Many filled out this page listing names and hometowns. At some point, Johnson drafted and submitted the Battalion for a Distinguished Unit Citation. The citation was drafted, proofed, corrected then sent to the Division for further action. Gen. Miley’s staff most likely made further corrections until a final submission went to higher headquarters for review and approval. It would be many months before anyone found out about the disposition, which was eventually disapproved by the ETO Board which reviewed such submissions.

Many men believed they had been awarded the

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643 United States v. Rollinson, 13-14. The author is continuing research to determine the fate of Rollinson.
Back to France, and Then Home

A week later the men received notice for another move back to France. The ground convoy left on 17 June at 0700; those who went by rail departed at noon. By 19 June the entire battalion had arrived in Vittel, France and set up billets. Shortly after arrival, the men received the news that most engineers would be assigned to other engineer battalions based on the "points" accumulated in the adjusted service rating score. The morale of the Battalion sank, due to the realization that this close knit group of men was being broken up. Johnson’s engineers were farmed out to the 129th AEB, the 307th AEB and the 326th AEB. There were not many of the original group left in the 139th.

No one was allowed to sulk in the mire of inactivity. All of the units of the Division turned their energies to a multitude of activities. Training continued, parades were never ending, and industrious units put their talents to good use. The men of the 194th GIR built a superb beer hall for the troops. They took over an old farmhouse and abandoned hangar complex and opened an Enlisted Man’s Club near Luneville France. The facility was a ¼ mile walk from the base and boasted a reading room, a waiting room, card rooms, game rooms and beer priced at 3 cents per glass. The two bars served iced American-style draft beer. One of the bars, known as the “Dug Out”, was in the cooler basement of the facility and had, 

"...a distinct Bohemian atmosphere, with a low ceiling and pretty murals."  

The 139th had been working diligently to field a respectable baseball team. The hitters who made up the team were as follows.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ringer</th>
<th>Pitcher</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Shaeg</td>
<td>Catcher</td>
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646 After Action Report: May, 15-17.
647 Justin Buckeridge, ed. “Gliders lead”, Talon Vol 1, No. 3, 3.
Blood on the Talon

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Player</th>
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<tr>
<td>Harrison</td>
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<td>Huff</td>
<td>2nd Base</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brucella</td>
<td>Shortstop</td>
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<td>Krikorian</td>
<td>3rd Base</td>
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<td>Everett</td>
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On 14 Jul 1945 the French city of Vittel celebrated Bastille Day, in remembrance of the beginning of the French Revolution. Of course, the men put on a spit and polish parade with all of the imaginable pomp and circumstance.

During the 3rd week of July, the staff made arrangements for the glider qualified men to qualify for their glider pay. The various units involved left from the Luneville airstrip in C-47s and flew an hour and a half to a field near Amiens, France, where rows of CG-4A gliders were parked.

“Most of the men took 4 rides of an average duration of 6 minutes. Two rows of gliders were on the field. One serial took off, made a figure 8, cut loose and landed. The C-47 planes landed, hooked onto the second row of gliders and while those were in the air, the first serial was prepared for flight again. The trip took almost 2 days for most of the men; some completed 4 rides in one day.”

More soldiers were given an opportunity for passes or furlough. The Army created a number of rest camps and recreation facilities throughout the ETO. When able, soldiers were given some time to travel, visit various cities or spend a few days at one of the facilities. It was quite different for the engineers to view Europe through the sight of a Leica camera instead of the sight of an M-1 Garand. Bedecked in their new Ike jackets, trousers bloused over their jump boots, jump wings and combat ribbons on their chests, the paratroopers and glider men blanketed France and Germany in search of peaceful adventure.

Those remaining behind in the 139th finally received notice that they were going home. On 23

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August, the orders came through. The remaining troopers were slated to ride the SS Mariposa and the SS Wakefield, docked at Marseille and travel to the states. They boarded in early September and spent three weeks aboard the crowded ships before they arrived. The ship published a periodical with a smattering of news and provided a progress report on the trip. It was hard to imagine the adventure was coming to an end. The ships docked at Boston harbor with one day separation. SS Wakefield arrived first. Some of the men met loved ones at the dock, most awaited further travel to their discharge centers where they would out-process back to civilian life. With that action, most of the engineers closed a compelling chapter in their lives.

**Their Place in History**

From the humid and hot summer conditions of North Carolina to the freezing bitter cold of combat in the Ardennes the engineers of the 139th had proven themselves worthy of the name “paratrooper”. In the Ardennes they suffered casualties, endured numerous cases of frostbite, fought for many days without respite, rarely tasted a hot meal and slept in the same clothes for forty-seven days. They fought as infantry, went on patrols into enemy territory at night, emplaced mine fields and removed them. They defused booby traps and cleared the way for the division to advance. The combat engineers of the 139th had accomplished every mission assigned to them. Some of them returned seriously maimed; others did not return.

Ultimately Hitler’s designs of creating a thousand-year Reich were crushed by the overwhelming force of will of the Allied nations. At the point of impact of this force of will was the soldier. He enabled the grand strategy of the Allies. He did the dirty work that led to victory.

In the Ardennes, Hitler’s offensive action lacked the necessary resources to achieve his goal of reaching Antwerp. Some of the Wehrmacht’s lead
Panzer forces were able to overwhelm and brush American units aside, but the assault ran into several obstacles. The terrain and weather conditions restricted travel solely to the meager road network which ran through defensible road junctions. American commanders used this to their advantage in some cases and mounted decisive defensive actions. St. Vith and Bastogne reflect such efforts.

The delaying actions fought by other units along the eastern edge of the battle area bought precious time for the Allies to organize the defensive action, bring additional forces into the battle and to mount a strategic flanking maneuver. The defense of the key city of Bastogne and the other American delaying actions bought time for Patton to turn his THIRD Army northward and pinch the bulge closed. By the end of January, the front had been restored to its previous lines. Hitler’s strategic calculation had failed. Ultimately, it was the soldier who carried out the delaying action, who held the line, who fought with tenacity, who bled and died in Belgium to facilitate the orders of the Division, the Corps and the Army.

Each of the units that participated in the fighting in the Ardennes earned their place in history. Whether they fought in Bastogne, S. Vith or Clervaux, whether they repeatedly advanced on Chenogne taking heavy casualties, whether they attacked toward Houffalize to pinch off the salient, they each contributed to defeating Hitler’s operation in the Ardennes. The men of the 139th were no exception in this regard.

It might have been Field Marshall Montgomery who enabled the strategy of the Rhein crossing on 24 March 1945, but it was the individual engineer who rode in the wood and canvas contraptions and crash landed in Germany on that bright Saturday morning. He neutralized the farm houses manned by the last defenders of the Reich, he assaulted the guns firing on the gliders and C-47’s, and he secured LZ N for subsequent landings. One engagement at a time, he stamped out the final will of the enemy to resist.
The men of the 139th were able to be counted among the successful units who fought in the European Theater of Operations for several reasons. The training they received during the many months prior to their arrival on the continent had been exceptionally grueling. The leaders of the 17th Airborne Division recognized that harsh and demanding training reduced the number of casualties and increased the probability of mission accomplishment. The leaders spared no effort in the daily regimen of physical and mental conditioning. They developed an exacting training schedule that pushed the troopers to their limits. At times the training was so realistic that fellow troopers were killed.

A further reason for the success of the 139th can be attributed to the leaders who served selflessly and spared no effort to care for their men. They did not shirk their responsibilities, nor did they shrink to the challenges presented by exploding shells, advancing infantry or the rumbling of tanks. They stayed at their post, urged their men to fight and improvised when required.

