

Paratroopers' Odyssey

A History of the 517th Parachute Combat Team



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The 517th Parachute RCT Association, under President Charles E. Pugh, is proud to publish this history.

The Association was founded shortly after World War II to preserve the bonds of comradeship that were forged on the battlefields of Europe. Veterans of this Association served in the Rome-Arno, Southern France, Rhineland, Ardennes-Alsace and Central Europe campaigns.

517th Parachute RCT Association

William J. Lewis
Secretary/Treasurer

The Association's mandate to develop a unit history contained several key requirements. First, the history be complete, accurate and unglorified. Second, there be a reasonable balance between items of military and human interest. Finally, all material selected for publication be based on credible documentation.

These criteria have been met.

Clark L. Archer
Editor

This history is dedicated to all who served in the

517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team



517th Parachute Infantry Regiment
460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion
596th Parachute Engineer Company

Introduction

This is the story of the experiences of a separate parachute regimental combat team. It is written, not only for the surviving members of the combat team, but for their children and descendants. For those who gave their lives in these campaigns, it may serve to let their families and relatives know of their contribution. As many readers of this account may have been very young or not even present when Hitler's Nazi armies overran much of Europe and parts of Africa, it may also serve to let them know of the sacrifices that were made at this time to overcome a determined enemy and to show the necessity of being prepared against future aggression.

The members of this combat team were young Americans of that period where even the most senior battalion commanders and regimental staff officers were young graduates of ROTC with a year or two of service.

What motivated these people to close in against well defended enemy machine gun positions, often manned by elite Nazi SS troops, may be open to question. Perhaps initially it might have been patriotism, but later this was replaced by comradeship acting as a sort of life force inducing a loyalty that transcends friendship. They simply did not want to let their pals down. Good physical conditioning from long, hard training, and the spirit of optimistic youth willing to take a chance was also another probable ingredient.

It should be noted that although parachute units were only organized and equipped for short airborne operations and withdrawal, that they were usually kept in combat over long periods of time without proper transportation or supporting



Colonel Rupert D. Graves

artillery. This was probably due to necessity as well as the ability of the parachute units to operate successfully with the light equipment issued to them.

Although I have served with many different military organizations during my years of service, I have never served with any group that, compares with the spirit, the initiative, the physical qualifications and comradeship of the 517th RCT. I feel grateful for the opportunity given to me to take this unit overseas and bring it home.

We are indebted to those individuals who spent the long and painstaking hours devoted to compiling this story.

Rupert D. Graves
Colonel, U.S.A. (Ret.)

A History of the 517th Parachute Combat Team

Part One

Trial By Fire

Author's Preface

This has been a labor of love but it has not been done alone. I want to express special thanks to Clark Archer, Charles Pugh, and Bill Lewis, whose encouragement and support made this history possible; also to Joe Miller and Nolan Powell, who spent days and weeks at their own expense tracking down records at the National Archives and elsewhere. Grateful thanks and appreciation are also extended to the following, who contributed material and provided helpful comments:

John A. Alicki	Leroy Johnson
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William J. Boyle	Wayne D. Norwood
Raymond L. Cato	William Pencak
Thomas R. Cross	Walter P. Plassman
Robert W. Dalrymple	B.E. Putnam
Albin Dearing	James A. Reith
Albert P. Deshayes	Richard J. Seitz
Ralph Emmons	Dick Spencer
Bernard S. Freiberg	Carl E. Starkey
Ludlow Gibbons	Benjamin H. Sullivan
Allan Goodman	Wilbur H. Terrell
Rupert D. Graves	Myrle E. Traver
Howard E. Hensleigh	Thelma Vella
Raymond Hild	Louis P. Vogel
William F. Huffman	Louis A. Walsh
Richard C. Jackson	John Weddle

This history is intended to be a memorial to all who served in the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team. It has been possible to mention only a few men by name. To all the others ... the vast majority of the Combat Team, who did their duty bravely and well ... my sincere apologies.

Charles E. La Chaussee

Prologue

In early 1943 the United States had been at war for a little over a year. The future was cloudy. How long the war would last and its final outcome were uncertain. Although Japanese expansion had been halted in the Pacific, it was still a long way to Tokyo. The Germans held all of Europe and were deep within Soviet Russia.

This war was far different from its predecessor of 1914-18. The tank and the airplane had restored mobility to the battlefield. American airborne forces underwent a vast expansion, growing from a parachute test platoon to five airborne Divisions and several smaller units.

The paratroopers were a new kind of soldier, trained to jump behind enemy lines and fight without outside help until relieved. They were brash, cocky, self-reliant, aggressive individualists, and a great deal was expected of them. How well some of them met those expectations is the subject of this book.

The 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team, organized relatively late in the war, was destined to play a major role in the campaigns that led to the total defeat of the German Army and the liberation of Western Europe.

Chapter 1

Standing Alone*

* "Standing Alone" is the meaning of the Cherokee Indian word "Currahee."

The story of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team begins with the activation of the 17th Airborne Division on March 15, 1943. The Division's parachute units were the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment, the 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, and Company C, 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion. The 517th was at Camp Toccoa, Georgia; the 460th and C/139 were at Camp Mackall, North Carolina.

For the next several months all men volunteering for parachute duty at induction stations throughout the United States were sent to Camp Toccoa. The 517th was charged with screening the volunteers and assigning those qualified to either the infantry, artillery, 517 PIR Commander 1943 or engineers. Officers of the 460th and C/139 were placed on temporary duty at Toccoa to help with the screening, and men assigned to those units were sent to Camp Mackall.

As units filled up they were to be given basic training at their home stations and then sent for parachute qualification to Fort Benning, Georgia. After jump training all units, including the 517th, would join the 17th Airborne at Camp Mackall.

Receiving and screening one to two hundred men a day was a pretty big order for the 517th. On activation the Regiment had a total strength of nine officers, headed by newly-appointed commanding officer Lt Col Louis A. Walsh, Jr. They were joined three days later by the "cadre" under command of Major William J. Boyle, bringing the Regiment's strength to about 250.

Two days before the cadre's arrival the first trainload of parachute volunteers had pulled into the railroad station at Toccoa, early and unexpected. The nine officers met the train, drove the recruits to camp in borrowed trucks, issued some clothing and bedding and--with some help from the Post garrison--cooked and served them their first meal.

They were the first of many. Through the Spring of 1943 trains arrived at Toccoa daily with contingents of from 50 to 150 men. Each group was met at the station and trucked to the parade ground where a 34 foot tall parachute "mock tower" had been erected. Lieutenant John Alicki, favored by fortune with a rugged appearance, greeted them with a blood-and-guts speech intended to scare off the timorous.

"Awright, ya volunteered for parachute duty, now's your chance to prove ya meant it!" Still in civilian clothing, each man climbed the tower, was strapped into a parachute harness, and tapped on the rump. Most made it. Those who did not were immediately headed elsewhere.

517 PIR Commander 1943



**Col. Louis A. Walsh, Jr.
(Maj. Gen. USA Ret.)**

"In" and "out" platoons were formed. Those who survived the mock tower went to the "In" platoon for further screening. This consisted of a medical examination by Regimental Surgeon Paul Vella and his staff, followed by an interrogation by their potential officers as to why they had applied for parachute duty. Many answers were interesting and some hilarious. A few had been advised by doctors to take up parachuting to help overcome their fear of heights. Some with criminal records had been told their slates would be wiped clean. Those failing the screening process were sent to the "out" platoon and the balance assigned to units.

The military historian S.L.A. Marshall described the American WW II paratroopers as "adventurous kids from the wrong side of the tracks." This was close, but they were more than that. In prewar, depression America there had hardly been any "right" side of the tracks. The paratroopers came from all social and economic levels. Most were teenage kids, but some were married men in their twenties. There were roughnecks and brawlers, but also some saints and scholars. The common denominators uniting them were willingness to take a chance and refusal to admit there was anything in the world they couldn't handle.

Regimental Surgeon



Maj. Paul D. Vella

As men assigned to the artillery and engineers moved to Camp Mackall the infantry began basic training. Camp Toccoa had been a National Guard summer training post called Camp Toombs. With the coming of World War II it had been taken over by the Federal Government and retitled.* High in the mountains of northeastern Georgia, Camp Toccoa had a good climate and a natural training aid in Mount Currahee, 3 ½ miles away. The nearest town was the sleepy village of Toccoa.

*"Toombs", although the name of a distinguished Southern soldier, is a little on the gloomy side.

The isolation of Camp Toccoa had certain advantages from a purely military view-point. With few outside distractions and no higher headquarters close by, the Regiment was free to develop on its own. Major Paxton, the S-3, drew up a basic training program and the cadre went to work on the recruits. Companies taught the fundamentals, battalion committees trained crew-served weapons teams, and regiment supervised training in intelligence, communications, medical treatment, and other specialized subjects.

Military organizations are strongly influenced by the character of their commanders. Because of its isolation and greenness this was particularly true of the 517th. At age 32, Louis Walsh was young, cocky and aggressive. A '34 USMA graduate, he was the first in his class to make full colonel. He had been with the airborne since its earliest days and had spent three months as an observer with U.S. forces in the Southwest Pacific. Having seen combat in its most primitive form under atrocious conditions, he was determined to prepare the 517th to survive, fight, and win under any circumstances.

To reach this goal Colonel Walsh set extremely high standards. Physical conditioning was paramount. The paratroopers invented jogging thirty years before it became popular. Each morning after reveille the order was bellowed out:

"Riiiiight ., .face. , .double time. , .maaarch,"

and the entire command, colonel to private, was off on a two-mile run around camp, in step and in formation. In the afternoon there was either a routine run of six to eight miles or a seven-mile special up and down Mount Currahee. Once or twice a week "speed marches" of five miles in forty minutes were made, with full packs and all weapons--including mortars and machine guns. Throughout all training pushups were administered as mild punishments. A descriptive chant developed which was sung while running in formation:

"Every day we run up to the top of Currahee,
Fifty pushups after that's too goddamn much for me,"

Each trooper was required to qualify as 'expert' with his individual weapon, 'sharpshooter' with another, and 'marksman' with all crew-served weapons in his platoon. None of these were easy. For weapons qualification, battalions bivouacked at the snake-infested Camp Toccoa range. There was plenty of ammunition. Those who failed to make the required qualifications the first time re-fired until they succeeded. Each week those who met the requirements were allowed to come back to camp while the others kept at it. After several weeks, despite best efforts, a hard core of "bolos"* still remained. Eventually they managed to sneak back in more or less unnoticed. Colonel Walsh's marksmanship requirements, while highly desirable, were not always attainable.

* The term "bolo" originated during the Philippine insurrection, when men who could not qualify with rifles were contemptuously told the only weapon they were fit to use was the "bolo" machete.



On week nights "officer's school" was conducted for three hours after the evening meal. Classes were held in various subjects ranging from "the platoon in the attack" to rigging bundles for parachute drop. Field grade officers and senior captains were the instructors. After class the officers were free for what remained of the evening but still had to instruct the troops the next day. Most platoon leaders, almost as inexperienced as the troops they were instructing, managed to stay ahead only by cramming on field manuals long into the night.

Despite this harsh regimen -- or perhaps because of it -- most of the officers and men of the 517th were solidly behind Colonel Walsh. Young men tend to cynicism and like all Americans they often made flippant remarks, but inwardly they understood what he was trying to achieve. They were proud of themselves and the outfit and ready to follow wherever he might lead.

From the incoming manpower, a three-battalion regiment of 142 officers, 2 warrant officers, and 1,856 enlisted men had to be created. The Tables of Organization and Equipment for parachute units were restricted by the technology of the time. Everything had to be deliverable by the parachutes and aircraft then available. It was visualized that paratroops would land on or near their objectives and fight for only a few days before being relieved. Units were to be "lean and mean" with no non-fighters or administrative frills.

The rifle squads were the cutting edge of the sword. There were two per platoon, six per company, and eighteen in each battalion. Each rifle squad consisted of a squad leader, an assistant, a three-man machine gun team, and seven riflemen. Two such squads and a 60mm mortar squad made a rifle platoon, commanded by a lieutenant with an assistant platoon leader, a platoon sergeant, and a few runners.

From company through regiment the organization was "triangular." Three rifle platoons made a company, three companies a battalion, and three battalions a regiment. At battalion and regimental levels additional support was provided. The battalion headquarters company included 81mm mortar and machine gun platoons. At regiment there were headquarters and service companies.

To free company and battalion commanders from administrative chores, personnel, food service, and supply were centralized in Service Company. This looked good on paper but did not work out well in practice, because the commanders lost control of factors that affected morale. In the 517th, Supply Sergeants were released to companies and clerks found their way into orderly rooms, but Service Company operated battalion messes throughout the war. Anyone who has tried to feed 600 people at one sitting can imagine the result. Out of necessity the troopers normally subsisted on the individual C and K rations in the field. These were intended only for emergencies, but became the steady diet.

The regiment was authorized only enough vehicles to meet garrison administrative needs. This was acceptable in airborne operations, but in prolonged ground combat -- which was the case most of the time for the 517th -- the shortage of vehicles

was a constant headache and source of hardship.

There were seldom any complaints over the Regiment's Medical Service. The Tables of Organization allowed eight Medical Corps officers, one dentist, and 69 enlisted men. These were divided into a Headquarters and three Battalion sections. The Headquarters section took care of supply, records, and reports, and tended the sick and injured of Headquarters and Service Companies.

Each Battalion section had two medical officers, seventeen men, and a jeep. This allowed two aid men to each rifle company, two litter teams, and a Battalion Aid Station. The jeep was rigged up as a platform for two litter cases. the Battalion Aid Stations were dressing stations and relay points for the evacuation of wounded, who were carried to Field Hospitals by Ambulance Collecting Companies.

Though understaffed and under-equipped, the Regiment's Medical service performed brilliantly throughout the war. On innumerable occasions lives were saved by evacuation and treatment under desperate conditions. The Medics were always well up front with the riflemen. Many men are alive today because they were there.

It wasn't all deadly serious. One night on returning from compass-course training, Major Boyle noticed a crowd of men gathered around the B Company supply room. He pushed his way through and found the B Company Supply Sergeant perched on a high counter. A large lion cub lay docilely on the floor .

It seemed that Captain Eldia Haire, deciding that his company needed a mascot, had persuaded the St. Louis Zoo to send the lion by way of helping the war effort. Although only a cub, the lion was big and potentially dangerous.

The mob scene was dispersed. Locked up in a hut of its own, the lion proceeded to reduce a pile of pillows and mattresses to a large stack of GI duck feathers. Colonel Walsh got wind of the affair but hesitated to take action. The feline might help morale, although he would have a hard time explaining to the authorities if anyone got hurt. For several weeks groups of B Company men were seen walking -- or being walked by -- the lion on the end of a long, strong chain.

A few weeks later the first Regimental "Prop Blast" party was held. As the ceremonies were winding up Major Boyle sensed that the supply of spirits was about to run out, and began to leave for the off-post "Hi-Dee-Ho" club. Several others joined him, including "Ike" Walton. All piled into Boyle's ancient Ford. Walton had never seen the lion, so at his urging they detoured by B Company. Colonel Walton then decided that it would be a great idea to bring the lion to the party. No one was going to disagree with the Regimental executive officer, so they pushed the feline into the back seat of the car and rolled off .