When the fighting was over following VE-Day, there were no reporters from the Stars and Stripes newspaper to interview the engineers. No official US Army historians visited the troopers, and none of them were featured in Movie-Tone news reels. All of their exploits were contained in the unit’s silent After Action Reports, their small pocket history, the General Orders of the 17th Airborne Division and, of course, they were seared into the memories of the living. Within these few documents and within the hearts of the warriors, the courageous exploits of the unsung heroes were extolled. The engineers had not saved the 101st Airborne Division from destruction, they had not broken through the defensive strangle-hold that the Nazis had on Bastogne and they did not single-handedly thwart Hitler in his desire to reach Antwerp. They were not solely responsible for the success of Operation VARSITY. They simply accomplished the missions they were assigned without complaint or failure and did so in an aggressive, honorable manner. With this, the engineers contributed to the successful conclusion of WW2 and earned the right to be counted among history’s fabled warriors. Let us never forget their contributions!
Appendix A: Unit Roster 1943-45

A
Acosta, Joseph
Adams, Loy G.
Adler, Eugene O.
Ahrens, Vernon J.
Ahwesh, Norman N.
Aikens, Norman R.
Alderman, Alvin F.
Alford, Gilbert K.
Alford, William H.
Alvarez, Manuel M.
Ambos, William H.
Amburg, Albert F.
Anderson, John R. (KIA)
Anderson, Nels L.
Andrews, Ivan L.
Andries, Joseph A.
Andros, George
Anetrini, Mario J.
Ater, Prentise N.
Atkinson, Edward A.
Atkinson, Tim H.
Avery, Levert L.
Aycock, Morris C.
Belenson, Stanley M.
Bell, Robert W.
Bellamy, John W.
Benitez, Rodolfo C.
Bennink, Fred A.
Bentzien, Robert H.
Bercini, Clarence m.
Bice, Crandel C.
Bier, Murray
Bierbaum, Orlando F.
Bird, Rodney E.
Birkhimer, Jack C.
Blackwell, Jack m.
Blair John H.
Blake, Charles T.
Blake, Edwel J.
Blasck, William A.
Blevins, Clarence L.
Blodgett, James M.
Blount, Leon N.
Blunkall, Charles H.
Blysak, Anthony
Boatwick, W. M. III
Bolmowski, Harry
Bona George H.
Booher, Donald W.
Bordeleau, Paul E.
Bosch, Anton
Bosiacki, Joseph S.
Boston, George W Jr.
Both, Warren J.
Bouldry, James S.
Bower, Frank E.
Bowers Robert F.
Boyce, Robert J.
Boyd John R.
Brennan Glenn J.
Brennecke, Bert O.
Brewer, Pleas E.
Brindle, Franklin D.
Britton, Elwood H.
Brizendine, Robert E.
Brown Wilbert S.
Brown, James H.
Brown, John P.
Brucella, Frank
Bucci, Joe
Buchanan, Ambrose W.
Buford, Horace R.
Bullard, Everette A.
Bulock, Edwin J.
Bunch, William H.
Buntin, Albert R.
Burdick, Walter C.
Burne, Claude R.
Burnette, Lawrence W.
Burns, Robert E.
Butera, Thomas A.
Byrnes, Thomas L.
Byron, John E.

B
Bachellar, Roy A.
Back, John H. Jr.
Badertscher, Russell E. (KIA)
Baggarly, Paul R.
Baham, Henderson C.
Baker, Norman
Balboni, Andrew A.
Balcom, Cecil R.
Ballard, Elva A.
Bancroft, Elwood A.
Bankhead, Earl T.
Barbrick, George L.
Barholomew, Richard
Barth, Elmer R.
Beame, James O.
Beatty, John W.
Beauchamp, Robert J.
Bechtel, Philip B.
Bednarik, Charles J. (KIA)
Beekman, Robert L.
Beighey Marvin P.
Campbell, Raymond C.
Camu, Fausto M.
Cannon, Frank M.
Capps, Harold H.
Carey, Adrian F.
Carlin, Joseph.
Carlock, Herbert D.
Carmichael W.C. Jr
Carpenter, Richard E.
Carroll, Malon J.
Carter, Edgar C.
Carter, Edward H.
Cartwright Robert E.
Cartwright, Jack E.
Carvalho, Jesse A
Cass, Melvin R.
Cassidy, Francis C. Jr.
Casto, Mell
Catalano, Ralph L.
Cegielski, William J.
Chaney, Roy
Chavez, Ruben J.
Childs, Arthur E.
Chilely, Nicky E.
Chirieleison, Rocco
Chrostowski, Stanley
Church, Rocky
Cicero, Clarence N.
Clancy, Joseph F.
Clark, William C.
Clayton, Norma E.
Cleeland, Raymond T.
Clendenen, Leo H. Jr.
Clere, Calvin J.
Clevenger, Alfred G.
Clews, Ronald K.
Blood on the Talon

Cline, Harold L.
Cloutier, Joseph A. J.
Cobb, Edward C.
Coburn, Robert W.
Coghlan, Cecil
Cole, Dandridge M.
Cole, Robert U.
Cole, Roland N.
Collins, Thomas J.
Coltman, Joseph W. Jr. (KIA)
Colvin, Paul E.
Colwell, Clark M.
Combs, Burnett
Confrey, Evan
Conn, Fred E.
Connelly, John R.
Connor, Seymour V.
Converse, Harland J.
Coon, Frank G.
Cooper, Ernest E.
Cooper, William I.
Corbett, Lew A Jr.
Corbett, Robert J.
Corbin, Harry A.
Corley, Judson A. Sr.
Costanzi, Joseph A.
Coughlin, Arthur R.
Cowart, Donald B.
Coyne, Harold J. (KIA)
Coz, Alfred L.
Cragle, George
Cram, Robert W.
Cramer, Perl W.
Crandall, Cortney Jr.
Cribbs, Kenneth L. (KOD)
Cueiss, Eliseo Jr.
Cullen, John D.
Cuneo, Hanson J.
Curtis, Sidney B.
Cutshaw, Claude
Czubak, Joseph J.

De Gonia, Dwight J.
De La Vergne, H.R.
De Martino, Louis P.
Deaton, Robert L.
Deen, William J.
Deignan, James J.
Denis, Leonard J.
Deschamps, Lucien H.
Desorcy, Harold A.
Devine, Brendan J.
Di Dominich, Mario A.
DiMichele, John J.
Di Raddo, Harry
Dial, William B.
Dickey, Marvin W.
Dickson, Joseph A.
Divjak, Florian J.
Dockrell, Eugene G.
Dodd, Frederick B. Jr.
Dominguez, Lawrence G.
Donahue, Joseph A.
Donnelly, Kenneth E.
Douglas, John J.
Dougher, William E. J.
Dourm, William E.
Dowlan, Howard V. (KIA)
Downham, Dwight D. Jr.
Dowty, Nathan A.
Doyle, Paul R.
Dragan, John Jr.
Draper, Charles F.
Draper, Frank B.
Drummond, Willard C.
Du Frere, Lowell W.
Duckworth, Curtis D.
Ducote, Lurry L.
Dudis, Charles F.
Dunn, William E.
Duriez, Louis
Dutton, Raymond

Easterling, Eugene
Eberline, Jerald W.K.
Eddy, Harold L.
Edwards, Richard W.
Egan, James H.
Eldredge, Kenneth Jr.
England, Lovell E.
Equia, Leon L.
Espinosa, Jose F.P.
Evans, Alexander M.
Evans, Robert E.
Everett, Ivan

F
Farmer, Edan H.
Feducovitz, William T.
Felio, Dennis A.
Fellor, Russell K.
Fendrick, Lumir A.
Ferre, James R.
Fiderius, Walter T.
Fields, Carl F.
Fields, Gover F.
Filimon, Victor D.
Finlayson, Adrian J.
Finney, Calvin J.
Fitch, Paul E.
Flagg, Robert G.
Flaherty, Edward F.
Flannery, Robert M. (KIA)
Flannery, William D.
Flores, Charles E.
Flores, Charles E.
Floyd, Marion A.
Flynn, Eugene
Follmeyer, Charles I.
Fornataro, Edward S.
Foreman, Lawrence E.
Forrest, John M.
Forte, Willis W.
Fossi, James J.
Foster, Everette L.
Fowler, Aubrey L.
Fox, Robert
Franchini, Robert E.
Franzen, Jerey J.
Frederick, Albert J.
Fredericks, C.G.
Freed, Carol R.
Frese, Norman E.
Fretina, Thomas A.
Freund, Charles Jr.
Fridley, Wilbur H.
Frigone, Carl J. (KIA)
Fry, Walker O.

Gabler, Lewis
Gamble, John D.
Garafalo, Charles V.
Garbarino, David
Garner, Albert S.
Appendix A: 139th AEB Unit Roster 1943-45

Gatewood, Henry E.
Gatein, Hershel L.
Gentry, Charles F. Jr.
George, Hubert A.
Gervais, Earl A.
Gessing, John L.
Giacomozzi, Anthony
Gibson, Frank A.
Gibson, Robert N.
Gilmer, Steven A.
Gilsinger, Edwin C.
Goodman, Earl A. (KIA)
Gorczynski, Donald S.
Gore, Raymond R.
Grabill, William F.
Grady, Michael F.
Graham, William H.
Grause, Albert
Gray, Albert L.
Green, Arthur C.
Green, Darrell W.
Green, Paul D.
Gregson, Vester I.
Grieder, Robert D.
Griffith, Harold R. (KIA)
Grigsby, Edward W.
Grimm, Frank H. Jr.
Grooten, Ralph R.
Gross, Harry
Grover, Robert P.
Guidroz, Lloyd J.
Guifrida, Phillip C.
Gural, Joseph J. Jr.

H

Haagenson, James
Hagan, Hugh P.
Haggard, James R.
Hake, Edward J.
Hall, Jessie D. Jr.
Hall, Robert A.
Hall, Russell D.
Hallock, Edgar R.
Halter, Charles E.
Hambrick, Richard W.
Hammond, Harvey N.
Hampson, William J.
Hancock, Donald L.
Hanger, Ryland T.
Hanson, Eugene L.
Hardin, Elmer D.
Harrison, David T.
Hart, Robert M. Jr.
Hatash, Martin J.

Havens, Jink J.
Hayes, Phil M.
Hazelwood, Albert H.
Hazzard, Stephen B.
Heckler, Frank
Heinly, Edwin C.
Heise, Thornton E.
Henderson, Taylor V.
Hendricks, Tirie T.
Hernandez, Jose R. Jr.
Hess, Richard O.
Hewitt, James A. Jr.
Hickman, Powell
Hicks, George E.
High, Guy E. Jr.
High, Harold G.
Hill, Clarence E.
Hill, Edward C.
Hilton, George E.
Hinkel, William E.
Hinkel, John A.
Hoff, Carl A.
Hoffman, Clyde V.
Hoffman, Edwin E.
Hoffman, Louis H.
Hulabird John A.
Holden, Oliver R.
Hopkins, Warren E.
Horgen, Merlin A.
Houseley, Eugene M.
Hughes, Thomas P.
Huff, Harold B. Jr.
Hummel, Aloysius H.
Hummel, Robert E.
Hunter, Howard H.
Hurlbert, John H.
Hurley, Warren D.
Huta, Peter
Hutchins, Robert W.
Huth, John F.

I

Ita, Wilbur

J

Jachec, Matthew G.
Jackson, William R.
Jaeger, Robert
Jensen, Edwin C.
John, Lowell E.
Johnson, Arthur F.
Johnson, Philip

Johnson, Stanley T. B.
Jones, Howard D.
Jones, Turner H.
Jones, William J.
Jordan, Charles L.
Joseph, Richard N.

K

Kaple, John E.
Kardeen, Virgil J.
Karloch, Louis N. (MIA)
Kaupas, Paul J.
Kazwell, John P.
Keister, Melvin M.
Kellogg, William W.
Kelly, George S.
Kelly, Raymond J.
Kerans, Russell E.
Kershenstein, James L.
Kessler, Max
Kessler, Walter T.
Kessock, Adam
Keltner, John W.
Keyt, Lloyd W.
Kicos, John J.
Kies, Charles E.
Kijek, Joseph P.
King, Gerald P.
Kitner, Russell B.
Kizer, John W.
Kleeman, Walter
Klimens, Thomas M.
Kline, Owen W.
Klingel, Kenneth H.
Klotz, Stanley J.
Kluge, Vincent A.
Klump, Charles G.
Knight, Steve B. Jr.
Knox, Edward R. (KIA)
Kohut, Michael
Kolumba, Henry H.
Kormos, Lewis C.
Kontzen, Nobal B.
Kosorok, Lewis A.
Krain, Francis J.
Kravitz, Harold P.
Krawitz, Michael
Kremer, Nicholas R.
Kress, Donald R.
Krikorian, Garo
Krosch, Mark R.
Kross, George W. Jr.
Kubiak, Bernard
Kuhn, Paul B.

217
Kuns, Warren W.
Kutter, Allen H.
Kuzma, Frank J. (KIA)

La Cross, William N.
Lach, John
Lackey, John O.
Laczkowski, Lewis A.
Lambert, William E.
Lamborn, Aaron R.
Landers, George C.
Landford, Carroll E.
Lane, Ralph D.
Langner, Max
Lanier, Lave G.
LaRocca, Frank F. (DOW)
Lasher, Theron D.
Lavely, Horace T. Jr.
Lazzar, Pinky
Leach, William L.
Leafey, John J.
Leavings, Robert J.
Ledonne, Edward A.
Lee, John G.
Leeb, Lowden D.
Lechltier, Wayne (MIA)
Leist, Frank J.
Lenc, Emil S.
Lepine, Leopold J.
Lessa, Daniel E. L.
Leuthy, Raymond P.
Lewandowski, Frank J.
Lewis, Glenn M.
Lewis, Mark A.
Lezon, Thaddeus F.
Libardi, Eugene F.
Lindsey, James L.
Logandice, Francis J.
Loken, James A.
Lopez, Bernard A.
Lovelacon, Wesley E.
Loveless, James F.
Lunde, William H.
Lurvey, Gladwin E.
Lyda, Hoyle H.
Lynch, Harry J.
Lynn, Adrian L.
Lyons, John M

Machiea, Willard H.

McMullen, Ray W.
MacMullen, Warren H.
Madison, Edward C.
Maguire, John L.
Maltese, Salvatore A. Jr.
Manaham, Conway D.
Marcum, John M.
Marsh, Harry A. Jr.
Marsh, Kenneth E.
Marsh, Winfield R.
Martin, Samuel G.
Masias, Peter P. (KIA)
Mason, James I.
Mason, Nathanial R.
Masters, Milton F.
Mastin, Charles F.
Mathis, John M.
Mauldin, Glen
Mazza, Vincent A.
McCall, Charles W.
McCallister, D.P.
McCarthy, Daniel J.
McCarty, Mark A.
McCauley, Durland A.
McCormick, Fred
McCoy, Haskell
McCrone, William L.
McDermitt, Lewis W.
McDermott, Earl Jr.
McDonald, Bernard H.
McGann, Edmund S.
McGovern, Robert J.
McGowan, Herman D.
McHugh, Edward F.
Mcke, Maurice J.
Mckee, Russell
Mckee, William N. Jr. (KIA)
McKinnon, Roy E.
McLeod, Thomas
McMackin, Harry W.
McNamee, John J.
Medina, Gene M.
Mensick, Peter E.
Metrick, Michael
Michals, James P.
Miller, August V.
Miller, Charles H.
Miller, Raymond T.
Miller, William M.
Milligan, Charles R.
Mingin, Clifton
Minnicks, Charles R.
Mistovich, Robert
Mitchell, Edward S.
Mitchell, Vernon R.
Mitchell, William J.
Mohn, Harry B.
Mohney, Charles L.
Money, Wilfred O. (DOW)
Moore, George E. Jr.
Moreau, Gerard G.
Morgan, Edmond, Jr.
Morgan, Samuel E.
Morrison, Donald F.
Mort, James C.
Mostowski, John J.
Murphy, William F.
Mull, John C.
Mullins, Franklin
Murdock, John P.
Myers, Kenneth E.
Myers, Russell L.
Myers, Taylor L.

Napolitano, Ralph J.
Naylor, Francis X.
Neal, Nelson
Neary, James O.
Nelli, Gordon D.
Nelson, Walter O.
Nevendale, Andy F.
Neves, Ralph C.
Nichols, Carl E.
Nichols, Jack W.
Nicholson, Andrew D.
Nicollet, George W. Jr.
Nidy, Robert B.
Niederhelm, Elmer L.
Nitz, Alfred P.
Norris, Norman H.
Norton, Dale E.
Norvell, Frank A.
Nunn, William H.
Nyberg, Gilbert D.
Nylund, Dallas

O’Connor, Charles L.J.
O’Neill, John J.
Odum, James E.
Olcott, Edward H.
Olsen, Armim A.
Olson, James C.
Olson, Luther G.
Orr, Jack M.
Otney, Kiene P.
Overby, Harold L.
Appendix A: 139th AEB Unit Roster 1943-45

P
Padilla, Santos
Pagano, Harry A.
Palermo, Francis R.
Palmer, Gilbert L.
Pappos, John
Parisi, Joseph A.
Parson, James W. (DOW)
Pascoe, Phillip T.
Patrick, Warren H. Jr.
Paxton, David Jr.
Payne, Robert A.
Paynter, Robert C.
Pearson, Leroy J.
Peisochenske, Carl
Pellerin, Wilfred J.
Pelosi, Angelo
Pelto, Wilfred W.
Pennypacker, Arthur D.
Perry, Charlie H.
Peterson, Leroy
Peterson, Robert W.
Petrell, John F.
Petrie, Thomas J. Jr.
Petroske, Leonard B.
Petigrew, William R.
Petty, Joe T.
Pettygrove, Edward S.
Phelan, Francis J.
Phelps, Leonard O.
Phillips, Clarence P.
Phillips, Clifton R.
Philyaw, Edward P.
Philyaw, Lonnie J.
Piazza, Charles J.
Pickens, Ralph D.
Piechota, Stephen J.
Pierce, Eldon G.
Plourde, Benoit
Plute, Joseph
Poiles, Charles W.
Polinyak, Joseph P.
Polk, Lewis F.
Polkinghorne R.L.
Pope, Boniface F.
Pope, Cornell
Pope, Raymond W.
Pople, George D.
Porta, Joseph F.
Powers, Doyle R.
Preston, Richard E.
Przybylski, Edward M.

Q
Queeney, Bernard, Jr.