Cats do not like being awakened, particularly in the middle of the night; they also generally dislike automobiles. The lion perceived Boyle as the chief villain and tried to escape, taking several swipes at him. Medical attention was required.

Next morning Major Boyle arrived at the rifle range looking like the Sultan of Swat, his head swathed in a turban-like bandage with steel helmet perched on top. Colonel Walsh eyed him suspiciously.

"What happened to your head?"

"Sir, the lion got a little too playful last night."

That finished it as far as Colonel Walsh was concerned. In his words " ... I managed to get rid of the damned thing by convincing Jupe Lindsey that he ought to have it as a mascot ... " The lion was shipped out to join the unfortunate 515th Parachute Infantry at Fort Benning.

Regimental S-2 Captain Albin Dearing was a sophisticated and cosmopolitan man with literary and theatrical connections. On learning one day that the well-known comedian Bob Hope was scheduled for an appearance in Atlanta, Dearing asked Colonel Walsh for permission to try to get him to make a side trip to Camp Toccoa. To the great surprise of everyone except Dearing, Hope agreed, and a few days later a C47 carrying him and his troupe put down after dark at a tiny nearby airstrip.

Bob Hope was (and is) a quick study. His success is based in large part upon his ability to adapt to the idiosyncrasies of any particular audience. Enroute to the camp Colonel Walsh gave him a quick rundown on paratroopers and parachute training.

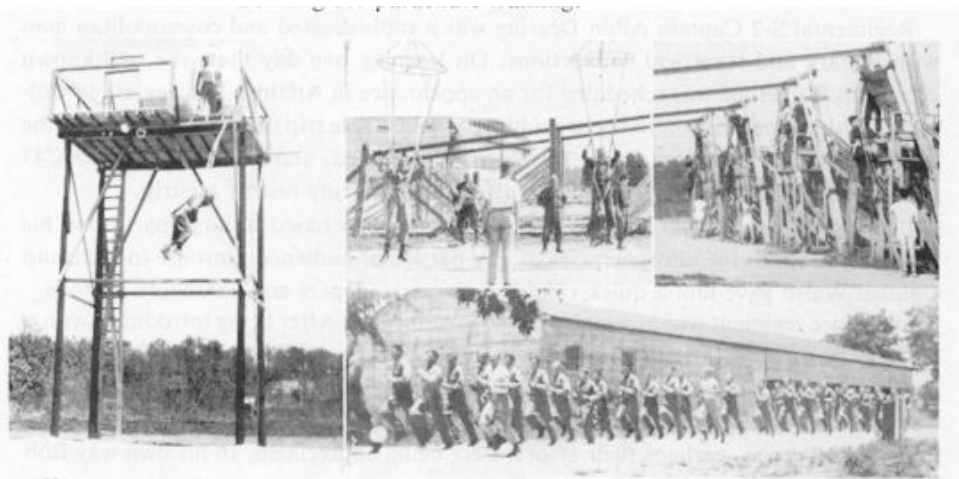
The entire regiment was assembled in the Post theatre. After being introduced with a not very original pun ("... I now present our last Hope. ...") Mr. Hope delighted his audience by pretending to struggle through an exaggerated pushup. The performance was brilliant. The troopers felt that if a celebrity like Bob Hope could take time to visit tiny Camp Toccoa, perhaps their efforts were being appreciated. In his own way Bob Hope contributed greatly to the war effort.

It had been planned to fill the Battalions in numerical sequence. By the end of April Major Boyle's 1st Battalion was almost complete. At the end of the following month Major Seitz' 2d Battalion was pretty well on its way. But in late June or early July, while Major Zais' 3d Battalion was still waiting for its first recruit, the flow of volunteers to Toccoa was suddenly turned off. It was announced that the 3d Battalion would be filled with Parachute School graduates who had already completed basic. Higher headquarters apparently felt that the 517th had rejected too many men and that the selection process was taking too long.

Part of the problem may have been faulty bookkeeping. Men en route to Toccoa were picked up as "assigned" to the 517th when they left the Induction stations*; men awaiting shipment out of Toccoa were also carried as "assigned" until they reached their new destinations.

* Some never arrived. General Walsh likes to tell of how "... the Governor of one of our distinguished western States released 50 life prisoners on the condition that they volunteer for parachute duty, They were loaded on the railroad and haven't been heard of since ..."

The Regiment had applied the medical standards prescribed by the War Department for parachute duty. Colonel Walsh had been allowed full discretion in all other areas. His Battalion commanders may have been over-selective, but hindsight is easy. The bottom line is that very few of the men selected ever let the outfit down. In late summer an advance detail staked out a claim at Camp Mackall and the Regiment moved to Fort Benning for parachute training.



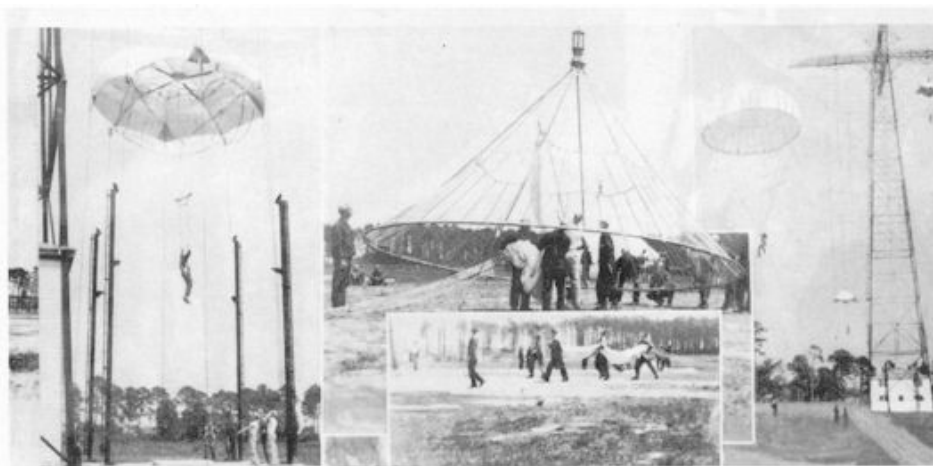
Parachutists Training, Fort Benning, GA

The Parachute School was a model of military efficiency in the highest sense of the term. Most of the School's physical plant was tucked away in a corner of Lawson Field, behind the airplane hangars. There were 34 foot "mock towers", similar to the one at Toccoa, and airplane mockups, "landing fall trainers", the "suspended harness", the "plumbers nightmare" and other instruments of torture. In the Main Post area were four 250 foot steel parachute towers, modeled after one that had been at the New York World's Fair of 1940.

The Parachute School Instructors were as fine a group of NCO's as any that has ever been assembled. The School had originally been cad red by the Test Platoon and the 501st Parachute Battalion, and continually added a few outstanding graduates of each class to its staff. Each Parachute School instructor was a rugged physical specimen with an air of authority and command that was envied by most officers. They established a tone and set a pattern of behavior that carried over into every American parachute unit.

The parachute course consisted of A, B, C, and D stages, each a week long. Physical conditioning was emphasized. The 250 foot towers were used in C stage, and D stage consisted of five live jumps.

The months of jogging, pushups, speed marches, running up and down Currahee, and all the rest paid off for the 517th troopers. They were more than ready for the worst the school could dish out. The School Instructors, accustomed to classes of men who had finished ordinary basic training, were astonished to find that the 517th men were in as good shape as they themselves were. Extra miles and pushups were piled on to find chinks in the 517th's armor, to no avail. As hard as they laid it on, the 517th troopers grinned and asked for more. It was finally tacitly conceded that there was no way the Instructors were going to get the 517th to cry "Uncle."

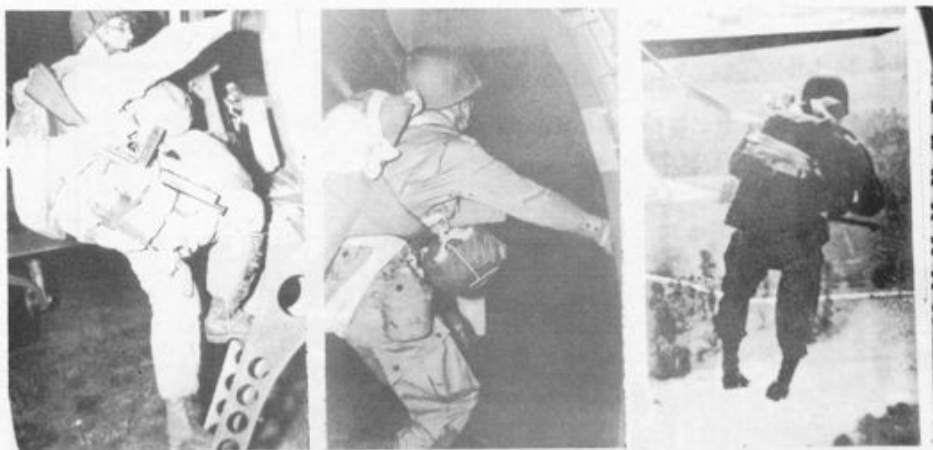


250 foot training tower, Ft. Benning, GA

No paratrooper will ever forget the "Command Sequence." The red light at the exit door comes on. "GET READY. ...STAND UP. ...HOOK UP" ... the plane sways and bucks, and you are on your feet struggling to hook the snap fastener over the anchor cable ... "CHECK EQUIPMENT" ... a quick look at the parachute and webbing of the man in front ... "SOUND OFF FOR EQUIPMENT CHECK" ... "Fifteen OK" ... "Fourteen OK" ... and so on down the line. ...the plane's engines backfire and it slows down, almost stalling ... the green light flashes on ... "LET'S GO! ", ... a sickening feeling in your lower gut, but you are determined to take those next few steps ... suddenly, silence and you are suspended in space until hit by a force of 4 or 5 G's ... overhead is a canopy of white, and all is serene until you realize that the ground is rushing up to meet you at fifteen miles per hour .

Afterward, a euphoric "high" that lasts several hours or days. ..or until the next Jump.

The 517th breezed through jump school with no washouts, setting a record that has endured to this day. School Commandant General Ridgely Gaither said that the 517th's battalions were without equal in discipline and effectiveness--which says a great deal for Colonel Walsh's selection and training methods. The 517th troopers were the first to wear the steel helmet in jump training; until then a modified football helmet had been used.



Stairway to the stars.

Stand-in-the-door.

Original space walk.

On completion of jump training the 1st and 2nd Battalions moved on to Mackall while the 3d remained at Benning to complete fill-up. Leaves were granted, and cities and towns rejoiced in the sight of jump wings and gleaming jump boots, whose proud owners had been allowed to stuff their pants into them for the first time.

Camp Mackall was not much different from Toccoa but bigger, on level ground. Everyone was quartered in the same one-story, uninsulated "hutments" heated with coal stoves, and the same drab, all-male existence went on. Passes were allowed, but after a few visits to the local small towns most troopers decided they might just as well stay in camp. The 17th Airborne was big on athletics, and the 517th shook it up a little by fielding football and boxing teams that won the Division championships.

One day an inspection team from Headquarters Army Ground Forces arrived at Camp Mackall to test the Regiment's physical fitness. Using more-or-less scientific statistical sampling methods, men and units were selected and put through their paces. Individuals took the Physical Fitness Test, consisting of pullups, pushups, and other weird calisthenics, done against time. Platoons and companies were chosen to run and march, with and without equipment, for various distances.

When all was done the results were analyzed and announced. The 517th had taken first, second, and third place in all tests and events, scoring higher than any unit tested before or since.

Undeniably, the 517th was a regiment of jocks.

Through the fall the regiment conducted unit training--tactical exercises for the squad, platoon, company, and battalion. Effort was made to conclude each phase of training with a parachute jump. Sometimes jumps had to be cancelled because of weather or lack of airplanes, but men and units averaged one per month.

In one exercise at Maxton Air Base Catholic Chaplain Father Alfred Guenette distinguished himself by jumping twice but only landing once. On the first jump the wire-and-canvas "pack tray" of his parachute snagged on a projection on the airplane's door. The priest hung outside the plane, beating helplessly against the fuselage, until the air crew noticed something wrong and dragged him back inside. Father Guenette bravely drew another parachute and tried again, this time successfully.

The newly-established Airborne Center at Camp Mackall was now prescribing training doctrine. One of its requirements for parachute units was a 300-mile flight, followed by a night jump and a three-day ground exercise, with all supply by air. The 517th took its turn in this operation in January, working with the same troop carrier formations that later were to drop the 82nd and 101st in Normandy, and the 517th itself in Southern France. The exercise was successful and unremarkable, except that due to an error in altimeter settings C Company dropped at an altitude of 200 feet. Fortunately there were no malfunctions. A day after the landing the weather turned cold, with sleet, snow and freezing rain. Men became walking icicles and found that the standard jump suit and boots were not very practical for cold-weather wear.

In February the regiment moved to Tennessee to take part in maneuvers being conducted by Headquarters Second Army. The 'Tennessee Maneuvers', were a sort of little practice war that went on year around. Divisions and regiments came and went, being assigned to either the "red" or the "blue" forces. Participation in the Tennessee maneuvers was supposed to be the final test before a unit could be pronounced combat-ready.

Without the stimulus of live fire and with inadequate umpire control the maneuvers were ludicrous. Units marched day and night through rain and mud. When opposing forces did meet, a sort of "Pickett's Charge" by one side or the other usually resulted. Malaria discipline was tested by wearing mosquito headnets in the winter cold and rain. On one occasion the regiment marched for 24 consecutive hours, covering over fifty miles.



One cold day in March when all were shivering and knee-deep in mud, it was announced that the parachute elements of the 17th Airborne Division were being pulled out for overseas shipment as the 517th Regimental Combat Team. This news was received with greater elation than the end of the war a year later. If there is a special hell reserved for soldiers who have sinned, it must be something like the Tennessee maneuvers.

So, from the mud of Tennessee, the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team emerged. The parachute units were hastily shipped back to Camp Mackall to prepare for overseas movement, leaving the glider-riders of the 17th Airborne to their own devices.

The 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, with an authorized strength of 39 officers and 534 enlisted men, consisted of a Headquarters and four firing Batteries, each with four 75mm pack howitzers. The 75 had been originally developed for animal transport in mountain warfare. It was a relatively light and versatile artillery piece which threw a 13.9 pound shell for a maximum range of 9,650 yards.* The 75 broke down into seven pieces for parachute drop. A "ground control pattern" connected the bundles in descent, preventing the pieces from floating off in seven different directions.

* M41A1 shell.

Two weeks before embarkation the Battalion commander and staff of the 460th were relieved. Lt Col Raymond L. Cato, USMA '36, and eight officers of the 466th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion were assigned in their place.

Company C, 139th Airborne Engineer Battalion, was redesignated the 596th Airborne Engineer Company. The 596th had a company headquarters and three platoons, with an authorized strength of 8 officers and 137 enlisted men. It was commanded by Captain Robert Dalrymple. He and his officers had been hand-picked, and had attended a 30-day course at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, prior to the Company's activation.