R
Raby, Eugene M. (KIA)
Radenski, Evan J.
Ramey, Lester
Ramirez, Salvador A.
Raths, Howard W.
Ratliff, James W.
Ratsch, Harlin M.
Ray, Woodley T.
Rea, John P.
Redmerski, John R.
Reed, George S.
Reed, Norbert G. (KIA)
Reed, Robert C.
Reed, Tracy R.
Reek, Ralph W.
Reeves, Eldon M.
Reformato, Angelo
Reich, Edward W.
Reimann, Leslie R.
Reiss, Ellwood M.
Renner, Charles F.
Revon, Joseph A.
Reyes, John
Rhodes, Walter P.
Ribble, Carl W.
Rice, Burel, Jr.
Rice, Ralph J.
Richard, Henry J.
Richardson, Robert H.
Richey, Harold R.
Ridings, Robert N.
Ridley, Charles M.
Riedl, Richard O.
Ring, William J.
Ringer, Richard V.
Ripken, Arend O.
Robbins, Verle P.
Roberts, Ernest F.
Roberts, Thomas P.
Robinson, Irving
Roche, Clyde S.
Roderick, Eugene V.
Rodriguez, Joe
Roemer, Paul A.
Roland F. H. Jr.
Rollinson, Edward J.
Romera, Jack
Rompot, Richard E.
Roper, Richard S.
Rosswog, Karl M.
Rowe, Hollis D.
Rowles, Irvin F.
Ruch, Howard S. (KIA)
Rummes, Merlin
Runyon, Victor
Rupert, Robert J.
Rupp, Gerald C.
Rushlieu, Jack H.
Russel, Clarence N.
Ryan, Clement J. (KIA)
Ryan, Vincent C.

S
Sabath, Daniel D.
Sabin, Eugene
Sacket, James J.
Safron, Arnold
Saliewiez, Vincent
Sample, William E.
Sandlin, William H.
Sauerwald, C. G.
Sayre, Herbert A.
Scalco, Joseph A. Jr.
Scalzo, William G.
Schaeg, Archie W.
Schappe, William J.
Schechet, Philip D.
Schrecengost, A.J.
Schultz, Ralph L.
Scott, Harry G.
Searles, Howard J.
Segretario, Jack J.
Sellers, Merrill G.
Sells, Joseph G.
Shea, John D.
Sheely, Clyde E.
Sheldon, George J. Jr.
Shelton, Gladford
Shenkel, Jay W.
Sherman, Robert L. Jr.
Shetter, Ira D.
Shibley, Richard M.
Shinn, Charles
Shirley, William A. Jr.
Shoop, Robert D.
Shortes, Stanley J.
Shortt, Kenneth L.
Shuffield, Donald P.
Shull, Kenneth A.
Sikorski, Donald R.
Silverman, Leon F.
Silverstri, Joseph F. (KIA)
Simmers, Albert L.
Simmons, William H.
Sims, Hugh C.
Sircceo, William
Sizemore, John M.
Skaggs, Howard P.
Skarzenski, James E.
Skenadore, Warren R.
Skowren, Henry M.
Slavenwhite, Elmer L.
Slaven, Elmer H.
Slemp, Ralph E.
Smith, Fred H.
Smith, Malvin
Smith, Robert A.
Smith Robert G.
Smith Robert J.
Snyder, Robert F.
Sorensen, George C.
Sowka, Samuel H.
Spilman, Hurschal D.
Spradlin, Charles R.
Stafford, Yantis E.
Stapleton, Leslie H.
Stark, Harry H.
Starnes, Luther C.
Statt, Felix
Steele, Walter D.
Stift, Leicester C.
Stoker, William E.
Stolberg, Gordon E.
Stotesury, Edward T.
Strong, Cloyd E.
Strong, William E.
Stroupshauer, Roy W.
Stowers, Olford E.
Strudwick, Robert H. (KIA)
Struchen, Edward H.
Stuntebeck, Joseph A.
Surma, Joseph J.
Sutto, Frank Jr.
Svoboda, Walter
Swartz, Allen C.
Swonger, Lon D.
Szakara, Michael
Szpankowski, H.T.

Taylor, Otis R.
Taylor, Roy A.
Teel, Johnnie J.
Teeling, Patrick B.
Tefft, Raymond T.
Telzrow, David D.
Tennis, Robert P.
Thomas, Archie M.
Thomas, Earl B.
Thomas, Sterling H.
Thomas, Wade Jr.
Thompson, Lester H.
Thompson, Erskine R.
Thompson, Richard G.
Thorman, Frank H.
Tomkiew, Stanley A. Jr.
Topar, John P.
Torles, Charles J.
Totten, Paul E.
Towler, Robert R.
Tribe, Robert W.
Tripp, Joseph A.
Turek, Harold J.
Turner, Robert T.
Tuttle, Lansing

U
Ujazdowski, T.J.
Ulrich, Irvin S.
Upton, David R.
Ursrey, Theodore F.
Ussery, Coy L.

V
Valerio, Nicholas
Van Buren, Harold F.
Van Dusen, Glen E.
Van Dusen, Kenneth R.
Vanko, Peter
Vansant, Henley A.
Vantura, James P.
Vasiljevish, Nicholas
Verruti, Samuel S.
Vicelish, John J.
Viets, Ralph R.
Vincent, William E.
Vowell, Clair J.
Vozobule, Frank J.
Vrooman, Nelson B.

W
Wadel, James I.
Wagner, Richard H.
Walenga, John L.
Walker, Berton H.
Wallace, Elbert G.
Wallace, William J.
Walser, William H.
Walters, Harold J.
Warinsky, Joseph
Watts, Wilbur R.
Webb, Claudell E.
Webb, Freeman
Wedertz, Raymond W.
Welch, Dwight M. Jr.
Welch, Vincent G.
Welliver, Russell W.
Wells, Milton H.
Westbrook, Robert L.
Western, Carmen J.
Whisler, John A.
Whiteside, Joe E.
Whytas, Anthony J.
Wickersham, Ollie B.
Wiens, Willard W.
Wigness, Arby E.
Wilhelm, Charles B.
Wilkins, John H.
Williams, Edward Y.
Williams, Hershell D.
Williams, Robert C.
Willoughby, Charles
Wilson, Charles L.
Wilson, James F.
Wilson, Robert
Winegar, Thomas H. Jr.
Wisnewski, Henry S.
Wittenmyer, James B.
Witter, Johnnie A.
Wollam, Richard I.
Wollenschlaeger, Edward
Wright, John D.

X
Xiques, Edward F.

Y
Yanni, Nicholas W.
Yewdell, Noel B.
Young, George H.
Young, Robert C.
Yount, Clifford C.

Z
Zedar, Frank (KIA)
Zeller, Albert W. Jr.
Zerby, Louis
Zerfoss, Hilton M.
Ziegler, Roland C.
Zimec, Benjamin J.
Zionis, Joe P.
Zmudzinski, Henry P. (KIA)
Zolman, Devon E. 651

651 Listings of the 902 names of members of the 139th AEB were taken from numerous sources including; letters from veterans, Thunder From Heaven Newsletters, Thunder From Heaven, 17th Airborne Division, Index to the General Orders, and 17th Airborne Division.
S/Sgt Robert H. Bentzien and other engineers were presented awards for valor by Maj. Gen. William Miley on 24 May 45.
**Appendix B: Awards and Decorations**

_Soldiers of the 139th were awarded at least: 7 Silver Stars, 3 Bronze Stars with Oak Leaf Clusters (W/OLC), 34 Bronze Stars, 7 Purple Hearts with Oak Leaf Clusters, 104 Purple Hearts, 3 Certificates of Merit, 1 Belgian Military Decoration 2nd Class with Palm (BMD2Cl w/Palm) 1 Belgian Croix de Guerre, with Palm (BCDG w/Palm) and 1 French Croix de Guerre (FCDG). Many were posthumous. This list is incomplete._

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<thead>
<tr>
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223
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Appendix B: Awards and Decorations of the 139th AEB

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<th>Name</th>
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<td>Ryan, Vincent C.</td>
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<td>Sandberg, Warren E.</td>
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<td>Tefft, Raymond T.</td>
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<td>Ventura, James P.</td>
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<td>Wallace, William J.</td>
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<td>Zmudzinski, Henry P.</td>
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652 Listings of the names of members of the 139th AEB who received awards and decorations were taken from numerous sources including; Thunder From Heaven Newsletters, Thunder From Heaven, 17th Airborne Division, Index to the General Orders, 17th Airborne Division. Accounting for all awards and decorations is an extremely difficult task and a thesis in its own right. Many additional awards were presented since 1945 and there is no single accounting of those. Members who qualified for the Combat Infantry Award were able to receive the Bronze Star as a result. Again, obtaining the record for those who received this Bronze Star after 1947 would require a massive amount of research. Accounting for every Purple Heart awarded to members of a unit is equally difficult. Those who were transferred to rear echelon medical facilities may have been awarded the Purple Heart under the auspices of the medical facilities’ Field Hospital. The documents were retained within their archives and not always transferred to the wounded soldier’s parent unit. There are probably several 139th AEB soldiers who received the Purple Heart, but these awards were not annotated in any official 17th Airborne Division sources. As a result, this is assuredly an incomplete listing.