The Engineers were lightly armed and equipped, but highly trained in their missions of construction and destruction. This training -- particularly in the removal of mines and booby-traps--was to stand them in good stead on the battlefields of Europe.

Most of the enlisted artillerymen and engineers shared a common background with the 517th Infantrymen, having entered the Army and gone through the Camp Toccoa screening process at about the same time. The 460th and 596th became integral parts of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team, and provided it loyal and enthusiastic support throughout its career.

The 517th RCT received no special augmentation to allow it to function as a separate unit. It was expected to operate as a small Division, although it lacked many of the specialized services and agencies available to a larger force. It was, in fact, "standing alone" and would have to make do with what it had.



On return to Camp Mackall all efforts were concentrated on preparation for overseas movement. Wills and Powers of Attorney were made out, leaves granted, and shots taken for virtually every communicable disease known to man. Crew-served weapons, artillery, and vehicles were cosmolined, crated, and readied for shipment. When all was done most companies and batteries were left with little more than individual weapons, the First Sergeant's records chest, and a broom.

In the midst of this activity the word spread one day that Colonel Walsh had been relieved. It was a real shock to the 517th troopers. He had put all he had into making the regiment a first-class fighting force with an esprit and elan second to none. Unknown to most, he had frequently gone to bat with higher headquarters for his officers and men. On at least one occasion he had offered to quit unless charges he felt were unjust were dropped. It was a personal tragedy. The majority were angry and felt that he had been sandbagged.

But in the Army as elsewhere life must go on. Colonel Walsh's successor was Lt. Colonel Rupert D. Graves, USMA '24, who came from command of the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion. A somewhat older man in his early 40's, Colonel Graves was cool, calm, unassuming, and professional. Like all new commanders he was closely watched while the troops, treading carefully and with great circumspection, tried to take his measure. Graves quickly proved to be likeable and unflappable, and before long things settled back to normalcy.

In early May the RCT components staged through Camp Patrick Henry, near Newport News, Virginia. The troopers milled about more or less aimlessly for ten days, making the acquaintance of some lovely members of a W AC contingent and an unlovely shipment of Air Corps replacement officers who were to be their shipboard companions. Some raucous paratroopers tried to get one of the aviators to give them flying lessons from the second-floor balcony of a service club, without success.



On May 17th the troopers climbed the gangplanks for their great adventure. The 517th boarded the former Grace liner Santa Rosa* with the WACs and aviators, while the 460th and 596th loaded onto the Panama Canal ship Cristobal. As the Santa Rosa pulled away from the dock Chief Warrant officer Everett Schofield, Regimental Personnel officer, was at the rail with a few others. Schofield, the oldest man in the regiment and a veteran of the First World War, found himself reenacting scenes that had taken place twenty-six years before. He must have had a sense of "deja vu." Indicating the troopers swarming allover the ship, the Chief said, "Take a good look. This outfit'll never be the same again."

* By an extremely odd coincidence, the shrine of the actual Ste Roseline was going to become familiar to them all within a few months.

Chapter II

Arrividerci Roma

In late afternoon Santa Rosa and Cristobal sailed down the James River. At Hampton Roads the transports were joined by a Navy destroyer and the little convoy headed out into the open Atlantic. The odyssey of the 517th RCT had begun. Although the ships were overcrowded and had few amenities it was a pleasant trip under sunny skies. The destination was unknown but the majority felt it would be England. It was common knowledge that the invasion of Europe would soon begin and parachute troops would be needed. Few gave any thought to the possibility of submarine or air attack; the war was still something to read about in the newspapers.

Duty rosters for the shipboard housekeeping chores had been posted on bulletin boards. An hour after embarkation Lieutenant John (Tiger) Rohr of B company discovered, to his horror, that he had been detailed as an assistant to the troop mess. His job was to stand with a thermometer beside a hot water tank and make sure that the troops washed their mess gear after every

meal. This was a tedious chore for a man of spirit. Rohr endured the indignity for almost an entire day, and even got a little fun out of it by growling at the WAC's, "**Wash** that mess kit, soldier. Ya wanna get the GI's?" But it soon became tiresome, and Tiger decided to exercise a little imagination. Somehow he found 'a list of all officers aboard -- including the Air Corps contingent -- and gained access to the ship's PA system.

Selecting the first aviator on the list, he announced, "Now hear this ... Lieutenant Ashe, report to the troop mess. Lieutenant Ashe ..." Tiger then dropped the mike and raced below, arriving at the troop mess just before the 19-year old Ashe. With all the authority of a first lieutenant speaking to a second, Tiger explained that "I am Lieutenant Rohr, Chief Mess Officer. You have been detailed as one of my assistants. Your job will be to make sure that the water is kept at a boil and that the troops wash their mess gear after every meal ... Are there any questions? I'll be around to check up from time to time, and if you need me in the meantime I'll be in my stateroom ..."

The guileless Ashe performed the duty for the rest of the voyage. Rohr proved to be a poor supervisor; he never went back.

The presence of 200 young ladies on board Santa Rosa naturally drew the 2,000 males like flies to honey. Measures were taken to prevent over-fraternization, but no amount of regulation has ever been able to alter human behavior. After dark blackout curtains were drawn and no one was allowed on deck, but Santa Rosa was a big ship and it was impossible to police all the gangways and passages. One young individual who considered himself quite a lady's man boasted of his prowess until his fellow-officers could no longer endure it. They set up a "sting" operation, in which the victim received a series of notes from a secret admirer. After a prolonged courtship a meeting was arranged. The unfortunate Casanova discovered that his lover was a well-padded and disguised brother officer, and the tryst was suddenly broken up by the arrival of his friends.

One dark night the ships slipped through the Straits of Gibraltar and it became obvious that the destination was Italy. After hugging the coast of Africa for a few days the transports headed northeast. Off Sardinia there was a little excitement aboard Santa Rosa when it came near a floating mine. A crew member got a rifle, but dared not fire because the mine was only a few yards from the ship's side. While the spectators held their breath waiting for an explosion the ship sailed on, leaving the mine bobbing wickedly in its wake.



Naples, Italy



Rome, Italy

This idyll came to an end when Santa Rosa and Cristobal docked at Naples on May 31st. The troopers filed down gangplanks into waiting railroad cars and were carried to a staging area in the Neapolitan suburb of Bagnoli. Enroute Colonel Graves was handed an order directing the RCT to take part in the attack from Valmontone to Rome next day. The 517th was ready to go, but since crew-served weapons, artillery, and vehicles had been loaded separately it would have to be with only rifles. After this was pointed out the order was cancelled and the RCT moved on to "The Crater ." The Crater was the bed of a long-extinct volcano that was rumored to have been the private hunting reserve of Neapolitan royalty (such as that may have been). It was a flat, circular area surrounded by the volcano's rim. Whatever hunting had been done there had probably ceased a hundred years before. The troopers set up a tent camp and settled down to wait for weapons and vehicles to arrive.

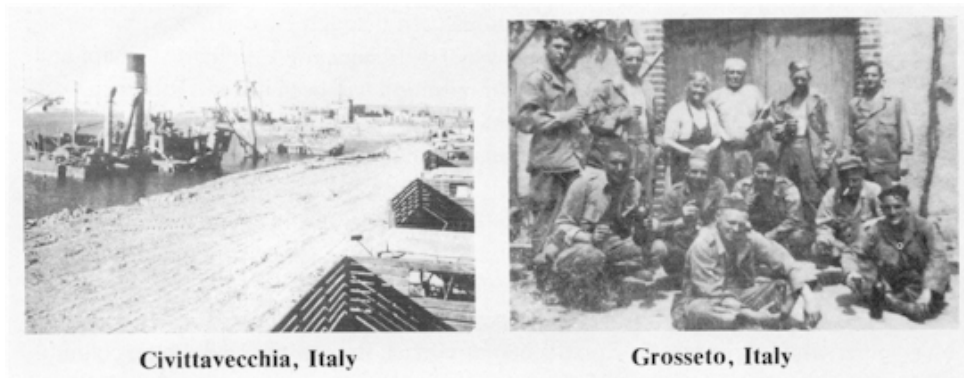
It turned out to be a two weeks' wait. Activities were varied. A lucky few went on pass to Naples. A team from the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion put on an edifying demonstration of German weapons. The troopers found the high rates of fire of the Ma 42 and MP 40 "burp gun" highly impressive. Ordnance experts assured them that at those rates of fire the weapons were bound to be inaccurate, but many skeptics decided that the Ordnance were not the ones who were going to be shot at. The rifle companies were assigned 10% overstrengths to replace casualties before they occurred -- a depressing thought. News was received of the fall of Rome and the invasion of Normandy. It seemed as though the 517th was going to spend the rest of the war in an ancient lava pit while history passed it by.

Gradually weapons and vehicles arrived. Cosmoline was removed and the equipment put back into operation. On June 14th the outfit struck tents, stowed away extra gear, and moved to a beach at Naples to wait for LST's to carry it to Anzio.

The Navy had been running a sort of shuttle-bus service to Anzio since the landings in January. At about noon an LST flotilla pulled in to shore. The crews disappeared into the "Alligator Club" near the docks. After several hours they emerged and the RCT loaded, three ships per battalion. The troopers filed aboard, were handed C-rations, and told to make themselves comfortable anywhere they could find space on the crowded decks. In the evening the ships raised ramps, backed out into the channel, and headed north.

During the night the RCT's destination was changed. It had been scheduled to land at Anzio, but the Fifth Army was now far beyond Rome and had uncovered several little fishing ports along the coast. At midday the LST's put in at bomb-wracked Civitavecchia, dropped ramps, and the troops marched off to bivouac several miles inland. Although the area had been cleared of Germans, they had left some souvenirs behind. A newly-assigned 3/4 ton truck went up in a column of black smoke, the victim of a Tellermine.

The RCT was attached to Major General Fred L. Walker's 36th Infantry Division, which under IV Corps was operating on the left of Fifth Army. A long truck ride and a short foot march on the 17th brought the units south of Grosseto. The troopers dug "wistful foxholes" among the rocks while the 460th contacted 36th Division Artillery and moved into firing positions.



Field Marshal Albert Kesselring's forces were in full retreat. An Allied offensive that began in April to draw troops away from Normandy had finally taken Cassino. Forces advancing from the south had linked up with those at Anzio and captured , Rome. The German Army had been decisively defeated and was moving to a new line above the Arno River .

The Italian terrain was ideal for defense. The Appenines run down the spine of the peninsula; numerous spurs extending east and west formed cross-compartments over which the Allies had to advance. Any hilltop provided good observation and fields of fire. Villages dating from medieval times were perched on hills, and very little effort was required to convert them into fortresses.

The 36th Division was sometimes called "The Texas Army", because it had been formed around National Guard units from that State. Since landing at Salerno in September of 1943 the Division had developed a highly professional attitude toward the war. There was no rush. The Germans had been here yesterday, were here today, and would still be here tomorrow. In contrast the 517th was green, eager, and anxious to prove itself. Colonel Graves was handed an overlay marked with zones, objectives, and phase lines. The regiment was to join the Division's advance north from Grosseto next day.

Grosseto had been given up by the Germans without a fight. The town lies in a flood plain formed by the Ombrone River. Criss-crossed by irrigation canals, the plain is ten miles wide at the coast and narrows to three miles inland. Leading north from Grosseto are Highway 223 to Siena, inland, and Highway 1 to Follonica on the coast. North of the Ombrone plain a ridge titled the "Moscona Hills" rises to 300 meters at the point where it is crossed by Highway 223.

At daylight on June 18th the rifle battalions filed through Grosseto heading northeast on Highway 223. The order of march was 1st, Regimental Command Group, and 2nd and 3rd Battalions. Combat loads of ammunition had been issued. Riflemen were festooned with ammunition bandoleers and grenades. Machine gun crews carried 1,000 rounds apiece. Rain early in the morning had tapered off into a light drizzle. Most men wore raincoats or ponchos.

Mechanized cavalry had reportedly been through the area and found it clear, but the leading company of Major Boyle's 1st Battalion ran into a storm of machine gun fire as it entered the Moscona Hills. The troopers fanned out, took cover, and returned fire. Sergeant Andrew Murphy of B Company became the regiment's first fatality, hit by a sniper while directing his squad's 60mm mortar fire. In the lead of the column, Major Boyle had been well forward with his Command Group and was pinned down. Battalion executive Herbert Bowlby came up from the rear to direct C Company to bring down fire on the enemy from a hill to the right.

The Germans held a group of farm buildings in a small valley. With a platoon of B attached, C Company moved to the ridge overlooking the farm and opened fire. Little could be seen. Enemy machinegun fire clipped leaves from a hedgerow; within a few minutes ten C Company men were hit. German mortars went into action. Fortunately, the freshly-plowed ground was still soggy from the morning rain. Most of the mortar shell fragments went straight up, but two more men were hit. Without waiting for orders, three men went down into a ravine to fight their own personal war. In four trips they killed several Germans, captured and turned a mortar against the enemy, and took nineteen prisoners.*

* Staff Sergeant Wilford Anderson and PFC Nolan Powell were awarded the DSC for this action.

Colonel Graves had received no word from the 1st Battalion, but its predicament was obvious. He committed Lt. Col. Dick Seitz' 2nd Battalion to envelop the enemy from the right, and sent I Company from the 3rd Battalion to protect the eastern flank.

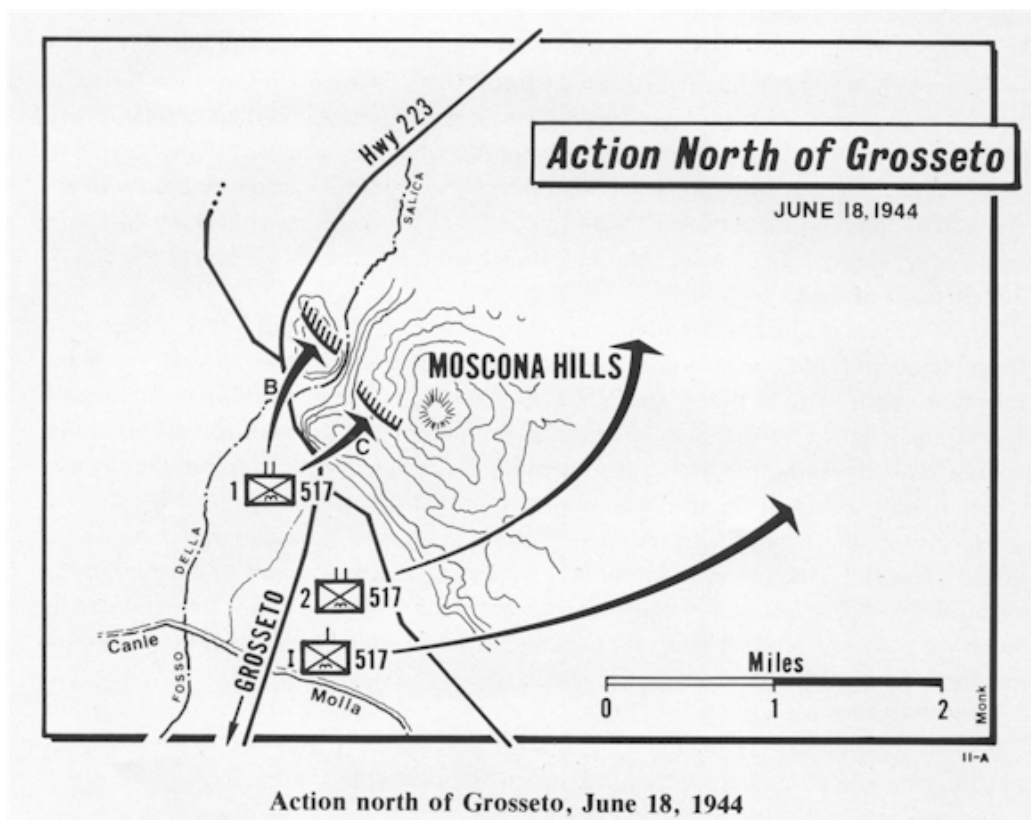
Battalion 81mm mortars and 460th guns opened up. Under this fire and with pressure on their front and flank, the Germans pulled out. They left behind over a hundred prisoners and considerable number of dead and wounded.