652
## Appendix C: Honor Roll

**ROSTER OF THE 139TH AIRBORNE ENGINEER BATTALION**

**KILLED IN ACTION, MISSING IN ACTION, KILLED ON DUTY OR DIED OF WOUNDS**

**(28 TOTAL) 1943-1945.**

### A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Anderson, John R.</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Bednarik, Charles J.</td>
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<td>Coyne, Harold J.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cribbs, Kenneth L.</td>
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<td>Kuzma, Frank J.</td>
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<td>Leichlitter, Wayne</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Money, Wilfred O.</td>
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<td>Ryan, Vincent C.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zmudzinski, Henry P.</td>
<td>Died of Wounds</td>
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653 Listings of the names of members of the 139th AEB who were wounded, missing or killed in action were taken from numerous sources including; *Thunder From Heaven Newsletters, Thunder From Heaven, 17th Airborne Division, Index to the General Orders, and 17th Airborne Division.*
To assess the costs of the war in terms of deaths and casualties expressed in numbers seems a very callous method. The 111 casualties, wounded, killed or missing, out of a battalion sized unit of approximately 503 troopers over the course of the war can be expressed in terms of an approximately 22.1% casualty rate. To the 21st Army Group commander that may seem small when compared to the near 100% rate suffered by other units. Historians and statisticians are generally drawn to show the cost in those terms. It provides them some comparative analysis of the severity of a battle or the effectiveness of an attack or defense.

How can one say to the Goodman family, who lost one precious son, that their sacrifice was small? The cost is, quite frankly, immeasurable when couched in spiritual terms. Each and every day countless family members grieve at the loss of a precious son, a dear brother, a devoted husband, or a loving father who will never embrace his children, and in some cases those children never felt that embrace. To Goodman’s Platoon the cost might be expressed in terms of the loss of a brother, who gave his life through the unfathomable bond that exists between soldiers in war. That life was given in exchange for his brother’s, so that they might live in his stead.

2nd Lt. Earl A. Goodman was killed in action on 24 March 1945. He died while selflessly trying to save the life of a fellow paratrooper. He advanced into heavy enemy machinegun fire to try and save another brother in arms. He was killed in the attempt. When the day’s battle was over, the sad report of the death of Lt. Goodman made its way to the Company and then the Battalion, and eventually to the Division Commander. In turn, each would grieve in their own way, and each fulfilled a solemn obligation to provide some level of closure to Lt. Goodman’s family. Although it was a difficult task, it was usually done with the most dignity and carefully chosen words that could be mustered. None of the enlisted men envied this officer’s task. As Vincent Mazza describes the pain:

“The Company COs had the worst time with the KIAs and DOW. They had to send the families the personal things and a letter of regret. They would always receive letters from them (the families) asking them how they died and if they had pain. Now letters from grandchildren and young relatives... asking for information. I used to answer some requests but stopped because I still see them in my mind and feel the guilt that I’m still here and they are not.”

On 9 April, Lt. Col. Stanley Johnson sat down and accomplished that painful task. He wrote a full page and one half on official letterhead using a typewriter. No doubt the Battalion Clerk did the typing, but the words flowed from the commander’s heart. The task at the division level was an even greater challenge, owing to the hundred of such letters that had to be properly researched, carefully drafted, reviewed, corrected, typed and signed by the Division Commander. On 9 June 1945, the proofed and typed letter addressing the loss of Lt. Goodman reached Gen. Miley’s desk and he signed it along with the many others.

Eventually a telegram reached the Goodman family in Mazeppa, Minnesota. Every few weeks or so later there would be more confirmatory news. The family would open the local newspaper and read about their son. Then there a letter a letter from the Battalion Commander would arrive, then one from the Division Commander. Eventually letters would stream in from Earl’s platoon mates. And finally, a copy of Lt. Goodman’s Silver Star Citation, another letter from the War Department and an officially engraved Silver Star in a substantial hinged case. There is a reason why veterans called the sturdy, dark-blue leather-covered, satin-lined medal boxes “coffin cases”.

### Appendix C: Honor Role of the 139th AEB

**COMBAT FATALITIES: 25 DEC 44- 10 FEB 45**

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657 This does not include the combat fatalities for the 550th PIB or any attached units.
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COMBAT OPERATIONS

ARMÉE DES CAMPAIGN: 

Coming within the time limitations as prescribed, the 139th
Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the Ardennes Campaign
by virtue of having actively engaged the enemy in the vicinity of
Morhet, Flambourg, Hubertont, Flamizulle, Hande-St., Ethes, Campagne,
and Hautbellain, Belgium, during the period 4 January 1945 to 25
January 1945. The Engineer Battalion was ordered into this cam-
paign per Field Order No. (unavailable) Headquarters, 17th Air-
borne Division, for the purpose of stopping the onslaught of the
enemy's counter-offensive in the sector west of Bastogne and driving
the enemy out of the "Bulge".

RHINELAND CAMPAIGN:

Coming within the time limitations as prescribed, the 139th
Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the Rhineland Campaign
by virtue of having actively engaged the enemy in the vicinity of
Clervaux and along the banks of the Our River in Luxembourg during
the period 26 January 1945 to 10 February 1945. The Engineer
Battalion was ordered into this campaign per Field Order No. (un-
available) Hqs. 17th Abn Division, for the purpose of driving the
enemy from the west banks of the Our River in the vicinity of
Clervaux and executing reconnaissance of the Siegfried Line de-
fenses in the sector.

CENTRAL EUROPE CAMPAIGN:

Coming within the time limitations as prescribed, the 139th
Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the Central Europe Cam-
paign by virtue of having actively engaged the enemy in the vicinity
of Wesel, Munster, and Essen, Germany, during the period 24 March
1945 to 8 May 1945. The Engineer Battalion was ordered into this cam-
paign per Field Order No. (unavailable) Hqs. 17th Abn Division,
for the purpose of crossing the Rhine River via air in the vicinity
of Wesel, Germany to secure the high ground in this area and
thence to push on to seize and hold Munster, Germany.
BATTLES

Battle of Dead Men's Ridge:
The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the "Battle of Dead Men's Ridge" in the vicinity of Renaumont, Hougount, Huberment, Flamierge, and Pinsamont, Belgium during the period January 4 - 9, 1945 during the Ardennes Campaign. The engaging forces included the 3rd Battalion Remmer Brigade, 29th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, 8th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, and the 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment. This battle resulted in our forces holding commanding ground to the west of Bastogne, Belgium.

Battle of the Ourthe River Junction:
The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the "Battle of the Ourthe River Junction" in the vicinity of Herpont, Flamierge, Mande-St. Etienne, and Flizemolle, Belgium during the period January 9 - 14, 1945 during the Ardennes Campaign. This battle resulted in our forces effecting a junction with the British 51st Division and obtaining objectives along the Ourthe River line.

Battle of Compogne through Espanier:
The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the "Battle of Compogne through Espanier" in the vicinity of Houffalize to Haelen, Belgium, exclusive, during the period January 19 - 26, 1945 during the Ardennes Campaign. This battle resulted in our forces seizing and holding towns of Hautbellain, Wattermaal, and Espanier.

Battle of the Our River:
The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the "Battle of the Our River" in the vicinity of Clercux, Luxembourg during the period 26 January 1945 to 10 February 1945 during the Rhineland Campaign. This battle resulted in our forces capturing Clercux and Oberesambach, Luxembourg, patrolling the Our River Siegfried line defenses and establishing a limited bridgehead on the east bank of the Our River.

Operation "Varsity":
The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the operation "Varsity" in the vicinity of Wesel, Germany during the period 24 - 26 March 1945, during the Central Europe Campaign. This battle resulted in our forces seizing and holding the high ground in their vicinity, and capturing the bridges over the Issel River and Issel Canal intact.

Battle of the "New York" to "Paris" Line:
The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the "Battle of the New York" to "Paris" Line in the vicinity of Wesel and Aachen, Germany during the period 26 - 27 March 1945 during the Central Europe Campaign. This battle resulted in our forces clearing the enemy from this area and reaching the line "Paris" on schedule.
Battle of Dorsten:
The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the "Battle of Dorsten" in the vicinity of Dorsten, Germany during the period 28 - 29 March 1945 during the Central Europe Campaign. This battle resulted in our forces routing the enemy from and seizing the town of Dorsten.

Battle of Munster:
The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the "Battle of Munster" in the vicinity of Munster, Germany during the period 30 March 1945 to 3 April 1945 during the Central Europe Campaign. This battle resulted in our forces capturing the Hermann Goering Barracks and the city of Munster.