Coming forward to survey the scene, Colonel Graves found the 1st Battalion preparing the wounded and prisoners for evacuation. At the Aid Station Captain Ben Sullivan was administering blood plasma to Lieutenant Howard Bacon of B Company, who had been shot through the chest and lungs. He looked as though he was done for, but under Sullivan's care survived.*

* Bacon fully recovered, returned to duty, and led a rifle platoon through the rest of the war.

In the early afternoon the advance was resumed. At twilight the Battalions took up rough perimeters and halted for the night. On the east I Company had become trapped in a minefield under machine gun fire. It was extricated after dark. The troopers were startled to find that the "German" force had been elements of the 162nd Turcoman Division,* recruited from Moslem minorities in the Soviet Union. Although the 517th troopers had not really expected all Germans to be blond supermen eight feet tall, neither had they expected these scruffy, undersized Mongolian types. The enemy's tactics were also baffling. In a delaying action it is standard practice to open fire at long range, forcing the enemy to deploy prematurely. The Turcomen had not read the book and allowed the 517th to get almost on top of them, which proved their undoing.

* The Army "Order of Battle Handbook" later listed the 162nd Turcoman Division as having been 'virtually destroyed' in Italy in June. After the war the remnants of the Division were returned to Soviet Russia, where it can be safely assumed that the destruction was completed.



Action north of Grosseto, June 18, 1944

In its all-important first day of combat the regiment suffered 40 to 50 casualties but inflicted several times that number upon the enemy. Far more important, the outfit had experienced the sights and sounds of combat and learned that it could fight and win.

The next seven days were spent in almost continuous movement. The Germans tried to make an orderly withdrawal while the Americans pressed them hard. It was a "pursuit" situation, but a pursuit that went only as fast as men could march up and down the endless succession of hills.

All the Armies in Italy -- the American Fifth, the British Eighth, and the Germans -- were moving north. While the Allies stuck primarily to the main roads the Germans moved in the same direction on secondary lanes, pausing now and then to fight a rear-guard action. Both sides frequently became lost and intermingled. The hot, dusty roads were littered with wrecked German tanks and trucks -- largely casualties of the Air Corps "Operation Strangle"* -- and occasional dead Germans looking like limp bundles of bloody rags. Under the hot June sun it did not take long for the sickly-rotten smell of death to spread.

* "Strangle" was the code word for the Air Corps interdiction program.
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It was easy to get lost in the mountains, where each hill looked like every other one. Companies and Battalions would halt and the officers begin to spread out maps (always discouraging to the troops: "Christ, they've got us lost again.") Frequently the infantry called for artillery to mark a prominent terrain feature with a smoke round. This worked quite well, but sometimes the requesting party found that he was standing on the terrain feature being marked .

Mules and "partizanos" played their parts. Lacking pack saddles and experienced animals handlers, the troopers found that pack mule transport wasn't all it was cracked up to be. After a few discouraging experiences in which the balky animals were hit by artillery fire or broke legs on slippery slopes, most units gave up on the mules and the loads returned to the trooper's backs.

The partizanos were fierce-looking locals wearing red scarves who had been hired by 8-2 to serve as guides. They knew their areas well but were over-inclined to socialize and, not unwisely, tended to disappear when a fight began.

On one occasion a rifle battalion emerging from a wood after an all-night march was met by a swarm of Germans trying to surrender. The troopers were in too much of a hurry to bother, and told the enemy to go surrender somewhere else. The Germans were crestfallen at this undramatic ending to their Wehrmacht careers. They had expected to at least be granted the dignity of surrender.

For the 460th the period was a continuous, 24-hour a day operation, a typical Field Artillery moving situation. Gun batteries continually leap-frogged each other; usually two batteries were in position while the other two were moving forward. When movement slowed all four were in position. The Fire Direction Center operated in two echelons, with one always in position and functioning. The 36th Division Artillery normally kept telephone lines into the FDC, enabling the 460th to call for fire from any Divisional unit within range.

In the RCT's brief engagement in Italy the principal chore of the 596th Engineers was road reconnaissance and mine-sweeping. In one reconnaissance Lieutenant George Flannery and two second platoon men ran into a German ambush and were killed.

On June 19th the 2nd Battalion captured the hilltop village of Montesario. On left the 3rd Battalion moved through Montepescali against light resistance, going on to take Sticciano with 14 prisoners. On the west along Highway 1 36th Division troops took Gavarranno, Ravi, and Caldanìa.

The RCT bivouacked overnight June 22/23 on a ridgeline south of Gavarranno. There was public bathhouse in the village and many decided to take advantage of it. Mess and supply trucks moving on the ridgeline drew German artillery fire. Several troopers dived into the bath, clothes and all.

Next morning the RCT moved across the Piombino Valley and closed into an assembly area behind the 142nd Infantry. On June 24th the 2nd Battalion entered the eastern outskirts of Follonica under heavy artillery and "Nebelwerfer" fire. During the night of June 24/25 the 3rd Battalion made a long infiltration, emerging next morning on high ground overlooking the dry stream bed of the Cornia River. At 0800 the 1st Battalion passed through the 3rd to seize Monte Peloso, dominating a broad valley with the town of Suvereto about a mile north of the far side.

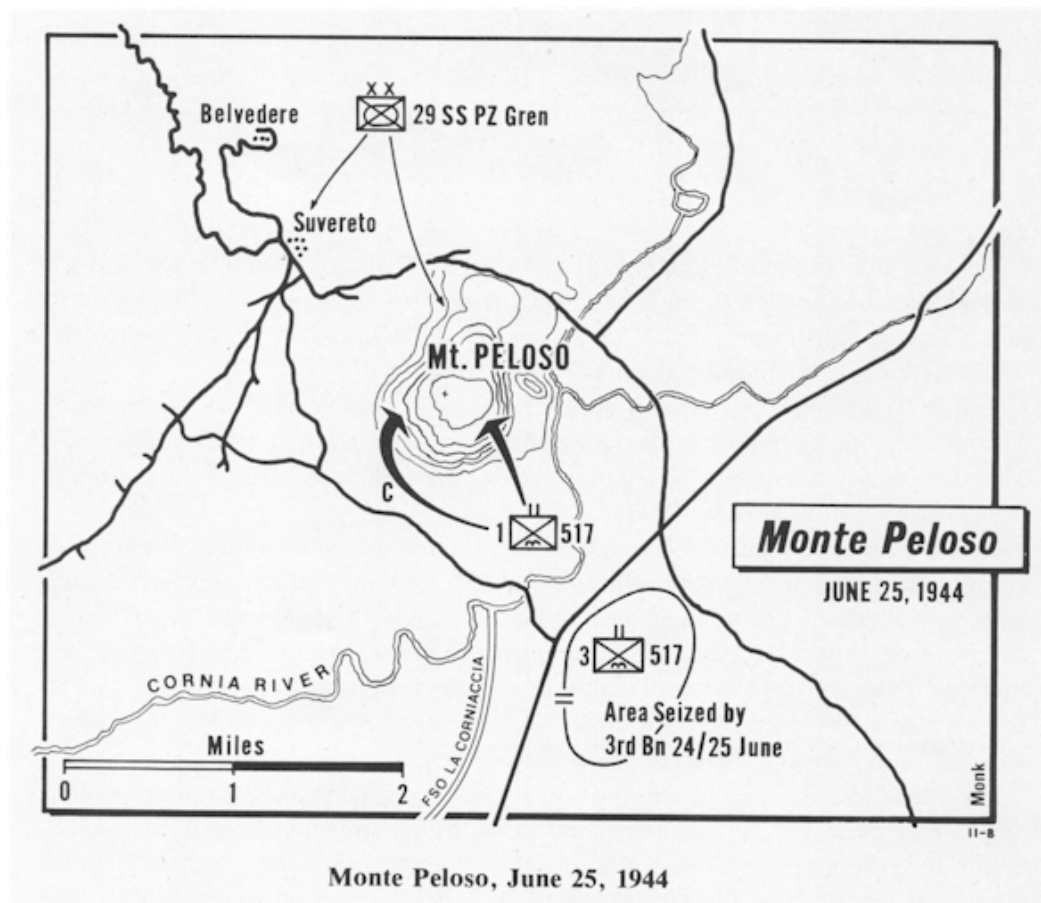
The attack was preceded by a heavy artillery barrage fired by 36th Division Artillery under 460th direction. Moving in column along the dry stream bed, 1st Battalion met minor delays as skirmishers with "burp guns" fought to slow the advance. Six

hundred yards short of the objective Major Boyle called his company commanders forward for orders. As they began to assemble enemy 81mm mortar fire came in, wounding Boyle and several others.

Under cover of a smoke screen laid down by "Pop" Moreland's 81mm Mortar Platoon, one company moved west in a shallow envelopment to the left. PFC Carl Salmon silenced a machine gun with rifle fire, and the troopers rushed the hill. While they were reorganizing an enemy motorcycle messenger arrived, took a horrified look, and raced away.

The enemy force had been a detachment of the 29th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, an altogether different breed than the Turcomen. None surrendered, although a badly wounded officer, incapable of further resistance, was captured and died a few hours later.

The remainder of the Battalion came forward and the position was consolidated. Major Boyle finally allowed himself to be evacuated, and executive officer Herbert Bowlby took command.



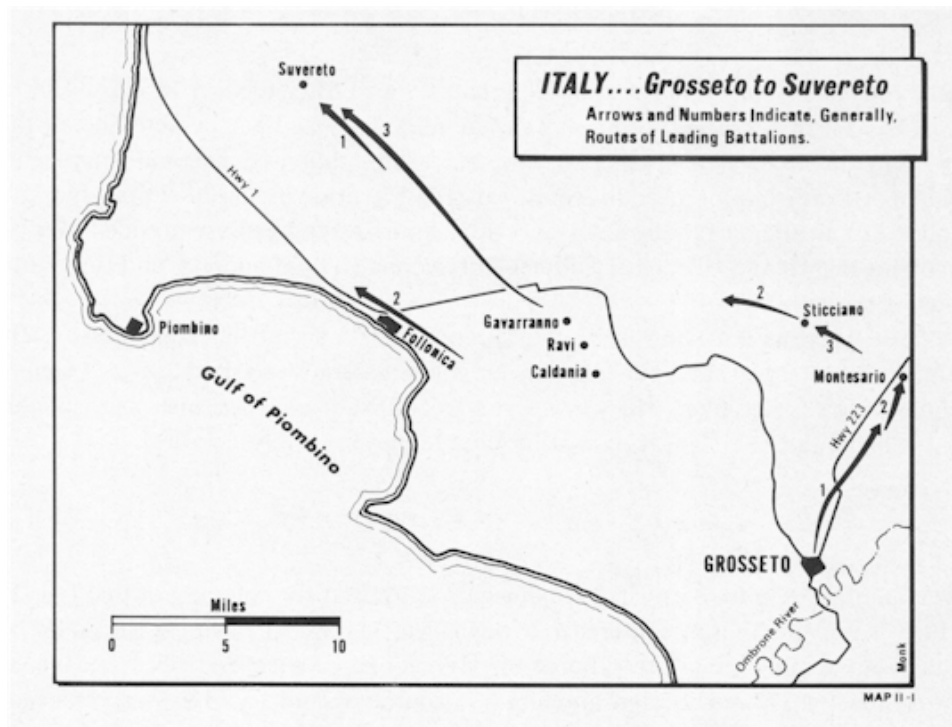
Enemy artillery fire continued heavy on Monte Peloso through the night. A haystack on the crest had caught fire during the afternoon. After dark it became an aiming point for the German artillery. At 0400 word was phoned down that "Daddy is here." No one had any idea what that was supposed to mean, but it became clear at daylight when the 3rd Battalion of the 442nd (Nisei) Combat Team moved in to take over. The 1st Battalion left the hill, formed up, and filed to the rear to join the balance of the RCT .

While the 1st Battalion had been taking Monte Peloso, Colonel Graves had been studying the terrain to the north. It was ideal for defense, with steep hills overlooking broad, open fields. In the distance he saw Tiger tanks moving around. Graves estimated that there would also be minefields to contend with. The Colonel was planning a night attack to Suvereto, and breathed a sigh of relief when he heard that the 442nd was to pass through the 517th in the morning.

The 517th went into IV Corps reserve and remained in that status until early July . While the troopers rested and awaited further commitment, the final steps toward a great decision were being taken.

The 517th had been sent to Italy in response to a Seventh Army request for airborne troops for ANVIL, the invasion of Southern France. ANVIL had been agreed upon by the Allies at the Tehran conference in 1943, as a secondary attack to draw German forces away from OVERLORD, the main landing. In early planning it had been found that there were not enough

landing craft for two simultaneous landings. ANVIL had been postponed until after OVERLORD, but planning and preparations for it had continued.



Now, with the Allies firmly established in northern France, ANVIL preparations were almost complete. Troops had been withdrawn from the line (including 517) and air and naval forces were assembling. All that was needed was a firm date and a go-ahead. But at this point, with the time for a final decision at hand, the British had second thoughts.

Since OVERLORD had succeeded they saw no need for a secondary attack in France; better, they felt, to use the ANVIL forces in Italy or elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

To the Americans Italy and the Mediterranean were sideshows. In their view all available forces should join the main battle in Northern Europe as soon as possible. General Eisenhower urged that ANVIL be executed on August 15th, stressing his need for the port of Marseilles. Roosevelt firmly backed Eisenhower and pressed Churchill to agree.

The British finally conceded, in reluctant recognition of the fact that the bulk of the combat forces were now American. On July 2nd the Combined Chiefs of Staff issued a directive to the CINC Mediterranean to go ahead with ANVIL (renamed DRAGOON) on 15 August.

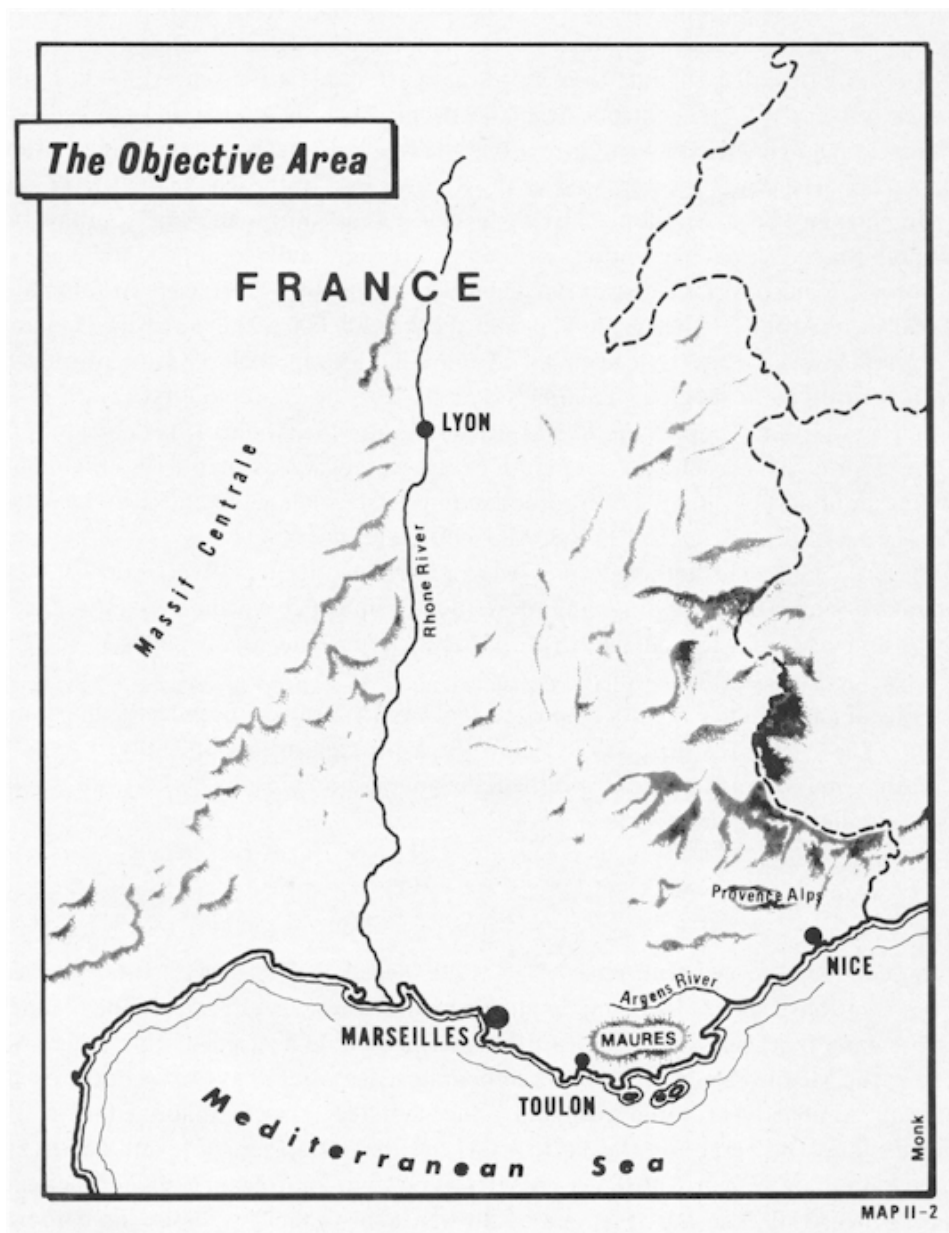
As a byproduct of this directive the 517th RCT was released from IV Corps and moved to join the First Airborne Task Force in the Rome area.

Blissfully unaware of this high-level debate, the 517th settled in to enjoy life in bivouacs west of Frascati. Rome was eleven miles away and passes were liberal; the immediate mission was rest, recuperation, and rehabilitation of men and equipment.

Combat losses had been relatively low during the brief period in action, but still totaled 129, including 17 killed. On July 9th memorial services were presided over by Chaplains Brown and Guenette. Colonel Graves made a brief address, and the troops marched thoughtfully off.

Almost everyone came down with the "Roman trots", a short-lasting but distressful form of dysentery. The epidemic ran its course -- literally -- by mid-July. Training resumed but was not taken over-seriously; a great deal of time was spent marching to Lake Albano and back, enjoying a swim in the interim.

Headquarters Seventh Army had remained in Sicily after the conquest of that island in 1943. After the Tehran conference it was given the task of planning the ANVIL assault. A planning group called Force 163 was set up in Algiers and developed a concept calling for a three-division amphibian/airborne assault to seize Marseilles, advance up the Rhone Valley, and join the forces in northern France.



There was no "soft underbelly" in southern France. Dominating the area were the Central Massif, west of the Rhone; the Maures Massif, rising abruptly from the sea at Toulon and extending east to the Gulf of Frejus; and the Provence Alps, north and east of the Maures. Corridors were formed by the Rhone flowing south to Marseilles and the Argens flowing east to the Gulf of Frejus.

German strength, though not as powerful as in Normandy, was still formidable. Minefields, obstacles, and anti-airborne devices had been sown on beaches and airborne landing areas, and heavy artillery was em placed in well-camouflaged bunkers. At Toulon casemated 340mm guns from the battleship La Provence, put in by the French prior to WW II, controlled the approaches both to Toulon and Marseilles.

The German Nineteenth Army was along the Mediterranean coast. Four Divisions and a Corps Headquarters were west of the Rhone. East of the Rhone the LXII Corps at Draguignan had a Division each at Marseilles and Toulon and one southwest of Cannes. Many German formations were understrength, underequipped, and made up of non-Germanic "volunteers". But regardless of quality, there were an estimated 30,000 enemy troops in the assault area and another 200,000 within a few day's march.

Marseilles was the basic DRAGOON objective but its approaches were controlled by the fortifications at Toulon. Toulon would have to be captured first. Since direct assault was virtually impossible, it was decided to use the Argens River corridor as a "back door". The beaches at the mouth of the Argens were suitable for amphibious landings, and level ground for airborne landings was available inland near Le Muy. West of Le Muy exits led to Toulon, Marseilles, and the Rhone.

The 3rd, 36th, and 45th Divisions were placed on the tentative troop list. All veterans of amphibious landings and of extended combat, they would comprise the VI Corps under Major General Lucian K. Truscott, a brilliant cavalry officer who had directed the breakout from Anzio.

Political and military factors mandated that French units be used to the maximum extent. The French II Corps was to follow the Americans ashore on D plus 1, and the , Seventh Army commander promised them the honor and responsibility of capturing Marseilles and Toulon.

Planning for the airborne phase of ANVIL began in February, 1944, and went through various changes involving landing areas, missions, and forces. The planners decided early that an airborne force of Division size would be needed. Since there was none in the Mediterranean, a force of comparable size would have to be improvised. Units in combat were withdrawn and additional forces were requested from the United States. In response, the 517th RCT and the 551st Parachute and 550th Airborne Battalions were provided. The 517th was put into line to gain combat experience under Fifth Army, and the 551st and 550th were sent to Sicily to assist the Airborne Training Center. Other units in Italy were designated "gliderborne" to be trained by the 550th and the Airborne Training Center.

Major General Robert T. Frederick, who had made an outstanding reputation as commander of the First Special Service Force, was chosen to command the "Seventh Army Provisional Airborne Division" (later renamed the First Airborne Task Force.) To complete his staff thirty-six officers were flown overseas from Camp Mackall.

By early July the concentration of the airborne force in the Rome area was almost complete. The 517th was at Frascati, the 551st and 550th had arrived from Sicily, and training of the "gliderborne" units was in progress. Two additional troop carrier wings totaling 413 aircraft were enroute from England to become part of the "Provisional Troop Carrier Air Division" under Major General Paul L. Williams.

Generals Frederick and Williams established their headquarters at Lido di Roma and reviewed earlier ANVIL planning. They found the plans limited in scope and vague in detail. Insufficient transport planes and gliders had been requisitioned; selection of drop zones and glider landing areas had been made without proper assessment of terrain, mission, and troop capabilities. A new plan was developed, submitted to Seventh Army, and approved.

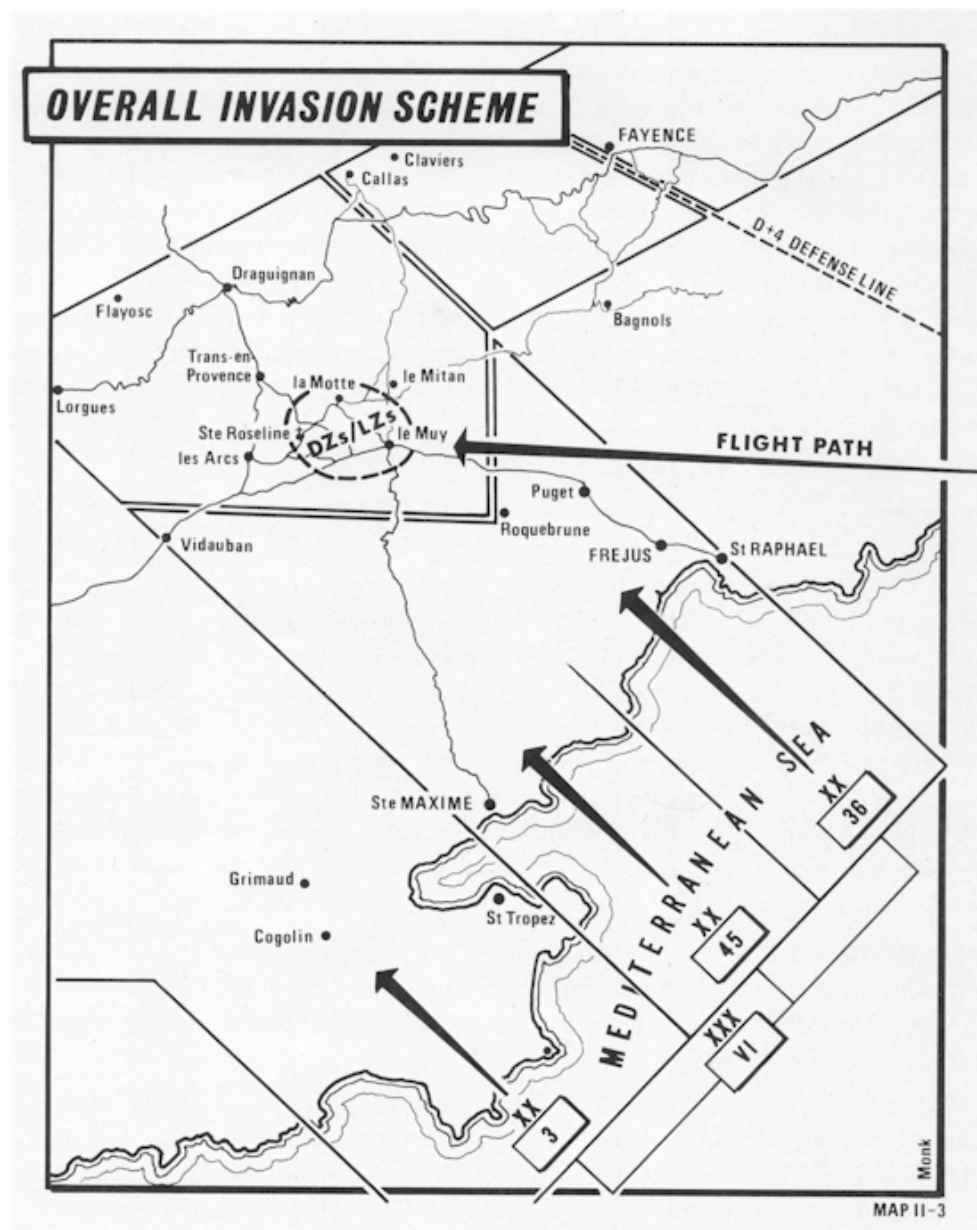
On July 18th the 517th RCT was formally assigned by Seventh Army to the First Airborne Task Force. However, Colonel Graves and his staff had been involved in DRAGOON planning for some time. In briefings at the Task Force Headquarters it had been revealed that:

VI Corps, under Seventh Army, would assault the southern coast of France and secure a beachhead for the assault and capture of Toulon.

The First Airborne Task Force would make a parachute and glider assault near Le Muy, seize and hold critical terrain features, and prevent the movement of enemy forces against the beachhead.

The 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion, with a platoon of the 596th and the 463rd Parachute Field Artillery Battalion attached, would land first on DZ "C" southeast of Le Muy. The 509th would seize terrain east of Le Muy and prepare to attack east or south.

Next in would be the 517th RCT, less one platoon of the 596th. The 517th would jump on DZ "A", west of Le Muy, and seize terrain to the northwest, west, and south. The RCT would also neutralize the village of La Motte, secure the DZ for later glider " landings, and prepare to attack west or northwest. The 442nd Antitank Company and Company D, 83rd Chemical Battalion, would be attached to the 517th after landing by glider.



The British 2nd parachute Brigade would jump last on DZ "O", northwest of Le Muy. The British were to seize Le Mitan, secure the DZ for later glider landings, and capture Le Muy before dark.

Task Force Headquarters and artillery of the British Brigade were scheduled to land by glider on DZ O at 0800. Reinforcing parachute and glider landings would begin at 1800, with the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion to jump on DZ A and the 550th Airborne Infantry Battalion to land by glider on DZ/LZ O. The 551st was to relieve elements of the 517th in the northwest and the 550th would go into Task Force reserve. Other supporting artillery and service units would then land by glider on both LZ's A and O.

H-Hour and D-Day were tentatively set for 0800, 15 August. The parachute assault was to begin before daylight and would be preceded by Pathfinder Teams, on all Drop Zones an hour earlier.

Colonel Graves and his planners went to work. Pathfinder teams of one officer and nine men from each battalion were sent to Marcigliana for training by Air Force experts and OVERLORD veterans. Service Company ran truck convoys to pick up three thousand parachutes at Naples, taking over Mussolini's "Science Building" near Rome for the parachute packing operation.



Last minute details.



The waiting game.

The 517th RCT had been allotted 180 C-47 aircraft in four serials * of 45 each, based at departure airfields at Ombrone, Orbetello, Montalto, and Canino. Now came the problem of how to best organize for the parachute landing.

* "Serial" A formation consisting of several flights of aircraft, separated from other serials in a column by a specified time interval.

The simplest solution would be to assign one battalion to each aircraft serial. This would be taking the chance that the artillery might land at some distance from the others, depriving the infantry of artillery support and possibly losing the artillery altogether. The alternative would be to create four self-sufficient teams of infantry, artillery, and engineers but this would confuse the command structure and degrade the capability of the artillery for massed fires, its most valuable asset. Graves finally decided to keep the artillery intact as far as possible.

With this decision out of the way, allocation of aircraft and missions was relatively simple. The 2nd Battalion would go in first in Serial 6 from Ombrone, capture La Motte, and seize high ground in the northwest. The 3rd would follow in Serial 7 from Orbetello to seize ground to the west; next would be the 460th (less one Battery) in Serial 8 from Montalto. Last would be the 1st Battalion in Serial 9 from Canino to seize ground to the south. One Battery of the 460th would be attached to the 1st Battalion for the drop. The Engineer Company (less a platoon attached to the 509th) and Regimental Headquarters and Service elements would be split between Serials 6 and 7.