Battle of the Ruhr Pocket:
The 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion participated in the "Battle of the Ruhr Pocket" in the vicinity of Essen and Duisburg, Germany during the period 6 - 10 April 1945 during the Central Europe Campaign. This battle resulted in our forces capturing the cities of Essen, Duisburg, and Sulheim, Germany. Also captured Franz Von Papen.
OFFICE OF THE COMMANDING GENERAL

ARMY WAR COLLEGE

WASHINGTON D.C.

8 September 1945

SUBJECT: Letter of Appreciation

TO: Commanding General, 17th Airborne Division

Soldiers have the versatility of the American soldier been more ably demonstrated than by the intrepid men of the 17th Airborne Division. In our glorious victory over an enemy with dreams of world conquest, the officers and men of your division employed new techniques and new weapons with such boldness, skill and courage that they have earned for themselves the eternal gratitude and respect of our country.

Activated in April 1943 and trained in North Carolina and Tennessee, your division arrived in Europe in the fall of 1944. When the German Army drove a huge wedge into our lines in the Ardennes, the 17th Airborne was brought forward immediately and placed in the line south of Bastogne. Despite freezing weather and heavy resistance, your troops assaulted the German salient, forced the enemy to fall back, and by the end of December had penetrated the western frontier of the Reich.

After a brief rest, you were called upon to engage in another arduous mission. In one of the most decisive battles of the war, your paratroopers dropped on the eastern bank of the Rhine and routed the enemy so effectively that British and American infantrymen were able to sweep across the river with little delay in the drive which at last brought about the surrender of all Germany.

The memory of your soldiers who gave their lives in combat that our nation might be free will forever be cherished in the hearts of all Americans. In heartfelt remembrance of their sacrifices, it is my privilege on the eve of the inactivation of your division, to commend you, your officers and men for your gallant contribution to the cause of liberty.
Dear Dad & Em,

Just a couple of lines from me to let you know that I'm feeling swell and having a swell time and I hope that you are the same and not working too hard. I know that there is a heck of a lot of work to be done around the house and I wish that I could be home to help you do it but the war comes first. Things are very quiet here now and it doesn't seem that there is a war going on and if it wouldn't be for the uniform I could really have a good time here. The people are friendly and the country is very beautiful very much like it is a home, and if I could talk this lingo I wouldn't mind staying over here. The women are very nice and they don't use the paint that the girls in the states do to make them selves that way.

Friday May 24 was a big day for me and it will be one that I will remember for a long time Maj. Gen. Miley pinned the Bronze Star Medal on me and I shook hands with him. I received the medal for being one of the first men to enter the town of Essen and there were three other men with me when we did it. We were four miles ahead of the infantry and the four of us drove right into the heart of the enemy town and a quick reconnaissance and then got out and fast.

I met Harold Lovander here several weeks ago and I've seen him several times since he is the same as ever and he told me to say Hello to you for him. He and I are going to get together when this thing is all over and have a good time either where he lives or in Milwaukee. The 1016th Engrs. Tdwy. br. Co. is over here some where and I'm trying to find out were so that I can go over and see some of the boys that I was with in Camp Shelby and Camp Campbell.

I suppose that you have been reading in the paper about the point system the army is using to discharge the men, and have been wondering just how many points that I had. Well if you have here is the low down, I've been in the army 44 months and have spent 27 months overseas, got one battle star with a good chance of getting at least one more if not two each star is worth five points, and the bronze star good for five points. Totaling them all up and just counting
the one star that I have got I have a total of 89 points which is just five points short of what I need to get out. So I hope that we do get the other star althou I might not get out right away I should have a good chance of getting out before the end of the year.

It’s been raining and cold all week and I didn’t get a chance to do any boating or swimming but today it cleared up and I’m going to spend the hole afternoon down on the river. The little sun tan that I did have is just about gone and I have to get some of it back this afternoon if I can.

That’s all the news that I have right now so I’ll sign off take it easy and drop me a line when ever you get the time.

Your son

Bob
SUBJECT: Supplementary Missing Air Crew Report.

TO: Commanding General, IX Troop Carrier Command, APO 133, US Army.

Attention: AG Casualty Section.

1. With reference to Missing Air Crew Report, this headquarters, pertaining to crew of C-47A aircraft number 42-100916, piloted by 1st Lt. ALAN J. WADEER, O-753180, 96th Troop Carrier Squadron, 440th Troop Carrier Group, missing as of 27 December 1944, approximately three miles from Festagne, Belgium, and further reference to letter, this headquarters, subject: "Supplementary Missing Air Crew Report", dated 7 January 1945, the following further information concerning missing crew members is submitted:

   1st Lt. ALAN J. WADEER, O-753180, pilot, 96th Troop Carrier Squadron, 440th Troop Carrier Group, from missing in action, as of 27 December 1944, killed in action as a result of plane crash, 27 December 1944. Identification from identification tags, buried 7 January 1945. Place of death Arlon, Belgium. Place of burial U.S. Military Cemetery #1, Grand Falaise, France, as per list of Transmittal, Headquarters, IX Troop Carrier Command, dated 14 February 1945, with enclosures to wit: ONS Form No. 1, Report of Burial, and Inventory of Personal Effects, signed by WILLIAM E. SIMMONS, 1st Lt., 2566, 3043 OGCR Co., received this headquarters, 18 February 1945.

   2d Lt. LEE W. DALYAN, O-769100, co-pilot, 96th Troop Carrier Squadron, 440th Troop Carrier Group, from missing in action, as of 27 December 1944, killed in action as a result of plane crash, 27 December 1944. Identification was made by WD AGO Form No. 65, an EMT signed by LOUIS C. ESPOSITO, Capt., 480, a certification, signed by LOUIS C. ESPOSITO, Capt. Int. (A&M). The next information is received by a report found among personal effects, bearing the initials L D and by a clothing mark, L D. The first two letters were missing, buried 7 January 1945. Place of death Arlon, Belgium. Place of burial U.S. Military Cemetery #1, Grand Falaise, France, as per list of Transmittal, Headquarters, IX Troop Carrier Command, dated 14 February 1945, with enclosures to wit: ONS Form No. 1, Report of Burial, and Inventory of Personal Effects, signed by WILLIAM E. SIMMONS, 1st Lt., 2566, 3043 OGCR Co., received this headquarters, 18 February 1945. Further statement, that plane C-47A, serial number 2100916 (presumably our number 42-100916) was found at 438566 Sheet #17, 1-100,000 (Arlon), signed by LOUIS C. ESPOSITO, Capt., Int. (A&M).

2. No further information is available.

For the Commanding Officer:

CARL S. PICKER
Cpt., Air Corps, Adjutant.
Appendix D: Supporting Documentation

Confidential


Abroad aircraft 442-100016 on 27 December 1944, as we started on our run into the LZ we saw heavy flak in front of us and the ships of the 96th Troop Carrier Group were already into it. I saw one of the ships burst into flames, nose up and fall off into a spin. It hit the ground and no one bailed out. It burned immediately. We got to the LZ, dropped our glider and turned around. Ship 910 with Lt Foster was still in the lead of us and as we made our turn it was the last we saw of him. He was still flying and in good shape at the time.

As we made our way out the pilot pushed the throttles forward and I pushed the prop pitch forward to about 2400 RPM. We were hit then by an explosive shell which exploded in the fire extinguisher box between the pilot and co-pilot. The explosion knocked me back and a burst of bullets, probably 50 cal. riddled the cockpit directly behind the pilot. The cockpit was aflame by then and the pilot gave the command to bail out. I immediately went back and kicked out the door with emergency release. It didn't go out the first kick so I kicked it again and it went out. The radio operator was directly behind me with his chute on. I then turned around and the pilot and co-pilot were in the companion-way and Lt Harder again gave the command to bail out. I bailed out and after pulling my rip cord another chute opened below and to the left of me. I followed him down and I found the chute but the person had already left. I then laid low for a while and got my bearings and opened my escape kit and got the compass out, also my map and made my way back in the general heading of south-west. After walking about two to three miles I came upon the wreckage of a plane which I found to be mine. It was completely demolished and was burning but I found the Weight and Balance Book with 4016 on it. I didn't see anyone around. I didn't stay there long as I didn't know if I was in enemy held territory or not.

I kept walking and that night I slept in a little barn in a field. The next morning I kept walking and about noon I came upon a town and again laid low in a small barn and waited to see who was in the town. I waited about a half-hour when five jeeps and an armored car came up the road and went into town. I then made my way into the town and met some American soldiers. They interrogated me to make sure I was not a German and then took me to the 206th Cavalry Reconnaissance C.P. near St. Marie. From there they took me to their Group C.P. at Lièrinent. I was interrogated again and taken to G-3 at Arlon, they sent me to Luxembourg to G-3 at the Third Army Headquarters. I spent the night there and met the crew of a ship from the 439th who had crashed up. They had already contacted their group and said I could fly back with them. We flew back yesterday afternoon, 29 Dec 44.