Allocation of aircraft by battalions to the companies and batteries followed. At each level command was decentralized. Plane loads were made as self-sufficient as possible. In a rifle company, for example, the Commander, Executive officer, and First Sergeant would be in different planes. All plane loads would include some riflemen, a machine gun or mortar, a bazooka or grenade launcher, and if possible, a radio.



Briefing.



Pondering.



Hook-up.

The senior man in each plane load ("stick") would be jumpmaster and the next senior "pushmaster". Men with extra-heavy loads were placed well forward in the sticks so that they could get out of the door more easily; very reliable men were put in the number three or four position to give them access to the parack bundle release. Hopefully, the bundles would come down somewhere near the center of the stick landing pattern.

Last -- and most important -- were the individual loads to be carried by each man. These were staggering. Airborne troops could be moved as far and as fast as planes . could fly, but once on the ground they had the mobility of Caesar's legions or less, since the Romans had animal transport. Everything needed to fight and survive for several days had to go on the backs of the troopers. The average man carried 30 pounds of personal gear his weapon and ammunition, three grenades, two days' rations, water, gas mask, entrenching tool, and the like. Another 20 to 30 pounds was added in "organizational" equipment radios, ammunition for crew-served weapons, mines, explosives--the list is endless. On top of all this had to go the main and reserve parachutes and the inflatable "Mae West" life preserver .

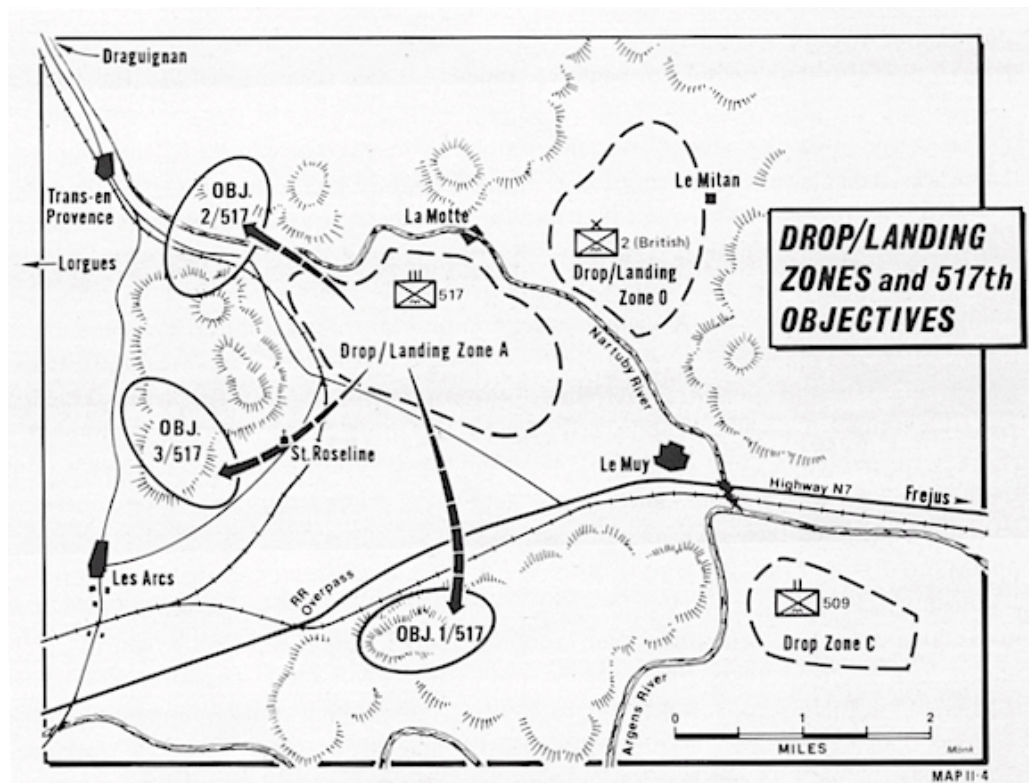
The next step was briefing. Battalion commanders briefed company commanders, who in turn briefed their officers and men without revealing the date and place of the operation. Troop briefings were with the aid of a six-foot square terrain model at the Regimental CP on which every field, road, stream, and house had been reproduced in meticulous detail. Towns and other landmarks were tagged with American place-names such as "Milwaukee" and "Hoboken".

A team of Engineers was detailed to camouflage clothing and equipment. The troopers filed through a paint-spray line* wearing and carrying the clothing, weapons, and equipment with which they would jump, and emerged in shades of yellow, green, and black. The clothing and gear were set aside and small American "invasion" flags were sewn on the sleeves of jump jackets.

* This was ordinary oil paint, which dried hard making clothing hot and uncomfortable; worse, a man hit by a projectile was liable to have the paint (including lead) carried into his bloodstream.

On August 6th a "skeleton" flight rehearsal was held which approximated the flight to the target area in France. The Combat Team and Battalion commanders, S-2s and S-3s, and most Company commanders went along. Although beneficial for the air-crews it meant little more than lost sleep for the airborne officers.

In early August the 442nd Antitank Company and Company D, 83rd Chemical Battalion, finished glider training and reported in to the bivouac area. On August 9th an RCT exercise which included these attachments was held on terrain chosen to match the objective area as closely as possible. Units were scattered out over fields by trucks to simulate a parachute landing; then they assembled, made reports, and went through



the motions of seizing ground. While this was pretty tame stuff for the 517th, which had made several large-scale jumps before leaving the States, it was badly needed by Task Force Headquarters. which had only this opportunity for practice before the real thing. *

The Combat Team was sealed off on August 10th.** Movement in and out of the bivouac area was banned, and no further contact with military or civilian personnel was allowed. Over the next two days units organized into Serials and moved to their departure airfields. The Combat Team CP opened at Ombrone on August 13th.

Most of the departure airfields were dusty cow-pastures with aircraft parked along dirt runways. The troopers set up camps and began another period of waiting. Final briefing was completed. Although the majority had long since guessed that their destination was France, for the first time it was officially confirmed. English-French phrase books appeared containing such handy phrases as "I am wounded," and "Where is the enemy?"

* Time and parachute limitations precluded a live jump exercise.

** On this date the CINC Mediterranean received the final go-ahead for DRAGOON. Fortunately, no inkling of the high-level indecision ever reached the troops.

Maps, 'escape kits' and invasion scrip were issued. To be on the safe side most officers took maps covering huge areas from Spain to Switzerland, adding many pounds to their existing overloads. The more fortunate enlisted men were given mimeographed sketches. The escape kits, issued one per ten men, were small packets containing maps, tiny files, and compasses. Basically intended for shot-down aircrews, they were highly, prized because they also contained a hundred dollars in cash .

During the last hours of daylight on the 14th equipment bundles were packed, rigged, and dropped off beside each plane. Mess tents remained open after the evening meal and much coffee was consumed. USO troupes performed, movies were shown, and little tubes of grease paint (made by Lily Dache, manufacturer of women's makeup) were distributed. Much entertainment was derived from painting hands and faces like Indians going on the warpath.

At around midnight the paratroopers formed by sticks and marched to their planes. After slinging the pararak bundles they fitted parachutes, adjusted weapons and equipment, and climbed aboard.

Colonel Graves reflected with amusement on a letter he had received just before leaving Frascati. It was from the Commanding General of the Rome Area Base Command, directing him to report to that headquarters at 1400, August 15th, to explain why so many vehicles with other unit markings were in the 517th area. At least that was one chewing-out he wasn't going to get.

Chapter III

Dragoon

D-Day

It was a sight that had rarely been seen before and which may never be seen again.* An hour after midnight on 14/15 August three hundred ninety-six C-47 aircraft, scattered over a hundred and fifty miles at ten airfields in west-central Italy, began turning over their engines. At ten-second intervals planes taxied down dirt runways, lifted off, and circled into formation. The dust, compounded by darkness, was so thick that many pilots had to use compass bearings to find their way down the runways. Takeoff times were from 0136 to 0151 for the ten serials, depending on the distance to the first check point at Elba. Each serial required over an hour to get into formation, a column of "V of V's" nine planes wide. The entire formation, from the head of the first serial to the tail of the last, was over one hundred miles long. This was the ALBATROSS mission, to drop 5,630 paratroopers in Southern France.

* It was the last large-scale night jump of World War II.



Hit the silk!

It was one hundred and eighty miles to Agay, the Initial Point on the French coast. Serials spaced five minutes apart cruised at 2,000 feet at 140 miles per hour, with individual planes 100 feet apart. The weather forecast was favorable; ground haze and 6-mile winds were expected over the Drop Zones. Radio beacons would guide the serials from Elba to the northern tip of Corsica. From there, radar and Navy beacon ships would lead them to Agay, where each serial would descend to 1500 feet *, slow to 125 miles per hour, and home in on its drop zone by beacons and lights to be put out by Pathfinder Teams.

Each plane carried six equipment bundles in pararacks beneath its belly. More bundles were in each plane, and men overloaded with equipment sweated it out under the special tension known only to paratroopers. Extra fuel was carried in 50-gallon drums within each plane because of the distance to be flown, and for the same reason sticks averaged only 16 men. All were relieved that at last the preparation and waiting were over and the time for action had arrived.

517th units were under the impression that jump altitude was to be 700 feet, and attributed jumping at higher altitudes to the need for climbing above the fog; but a 1500-foot jump altitude had been planned from the start.

Nine Pathfinder planes, each carrying a team of ten men, preceded the assault serials by an hour. Three teams were to drop on each DZ beginning with the 509th team on DZ C. The Pathfinder mission was under the same guidance as the main assault, but after landfall at Agay each element and plane would rely entirely upon the navigational skills of pilots and crews.

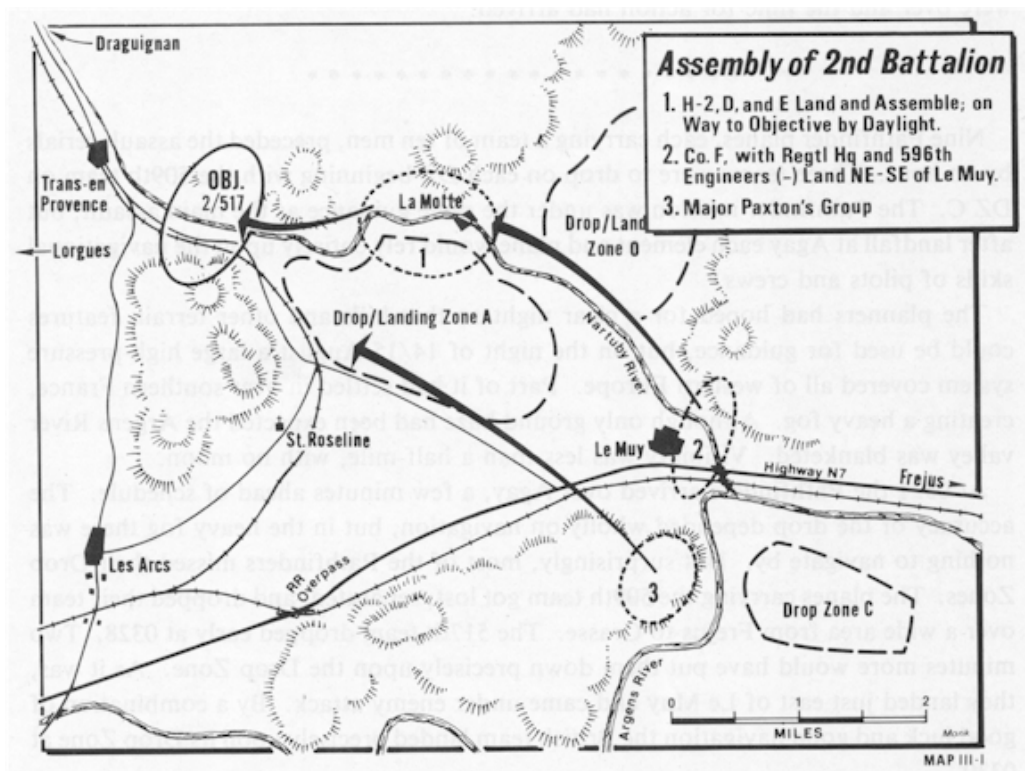
The planners had hoped for a clear night so that hills and other terrain features could be used for guidance, but on the night of 14/15 August a large high-pressure system covered all of western Europe. Part of it had settled in over southern France, creating a heavy fog. Although only ground haze had been expected the Argens River valley was blanketed. Visibility was less than a half-mile, with no moon.

At 0321 the Pathfinders arrived over Agay, a few minutes ahead of schedule. The accuracy of the drop depended wholly on navigation, but in the heavy fog there was nothing to navigate by. Not surprisingly, most of the Pathfinders missed their Drop Zones. The planes carrying the 509th team got lost, separated, and dropped their team over a wide area from Frejus to Grasse. The 517th team dropped early at 0328. Two minutes more would have put them down precisely upon the Drop Zone. As it was, they landed just east of Le Muy and came under enemy attack. By a combination of good luck and good navigation the British team landed precisely upon its Drop Zone at 0330.

Between 0349 and 0419 five C-47 aircraft came over the French coast northwest of Toulon on a diversionary mission. As they approached the coast they scattered metal strips ("window") to deceive German radar and create the impression of an airborne corridor. North of La Ciotat the aircrews dropped three hundred parachute dummies and a large quantity of 'rifle simulators' which went off in firecracker-like explosions as they hit the ground. *

* This diversion may have had some effect at German Corps and higher levels, but it probably served to increase the readiness of Germans in the drop area, already engaging 517th Pathfinders at Le Muy

The planes carrying Lt. Colonel Yarborough's 509th arrived over Agay close to schedule, but try as they might the pilots could not contact their Pathfinders for the

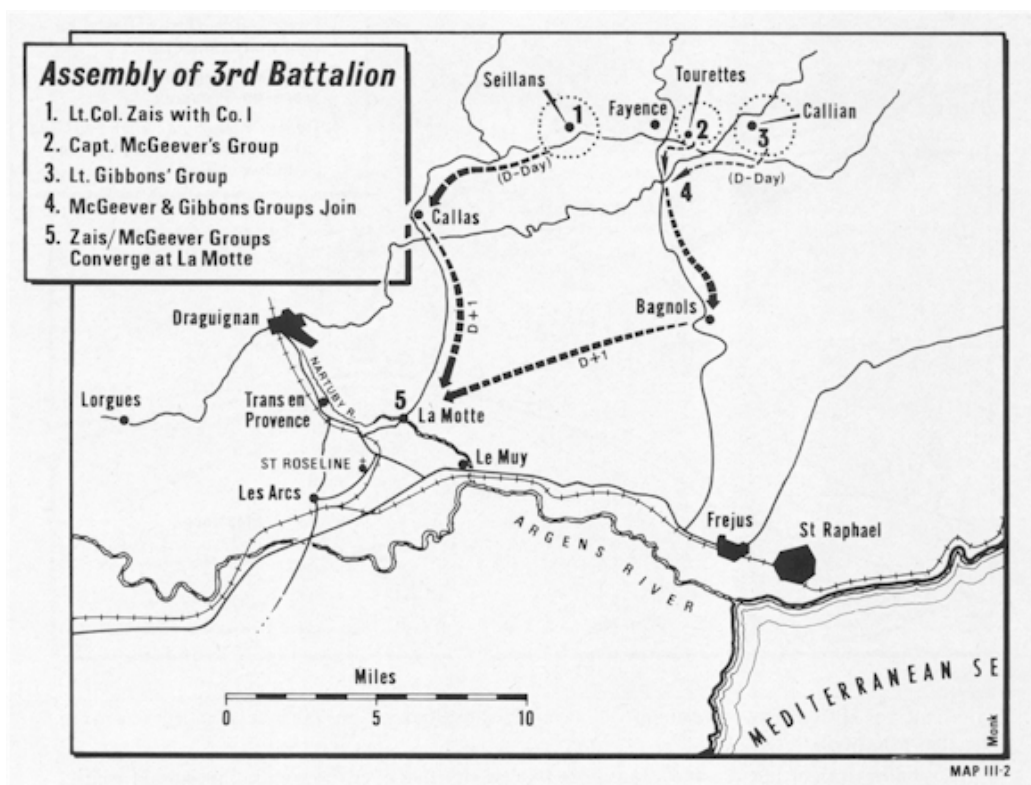


simple reason that they were not there. Flying time from Agay to the Drop Zone was about eight minutes, and within that time the decision to drop had to be made. Going down into the fog would only make matters worse, and turning back was unthinkable.