Before the mission we were not briefed and were given no password which would have come in handy. My escape kit was under my shirt when I bailed out and the compass was really a great help.

The 96th Troop Sq ship crashed at a position which I later found out to be 5355-British Coordinates. My ship, 442-100016, crashed at a position which I later found out to be 5655-British coordinates and I landed in my chute within a mile of this position.

Robert London
2nd Sgt, 56423562.
HEADQUARTERS
FIRST ALLIED AIRBORNE ARMY
Office of the Commanding General

APO 740, US Army,
29 March 1945

AG 381 FLAME

SUBJECT: Commandation

TO Commanding General, IX Troop Carrier Command, APO 133, U. S. Army.

1. It is my desire to congratulate and to commend the officers and men of all ranks of IX Troop Carrier Command for their fine performance in connection with airborne operations of 24 March 1945.

2. The pilots and co-pilots of many aircraft displayed great courage in their determination to continue to their assigned DZ's and LZ's in the face of intense antiaircraft fire, exceeding anything previously encountered by our units in this theater.

3. The Commanding General, 6th Airborne Division, was most emphatic in his high praise of the precision which characterized the drop of his division. The Commanding General of the 17th Airborne Division has written me, expressing unbounded admiration for the skill, courage and devotion to duty of all crew members of our aircraft and gliders.

4. Many individual cases have been cited where damaged and burning aircraft continued to their assigned areas in spite of the fact that the crews well understood that continuing on course destroyed any probable chance of survival for themselves.

5. The conduct of glider pilots, in general, is beyond written words of commendation. Not only did they deliver a magnificent and well coordinated landing which in many cases was in the midst of hostile positions, but were immediately engaged with their airborne associates, in the hottest kind of hand to hand fighting. In one specific instance, a glider pilot serial immediately organized for all-around defense and withstood heavy counter-attacks with the weapons at their disposal, putting one enemy tank out of action in this engagement. The discipline and combat efficiency of these glider pilot soldiers has called forth the highest praise of division and regimental officers.

6. The extremely low number of abortive aircraft and the speed with which abortives were re-dispatched indicates superior performance by all ground echelons. This devotion to duty is worthy of the highest praise.
7. The courage and devotion to duty of all IX Troop Carrier Command personnel is worthy of the very highest standards of our armed forces.

8. It is my desire that this letter be brought to the attention of all personnel of your command.

/s/ L. H. Brereton
/t/ L. H. BRERETON

Reproduced Hq IX Troop Carrier Command (FWD) 4 April 1945
Lieutenant General, USA
Commanding

HEADQUARTERS, IX TROOP CARRIER COMMAND (FWD), APO 133, US Army, 4 April 1945

TO: Distribution A

It is with intense pride that I pass on the foregoing letter from the Commanding General, First Allied Airborne Army.

/s/ Paul L. Williams
/t/ PAUL L. WILLIAMS
Major General, USA
Commanding

Reproduced Hq 440th Troop Carrier Group 8 April 1945
During nearly every engagement where German armor was present, the reports came in: “German Tiger tanks are attacking our sector!” The near-craze over the invulnerability of the Panzerkampfwagen VI “Tiger” caused many to misidentify any tank as a Tiger. Most of the evidence indicates that there were no Tiger tanks assigned or attached to units operating in the 17th Airborne Division’s sector from 2-12 January 1945. The vast majority of tanks facing the paratroopers were of the Panzerkampfwagen IV and Sturmgeschütz III versions. Both were armed with a powerful 75mm gun.

Despite this technical oversight, the lack of Tigers in the paratroopers’ sector does not diminish the effect of dozens of German tanks attacking troops in the open with little organic anti-tank capability on the part of the Americans. The troopers were armed with the 2.36” Bazooka anti-tank weapon and anti-tank land mines and had attached armor units capable of destroying German tanks, but to a man in a foxhole with a .30 caliber rifle, that was only a small comfort. The accompanying table lists the numbers and types of tanks and assault guns available to the German units in the 17th Airborne Division’s sector of battle. These numbers reflect their starting armor strength on 16 December 1944.

By the time the German units reached their fighting positions west of Bastogne on 2 January 1945, their ranks were heavily depleted of tanks. Vehicles and equipment available to the Germans in December 1944 were less than suitable for the task at hand. Motorized transport figures showed that only about 80% of vehicles were available to the divisions. The best equipped divisions had 60 different types of vehicles. Obtaining spare parts in a timely manner was next to impossible.

Calculating the exact losses of armor taken by the opponents of the 17th Airborne Division reveals some interesting numbers. Here are some examples; the Führer Begleit Brigade’s first engagement occurred on 20 December in the vicinity of St. Vith. Remer sent a company of tanks north of St. Vith through Ober-Emmels. The 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion in positions on the reverse slope knocked out the first four tanks. Since Remer’s units were strung out along the road enroute to St. Vith, he was unable to make a concerted effort on the 20th. Remer was directed to make an assault near St. Vith on 21 December, whether or not all of his armored forces had arrived for the task. On 23 December, Remer’s armor force pushed west again where they were engaged by another group of tank destroyers. In this encounter they lost two more tanks.

On 25 December Kampfgruppe Mauke, from the 15. Panzergrenadier Division, with the support of several tanks, mounted an attack towards Champs northwest of Bastogne against the 327th GIR and the 502nd PIR to the north. Eighteen Panzerkampfwagen IV and Sturmgeschütz III participated in the attack. Three of the Panzers were knocked out by tank destroyers and two more by bazooka teams. Another was destroyed as it entered the village of Champs, where paratroopers engaged it. The Panzers that turned south against the 327th met a similar fate. Tanks and artillery pieces with direct fire accounted for the remaining twelve tanks. The entire armor force was destroyed. This amounts to 28% of the starting armor strength of the 15.

On the 26th, General Kokott organized another assault by the 26. VGD using ten tank destroyers. The entire force was put out of action by the effects of artillery and tank destroyer fire. These were presumably the Hetzer 38(t) from the 26. Panzerjäger Abteilung, leaving only four tanks unaccounted for in the 26. VGD. Most likely they were lost due to mechanical breakdown.

Another indicator of armor losses for the Germans is evident when analyzing the events of 30 Dec – 2 Jan. During these four days the 11th Armored Division engaged elements of the Führer Begleit Brigade and the 3. Panzergrenadier Division in a head-to-head battle. An exact count of German armor losses is not available, but the losses must have been considerable, numbering in the dozens. Remer reports to have lost four tanks on the 30th of December. On 3 January, the day before the 17th Airborne Division’s attacks commenced, Remer reported that he had about

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*658 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 72. Remer’s TO&E did not include any Panthers. These were most likely Mk IV tanks.*

*659 The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, 396, 417.*

*660 Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now, 344-5.*
twenty-five tanks and assault guns ready for action. He had fifteen in repair and another fifteen to twenty tanks disabled with mechanical problems. Because of a lack of fuel he was not able to tow them back for repairs. These figures amount to a 65% loss rate for the Führer Begleit Brigade.

One of the few mentions of a Mark VI tank can be found in the Combat Interview of members of the 513th PIR. The 3rd Battalion Commander, Major Morris Anderson, recounted events from the 7 January attack on Flamierge:

"While ANDERSON was selecting positions for his mortars and light mgs, and liaison was being established with our tanks, (1130) six enemy Mk IV and VI tanks made an attack on the initial objective... It was now 1200. The infantry moved off, firing as they went. The disabled tanks, which were being used as pill boxes fired to cover their advance. The half tracks were driven off by bazooka fire and one of the Mk VIs on the crest of the hill was destroyed. The exact method of destruction is not known and both the disabled tanks and the bazooka gunners claimed the kill. The tank remains to prove that it was done."

661 The Führer Begleit Brigade in the Ardennes, n.p.
662 Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now, 35. These numbers represent the reported armor and assault gun strength of the designated units at the outset of operation WACHT AM RHEIN on 16 December 1944.
663 Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now, 37. A Kampfgruppe of unknown strength of the 9. Panzer Division was sent to support the defense of Flamierge on 8 Jan. Some of the unit’s organic Sturmgeschütze, Panthers or Mk IV’s could have been in the assault.
664 Although no Jagdpanther tanks were assigned to the units facing the 17th Airborne Division, the Panzer Lehr Division, which operated on the 17th’s left flank, had 15 Jg Pz V’s in their table of organization. Pallud, Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now, 51. The author has not confirmed if any were seen in the 17th sector.
665 The Führer Begleit Brigade in the Ardennes, n.p. Remer reported that his unit was brought up to his full compliment of equipment before the Ardennes offensive. Due to the many battles, it is doubtful that more than half of the slated armor vehicles were available by 3 Jan due to mechanical breakdowns and combat losses. He reported only about 25-30 useable tanks and assault guns available after the Ardennes offensive. 10-12 were destroyed by enemy AT fire, 5-10 by mines and the rest of the losses were self inflicted by crews who ran out of gas or broke down and did not want their tanks to fall into Allied hands.
On 8 January, the 17th Airborne Diary reported two separate enemy counterattacks from the village of Flamizoulle. Fifteen to twenty tanks were repulsed by troopers from the 193rd GIR. The enemy lost four tanks in one attack and three more in another for a total of seven. The area around Flamizoulle was held by a mix of Grenadiers from the 3. and 15. Panzergrenadier Division and the 26. Volksgrenadier Division.