So at 0421 when the pilots thought they might be somewhere over the DZ the green lights began to flash.

The four serials bearing the 517th RCT were next in at 0430. The twenty-odd minutes from the arrival of the first serial to the departure of the last were chaotic. Encountering the high fog bank and without Pathfinder guidance, all serials met varying degrees of misfortune.

First to arrive at 0431 was Lt. Colonel Dick Seitz' 2nd Battalion (with some of Regimental Headquarters and the 596th Engineer Company) in Serial 6 flown by the 440th Group from Ombrone. The troops of this serial made the best landing of any in the 517th, with roughly one-third concentrated from La Motte to about a mile southeast. Twelve plane loads were scattered west, southwest, and north around Trans-en-Provence, Les Arcs, and Draguignan. All of Company F, most of Regimental Headquarters (including the Regimental Commander) and the Engineers landed northeast and southeast of Le Muy, with a few men dropping into the town. In all,



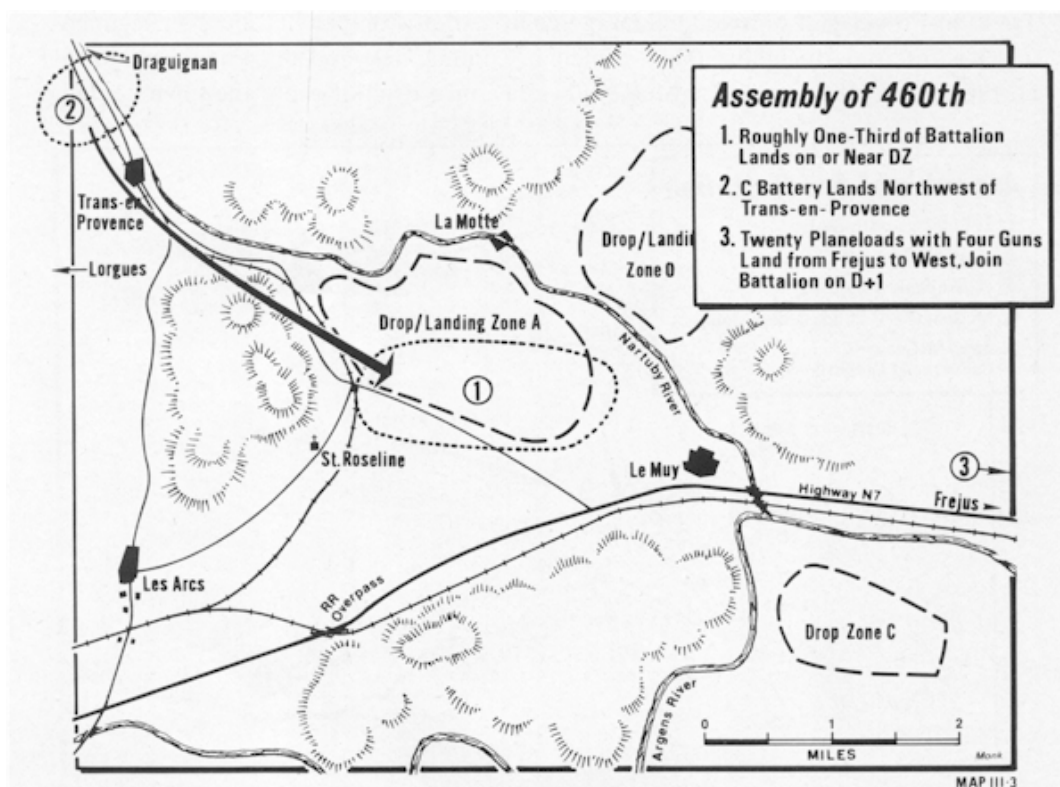
about half of the 2nd Battalion landed within a mile or so of DZ A.

Lt. Colonel Mel Zais' 3rd Battalion (with a platoon of the 596th, some Service Company men, and a few Task Force staff members) was due next in the 439th Group's Serial 7 from Orbetello. This serial was plagued with bad luck from the very start. One plane crashed on the runway on takeoff. * All then went well until landfall at Agay, when the serial inexplicably wandered 45 degrees off course, heading northwest instead of west. The troops in the leading ten planes jumped in the vicinity of Seillans, and those in the following thirty-four landed near Callian and Tourettes. The Battalion was split into three groups, 3 to 5 miles apart, over an area 8 miles long and fifteen miles from DZ A.**

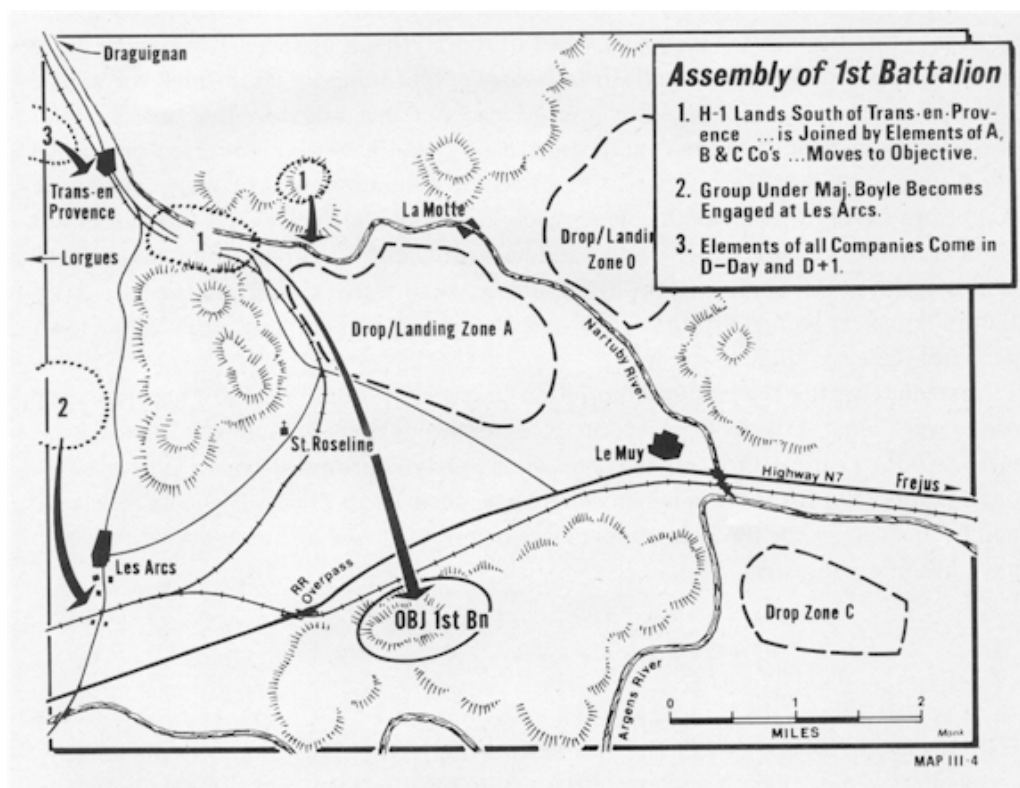
The 460th Field Artillery (less Battery C) in Serial 8 with the 437th Group from Montalto fared better than the 3rd Battalion but not as well as the 2nd. Either through error or a faulty light system, twenty plane loads jumped early and were spread from Frejus to the west. One-third of the serial (fifteen plane loads) landed on or within a

* Sixteen men of H Company were aboard. Eleven were hospitalized, but the others made it to France by glider that afternoon.

** Fifteen miles straight-line distance, but more like twenty-five over the winding mountain trails.



mile of the DZ, but the remaining ten were scattered from Le Muy to Draguignan and west to Trans-en-Provence. Last in was Serial 9 at 0453, flown by the 438th Group from Canino with Major Boyle's 1st Battalion and Battery C of the 460th. This serial dropped most of Headquarters and A Companies over a two-mile area southeast, south, and southwest of Trans-en-Provence. Most of B and C Companies were literally scattered to the winds. Little or no Group control was exercised and each pilot apparently gave the green light



on his own. B and C Companies were spread by sticks and small groups overall area of 30 to 40 square miles from Trans-en-Provence to Draguignan, Lorgues, and Les Arcs. Battery C of the 460th landed northwest of Trans-en-Provence. By the exception that proves the rule, one stick of Serial 9 landed within 200 yards of the DZ.

All told, only about 20% of the 517th RCT landed within two miles of the DZ. The 2nd Battalion had made a fair landing, but had only half its strength on hand. The 3rd was split into three groups a day's march away. The artillery was in three groups near Frejus, Trans-en-Provence, and the DZ. The 1st Battalion was so widely scattered that it would take most of a day to get it together.

The basic cause of the inaccurate landings was the heavy, unexpected fog bank. But there were other factors, including gross navigational error, excessive airspeeds and altitudes, lack of practice in formation flying, * and failures of the red light-green light system.

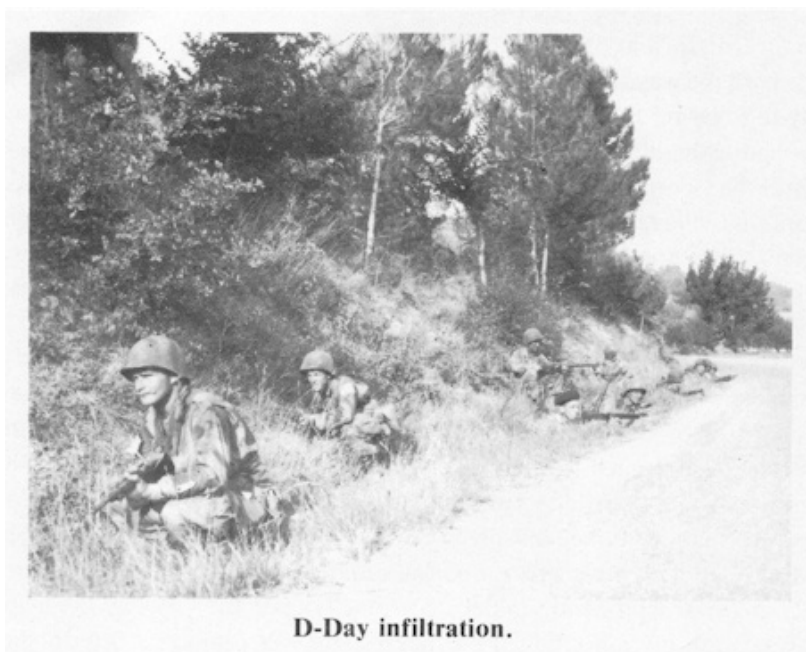
* VSAF Historical Study No.74, "Airborne Missions in the Mediterranean, 1942-45" states that ". . . the 50th and 53rd wings ... (which provided the planes carrying the 517) ... fresh from OVERLORD, felt no need for practice in formation flying and kept rehearsals to a minimum . . .",

Paratroopers want most of all to be dropped upon their DZ. Failing this, they want at least to be concentrated together. Most of the 517th got neither. The leading plane of each serial was supposed to flash the warning and jump lights through the plastic astrodome above the cockpit. Some serial leaders either failed to give the signals or they could not be seen in the fog; in other cases, red lights were not given or flashed green instead of red. This apparently caused the premature exits of two sticks of the 509th and twenty of the 460th. There were many similar incidents. Captain Grant Hooper of G Company, caught with a sudden green light with no warning, managed to get his stick out but landed northwest of Grasse, twenty-five miles from the DZ. A 1st Battalion officer landed in Trans-en-Provence but the last man in his stick came down near Lorgues, six miles to the west.

Immediately after the landings the Troop Carriers reported "the most accurate drop of the war" and "85% to 90% accuracy." The truth is that the Southern France drops were as poor as those in Normandy, or worse. Only four out of ten serials (one 509, one 517, and two British) landed anywhere near their Drop Zones. If enemy resistance had been stronger, or the paratroopers less determined, the airborne operation could have become a disaster.

Regardless of where they landed the 517th troopers went to work with the tenacity and aggressiveness that characterized parachute outfits. They had come to France to do a job, and landing five or twenty-five miles from the DZ was not going to stop them. Many unrecorded acts of heroism, devotion, and self-sacrifice were performed.

The paratroopers had a psychological advantage over the enemy. They knew where they were .going and what had to be done, while the Germans did not have the foggiest notion of what these camouflaged desperados all around them were up to. Their own parachute troops were a highly-respected elite. The Germans were not anxious to tangle with the Allied paratroopers but nevertheless put up a stiff fight.



The first task for each man was to get out of his parachute harness, usually with a bayonet-knife. Next was to struggle with his equipment, orient himself, join his stick members, find an equipment bundle, and head for an assembly area. In the fog and darkness this was slow and difficult. Often men separated by only a few yards lost each other and went in opposite directions.

Equipment bundles were particularly hard to find. Lights on the bundles, supposed to be activated by the opening shock of the parachute, frequently were torn off or did not work; when they did work they often drew German fire.

The password and countersign much used in the first hour were "Lafayette" ---- "Democracy". An alternate for those who might be separated from their outfit for over 24 hours was "Billy" ---- "The Kid". The story was told (probably apocryphal) of a British trooper who, failing to remember the countersign when challenged, finally came up with "...some fookin' cowboy,"

Half of 2nd Battalion Headquarters and D companies landed a mile southeast of La Motte. Battalion executive officer Tom Cross broke a leg on landing. Nevertheless he assembled what he could find of the battalion and met up with Colonel Seitz. By daylight half the battalion was on the way to its objectives meeting light opposition from German sentries and patrols; at noon the battalion was on its objectives. Major Cross made it all the way, broken leg and all. He recalls that "a German MG 42 provided a highly motivating factor." Both he and injured D Company commander Dave Armstrong had to be directly ordered to accept evacuation.

Company F had been assigned to capture La Motte, so by Murphy's law it landed further from that village than any other 2nd Battalion unit. With most of Regimental Headquarters (including Lt. Colonel Graves) and a platoon of the 596th Engineers, F Company came down northeast and southeast of Le Muy. A few men landed within the town.