Mechanical breakdowns of German armor were an ever-present nuisance. In the winter, with freezing temperatures, a lagging supply system, suffering from a lack of petrol, all while on the offense, it must have been exceptionally difficult to make rapid repairs. Tanks sat idle awaiting maintenance, were towed to the rear for repairs or were abandoned and destroyed by their crews. According to Sepp Dietrich, a 20% loss of armor during the Ardennes campaign due to mechanical failure over the course of a three-day road march was not uncommon.

Given that the German tanks needed to move from the rear assembly areas to their jumping off points and then go on the attack, it is quite conceivable that during the period from 15-30 December as many as 50% of the armor was idle due to mechanical failure. Analyzing the measurable combat losses, of which forty can be accurately counted as having been destroyed by direct action and the expectations of mechanical breakdowns and losses due to mines, it is estimated that approximately thirty to fifty tanks were available in the 17th division sector on 3 January when they arrived to relieve the 11th Armored Division.

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666 Operational Diary, 17th Airborne Division, 5.
667 Hitler’s Ardennes Offensive, 17.
Appendix F: German Units

Führer Begleit Brigade

The Führer Begleit Brigade, commanded by Oberst Otto Ernst Remmer, was the key opponent to the 17th Airborne Division. The unit was sent to the west side of Bastogne in an effort to close the opening to Bastogne. The unit had undergone several reorganizations in the past and at the outset of Operation WACHT AM RHEIN it was organized as follows.668

- Panzer Grenadier Regiment with three Abteilungen:
  - Abteilungen 828 z.b.V (zur besondere Verfügung: for special attachment) with 1. 2. and 3. Schutz Kompanien and the 4. schwere Schutz Kompanie

- Panzer Regiment with 5 Kompanien of Panzer Kampfwagen IV
- Sturmgeschütz Battalion 120 with 4 Batterien of Sturmgeschütz III
- Artillerie Abteilung FBB with 1. 2. and 3. Leichte Feld Haubitze Batterien
- Führer Flak Regiment with 1. 2. 3. and 4. Self-propelled Batterien, and 5. 6. and 7. towed 8.8cm Batterien
- Panzer Aufklärungs Kompanie
- Various support organizations

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3. Panzergrenadier Division

The 3. Panzergrenadier Division was commanded by Generalmajor Walter Denkert and was one of the opponents of the 17th Airborne Division during the Ardennes campaign. Originally an infantry division, it was engaged in fighting in Poland in 1939. It became motorized in the summer of 1940, fought on the Eastern Front and was destroyed at Stalingrad. It was reformed in Southern France and was designated a Panzer Grenadier Division in June 1943. It was employed in France and in December moved to the Aachen sector before being folded into planning for the Ardennes offensive. The unit was assigned to the XLVIII Corps on the west side of Bastogne and was employed in an effort to close the opening to Bastogne.

The bitter fighting in the Aachen sector had taken a terrible toll on men and materiel. They lost nearly 25% of their troop strength. Following the hard fighting in December, the 3. sustained casualties of nearly 1000 men, but a solid stream of replacements made up for the losses. During the month of December the division received 16 Sturmgeschütz III and 17 Jagdpanzer IVs to replace losses in armored vehicles. During Operation WACHT AM RHEIN it was organized as follows:

- Division Stabs Kompanie
- 8. Panzergrenadier Regiment with three Abteilungen
- 29. Panzergrenadier Regiment with three Abteilungen
- 3. Panzergrenadier Regiment with three Abteilungen
- 103. Panzer Abteilung equipped with 25 Jg Pz IV/L70
- 103. Panzer Abteilung with 3 Sturmgeschütz Baterien equipped with a total of 20 StuG III
- 103. Äufläungs Abteilung with 3 Motorisierte Äufläungs Kompanien and 1 schweres Sturmpanzer-Kompanie
- 312. Flak Abteilung with 2 motorisierte Schwere Flak Batterien and 1 Leichte Schwere Flak Batterie
- 3. Artillerie Regiment with 2 Motorisierte Feld Haubitze Abteilungen with 3 Batterien each, and one self-propelled Feld Haubitze Abteilung with 3 Batterien
- 3. Pionier Abteilung with 3 Motorisierte Pionier Kompanien and 1 Leichte Pionier Kolonne
- 3. Nachrichten Abteilung with 1 Fernsprech Kompanie, 1 Funk-Kompanie and 1 Nachrichten Kollone
- Various support organizations

669 Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now, 35.
The 15. Panzergrenadier Division was commanded by Generalmajor Hans-Joachim Deckert was one of the opponents of the 17th Airborne Division during the Ardennes campaign. The unit served previously in Italy, France and would serve in the Netherlands and in Northern Germany during the final defense. The unit was assigned to the XLVIII Corps on the west side of Bastogne and was employed in an effort to close the opening to Bastogne. During OPERATION Wacht am Rhein it was organized as follows.

- Division Stabs Kompanie
- 115. Panzergrenadier Regiment with three Abteilungen:
- 104. Panzergrenadier Regiment with three Abteilungen:
- 115. Panzer Abteilung with 3 Panzer Kompanieen equipped with Panzer Kampfwagen IV
- Motorieziertes Panzerjäger Abteilung with 2 Jagdpanzer Kompanien, a Sturmgeschütz Zug, a Motoriezierte Panzerjäger Kompanie and a Schweres Flak Batterie among other support units
- 31. Schweres Flak Abteilung with 3 Motorieziertes Flak Batterien
- 31. Feldersatz (field replacement) Abteilung with 4 Panzergrenadier Kompanien and 1 Panzer Kompanie
- 33. Aufklärungs Abteilung with 3 Motorieziertes Aufklärungs Kompanien and 1 Schweres Sturmpionier Kompanie

The 26. Volksgrenadier Division was commanded by Generalmajor Heinz Kokott and was one of the opponents of the 17th Airborne Division during the Ardennes campaign. Originally an Infantry Division, it had been engaged in combat on the Eastern Front since July 1941. It was withdrawn from battle in September 1944 and designated the 26th VGD. It was nearly at full strength when it entered Belgium on 16 December 1944. The unit was assigned to the XLVIII Corps on the west side of Bastogne and was employed in an effort to close the opening to Bastogne. During Operation \textit{Wacht am Rhein} it was organized as follows:\textsuperscript{675}

- Division Stabs Kompanie
- 39. Panzergrenadier Regiment
- 77. Panzergrenadier Regiment
- 78. Panzergrenadier Regiment
- 26. Feld Ersatz Abteilung
- 26. Fusilier Abteilung
- 26. Artillerie Regiment with 4 Feld Haubitze Batterien
- 26. Pionier Abteilung
- 26. Panzerjäger Abteilung equipped with 14 Jagdpanzer 38t
- 26. Nachrichten Abteilung
- Various support organization

\textsuperscript{674} \textit{Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now}, 51.
\textsuperscript{675} \textit{A Time for Trumpets}, 645.
The reconstituted 84. consisted of three Grenadier regiments, the 1051, the 1052, and the 1062. The 1051 and 1052 each had two Grenadier battalions; the composition of the 1062 is unknown. The divisional artillery, the 184. Artillerie Regiment, consisted of four artillery battalions of mixed guns. Anti-tank forces were organized into the 184. Panzerjäger Abteilung, whose commander had been missing since 22 February. Interrogations of prisoners revealed he was most likely a deserter. Signal, engineer and headquarters elements rounded out the tattered composition of the 84.

- Division Stabs Kompanie
- 1051. Panzergrenadier Regiment
- 1052. Panzergrenadier Regiment
- 1062. Panzergrenadier Regiment
- 184. Artillerie Regiment
- 184. Pionier Abteilung
- 184. Panzerjäger Abteilung
- 184. Aufklärungs Abteilung
- 286. Feld Ersatz Abteilung
- 317. Volks Schutz Abteilung

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677 6th Airborne Division Intelligence Summary No. 34. Local Reserves, 15 March 1945, 2.
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# Photo Credits

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AC: Author’s Collection
AD: Author’s Design
ACP: Author’s Collection Photo
AMC: Author’s Militaria Collection
NARA: National Archives Records Administration
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