Le Muy is at the eastern edge of a natural bowl-shaped amphitheater three to five miles in diameter, encompassing the "airhead" area and including DZ's A and O. Le Muy was occupied by a battalion-sized German force that had built fortifications to the east astride the approach from Frejus. The enemy were alert and ready. They had already captured some Pathfinders and were expecting the main body when it arrived.

Colonel Graves landed on the hillside northeast of Le Muy. At daylight he contacted Captain Mc Kinley with most of Company F, and the column moved west along the Nartuby River toward La Motte under occasional sniper fire. A few Germans were found near a group of camouflaged barracks; eight were captured after a short fire fight. In another skirmish near La Moue Lieutenant Giuchici was wounded by a grenade fragment. A patrol sent north contacted British paratroopers, who said that La Motte was already occupied by Americans and British. Company F joined its parent battalion, and Colonel Graves reached the Regimental CP in the early afternoon, finding it already in business.

Many men of Regimental headquarters landed within the German fortified area on the hillside northeast of Le Muy. These included Lieutenant Tait, First Sergeant Arnold, and Captains Dearing, Bigler, and Pearce. Tait rounded up Sergeant Arnold and seven others a mile and a quarter northeast of Le Muy, was fired upon, and withdrew a short distance; in mid-morning the British arrived and Tait led his group off toward La Motte.

Regimental Adjutant Pearce broke his leg and suffered severe internal injuries on landing. T/4 Van Cleave and another man landed nearby. When a three-man German patrol came out to investigate, Van Cleave, still trying to get out of his parachute harness, killed one with a knife and the other two with a grenade. The two men hung on, refusing to leave Pearce; when the British attack on Le Muy began, they evacuated Captain Pearce and moved on to the CP.

Dearing and Bigler landed in the fortified area, unknowingly quite close to Tait, Pearce, and the others. Assembling eighteen men of the 517th and 460th, Dearing and Bigler headed west. At daybreak they encountered a German patrol on motorcycles and killed three enemy. Near Le Muy they collided with a strong German force. One American was killed, and Captain Dearing with four others took refuge in a farm building. The Germans attacked in strength, capturing Dearing and his group after a prolonged siege in which all the Americans were wounded. The captives were taken to Le Muy and treated by a French doctor. Captain Bigler withdrew and laid low, arriving at the Regimental CP next morning with three walking wounded.

Several men landed within Le Muy. Most escaped through the streets before daylight, but two men of the 596th Engineers were caught within the built-up area. They remained there most of the day, sniping and being sniped at. Late in the afternoon they made their getaway by wading in neck-deep water through a sluiceway between the buildings. They joined the British attack, and remained in the area until Le Muy was finally captured by the Americans next day.

Lieutenant Alicki and part of his demolitions platoon, with some military policemen, were attacked a half-mile south of Le Muy by a German force of thirty men. In the fight that followed one American was killed and eight others led off to the POW cage.

A mile and half south of Le Muy Regimental S-3 Major Forest Paxton assembled his stick and waited for daylight. He then moved north, picking up Alicki, some of the demo platoon, and a collection of high-ranking talent including Regimental Surgeon Major Vella, Chaplain Brown, and Major Kinzer of the artillery. Moving west toward La Motte, Paxton gathered up another 75 men from F Company, the 460th, and the Engineers. At La Motte contact was made with Company E. The energetic

Paxton then went on to set up the Regimental CP at Ste Roseline. When Colonel Graves arrived at 1300 Paxton was issuing orders for the removal of anti-airborne obstacles from the Drop Zone .

To complete the Regimental Headquarters story, Lieutenant Pat tin and the balance of the demolitions platoon landed seven miles south of Le Muy. They moved west and north, arriving at Ste Roseline without incident.

Fifteen miles northeast of DZ A a wild adventure story was being played out. Lt. Colonel Mel Zais' 3rd Battalion and its attachments had been strewn over eight miles of rocky landscape from Seillans east through Fayence to Tourettes and Callian, all a day's march from DZ A.

This is mountain country. Many men suffered landing injuries as they came down on the rocky slopes and terraced hillsides. As the troopers began to assemble and look for equipment three major groups emerged: the first ten plane loads near Seillans, which included most of Company I and Colonel Zais with a Battalion Headquarters group, totaling about 160 men; 60 men of Battalion Headquarters, a, and H companies in the vicinity of Tourettes; and in the area of Callian 200 from 3rd Battalion and 60 Engineer, Regimental Headquarters, and Service Company attachments.

The three groupings total 480 men. The balance was spread far and wide. About 35 were injured and had to remain behind. Seventy-five caught up with the columns heading for the DZ, and 30 made it to the DZ separately, but about 50, too far away to join the major groups, remained in the area and fought their own war for several days. *

* The adventures of those who remained behind are recounted later in these pages.

At Seillans Colonel Zais lost no time getting started. After a check to determine how many were unable to march, Lieutenant Stott and six others were left with an Aidman; Battalion Executive Major Bob McMahon insisted on remaining in action despite severe cuts in one leg. The column formed at 0800 only to suffer another of the misadventures that dogged Serial 7. A group of P-38s came in on a low-level bombing run that ended only when Captain Bill Pencak threw a yellow smoke grenade, the air-ground recognition signal. Zais' column then reformed and marched off, halting to blow up a section of railroad north of Claviers. At darkness they reached Callas, formed a perimeter, and waited out the night.

Battalion Headquarters Company Commander Captain Joe Mc Geever assumed command of the 60 men around Tourettes. Leaving ten injured with some Aidmen, Mc Geever's group headed south from Tourettes at 1100. Outside the village they were joined by 80 British paratroopers under a Major Blackwood.

Emerging upon the Fayence-Bagnols road, the column came upon an enemy truck convoy under fire coming from a stone house near the road. Six vehicles had halted. The Germans had dismounted and were returning the fire. Mc Geever's Americans and British joined in happily. The fight ended when 81mm mortars went into action. Five Germans surrendered, 10 or 12 were killed, and the rest escaped into the countryside. Three men of Task Force Headquarters had been in the stone house, including no less a personage than the Chief of Staff, Lt. Colonel De Gavre. They joined Mc Geever's force. The column resumed its march south, its burdens eased somewhat by three captured trucks.

Approximately 260 men had managed to assemble around Callian, by far the largest part of Serial 7 .There was a plenitude of Lieutenants but no one of higher rank. The young officers decided that Lieutenant Gibbons of Company H was senior. Under his leadership the column formed and moved southwest. Encountering no opposition, Gibbon's group met the Mc Geever column at a junction on the Bagnols-Fayence road. More men joined both columns along the way. By the time the combined force halted for the night five miles north of Bagnols, it had grown to a respectable size of over 400.

Lt. Colonel Raymond Cato was an artillery officer in the tradition of "the gallant Pelham".* Under his leadership the 460th had become, in the opinion of the 517th, the finest artillery battalion in the US Army. Cato was determined to show what could be done with parachute field artillery.

* Confederate Major John Pelham, at age 23, was Chief of Artillery for J .E.B. Stuart's cavalry. Pelham was noted for his daring and innovative use of artillery.

Fifteen plane loads of the 460th one-third of the Battalion landed close to the Drop Zone. Ten more were scattered from the DZ to Le Muy. Colonel Cato quickly assembled two plane loads of Headquarters Battery and headed for his assembly area, silencing some German automatic-weapon fire enroute. While most of the infantry were still trying to get oriented at 0630, four howitzers were in position; by 0800 two more had been set up in an improvised battery of six guns. By noon eleven howitzers were in position, manned and ready to fire.

Radio contact was made with the 36th and 45th Divisions, VI Corps, and Task Force Headquarters. Battery C and the elements at Frejus were contacted on the Battalion net. Liaison parties were sent out, and at 0900 the infantry was notified that the artillery was ready to fire.

Northwest of Trans-en-Provence Captain Louis Vogel managed to assemble two guns and three-quarters of his C Battery. Keeping to the road because the guns had to be hand-towed, they met a group of forty 1st Battalion infantrymen under Lieutenant Ralph Allison. Three hundred yards from Trans the mixed group came under enemy fire; two artillerymen were killed trying to rush the German position. Allison, supported by a point-blank 75mm fire, circled around with a 5-man patrol and entered the town. Four Germans were killed and the rest withdrew. The group resumed the march, passing through Trans without further incident. Vogel's battery (now grown to three guns) joined its parent battalion and Allison continued on to Ste Roseline.

One of C Battery's gun sections, isolated from the unit, came under German attack north of Trans-en-Provence. The crew fired until their ammunition was gone and then withdrew. **

** The gun was recovered on D plus One, only slightly damaged.

As noted earlier, twenty planeloads of the 460th jumped prematurely because of a faulty red light-green light system. Major Frank, the Battalion Executive officer, rounded up three Headquarters Battery planeloads near Frejus and headed west. At 1200 Frank met another group from several batteries with four complete howitzers. Leaving injured men at homes in the area, the group with a local guide moved west on a trail paralleling the main highway. As darkness approached they halted for the night. At 1800 a Frenchman appeared with information of a nearby German 88mm battery. Taking three men with wire and telephone, Frank crawled into position in rear of the enemy battery. Instructions were phoned back to lay the guns and be ready to fire at daybreak.

At 0700 next morning one smoke round was fired into the German battery, followed by five rounds of time-fused air bursts. Confused noise and movement was heard but could not be observed through the thick brush. Major Frank returned to his improvised battery, gave "March Order", and the column continued west, joining the Battalion in firing position. Word was received later that their fire had caused the Germans to pullout with seven guns, 25 trucks, and many casualties.

Most of Major Bill Boyle's Battalion was scattered over an area 30 to 40 miles square west, northwest, and southwest of Trans-en-Provence. Battalion Headquarters Company made the best landing, relatively well-concentrated in wooded hills southeast of Trans. By daylight Lieutenant Erie Ehly had assembled more than half his company. Joined by Captain La Chaussee of C Company, the group moved east along the road to the Battalion assembly area, with more men coming steadily.

At a crossroads near the assembly area two Germans of the "Organization Todt" Labor Service opened fire upon the column with a Maxim water-cooled machine gun. After a brief exchange of fire, the Germans surrendered and the group closed in the assembly area. Soon Lieutenant James Reith * arrived with fifty to sixty men of A Company, followed by Lieutenant Dan Cook with a stick of C Company. Other small groups and individuals came in, but there was no sign of the main body of the Battalion. After a half-hour La Chaussee and Ehly decided to move on to their objective. Gathering more men as they moved, they headed south, passing the Chateau Ste Roseline on their right. While crossing Highway N7 a small enemy detachment offered a brief argument which was quickly settled by Sergeant Chobot of A Company with a few riflemen. At this point Major Bowlby, Battalion executive officer, arrived and took command. At 1130 the 1st Battalion had a force of about 150 men upon its objective.

* Reith's platoon had been assigned the mission of staging a raid upon Draguignan immediately after landing -- "if possible" - to capture or kill the German LXII Corps Commander. "If possible" meant that if they landed close to Draguignan, were able to assemble quickly, and could overcome or bypass enemy resistance. None of these circumstances existed, but Reith was disconsolate and had to be ordered to forget it.

West of Ste Roseline a low range of hills extends from Trans-en-Provence south to Les Arcs. Most 1st Battalion men en route to their objective went around these hills, either north via Trans or south toward Les Arcs. At Les Arcs they stumbled into a hornet's nest, colliding with a force of over 300 Germans moving northwest.

Major Boyle landed 4 or 5 miles southwest of Trans. Two-thirds of his stick became lost in the dark, and Boyle moved toward his objective area with the remaining 5. As he entered Les Arcs in the afternoon he found about 20 men with S-3' Captain Young and Assistant Surgeon Captain MacNamara. Gathering up the group, Boyle moved southeast across the railroad tracks into a valley just north of his objective. Here they came under heavy small-arms fire, fell back to the southeast edge of Les Arcs, and formed a perimeter.

The enemy pressed hard and the fighting became touch-and-go. Private Jim Dorman of C Company knocked off three Germans with one rifle grenade at fifty yard's range, and Privates Ernst and Jamme of A Company made high scores with a machine gun. The Germans kept trying to encircle Boyle's force by closing in through adjacent houses and over rooftops. They lost heavily in trying to cross a street down which Ernst and Jamme had established a machine gun killing zone.

More 1st Battalion men continued to arrive from the northwest. By nightfall Boyle's "little Alamo" had about 45 to 90 men, with 5 line officers and the surgeon. *

*This figure cannot be nailed down precisely. After-action reports indicate that with Boyle at Les Arcs were Sgt. Critchlow, Company A, with 2 squads (20); three and one-half planeloads of B Company, about 50; Sgt. Lanson, Company C, with 18; and 6 men of Battalion Headquarters. Colonel Boyle, on the other hand, recalls there being about a squad from each lettered company.

As other groups of 1st Battalion men drifted in from the west they were pressed into service by Captain Fraser (whose A Company had been designated Regimental Reserve) to fill the gap left by the absence of the 3rd Battalion on the hills west of Ste Roseline. All these groups told essentially the same story: landing 2 to 6 miles (or more) from the DZ, recovering what equipment they could find, and a rugged cross-country trip enlivened by brushes with the enemy. Paul Vukovich, a giant C Company football player, arrived with an injured leg but carrying a complete 60mm mortar, a BAR, and thirty pounds of ammunition.

Company B had the unhappy distinction of being the most widely-dispersed unit of the entire 517th CT. Acting Company Commander Lieutenant Hillsdale landed with his stick two and one-half miles northwest of Lorgues, while Company executive Lieutenant Terry Sanford dropped with his men five miles northeast of the DZ, fifteen miles from Hillsdale.

Hillsdale and his men went through a virtual odyssey in trying to get to their objective. At Lorgues they dropped off an injured man at a local hospital. Continuing southeast, they heard heavy fire at Les Arcs and decided to back off and go around by the north. That used up all of D-Day. Next morning as they began to move out they were strafed by an American plane. On the way to Draguignan, Hillsdale put out two small patrols, one of which became lost;** then the group encountered two German

** The "lost" patrol turned up on D/3. It had gone off on a wild goose-chase with an FFI detachment to Le Thoronet, five miles southwest of Lorgues, and was captured by a German force of 250; when the Germans became surrounded by FFI a day later, they 'surrendered', to the patrol members, who turned them over to the FFI anyway.

trucks with an officer and some wounded, which they sent under guard to Lorgues. Moving southeast through Trans, Hillside and his men contacted the 551st and finally made it to Ste Roseline an hour before midnight on D/1.

Lieutenant Reardon's planeload landed two and one-half miles southwest of Draguignan. Assembling all 16 men, Reardon moved through Trans toward the objective. At 1240 they ran into a German force on Highway N7, killing 5; a few minutes later they ambushed two cars and a motorcycle, killing 6 and capturing one prisoner. After some indecision Reardon's group set up a roadblock on N7 and remained there, becoming one of the most effective units in the entire Combat Team.

Lieutenant Sanford's stick northeast of the DZ met General Frederick and a group from Task Force Headquarters. After a stint of outpost duty and looking for lost men, Sanford and his group moved south, joining Reardon on N7. Lieutenant Sanford took command of the roadblock force.

By darkness of D-Day the 1st Battalion had 45 to 90 men with Major Boyle at Les Arcs, about 200 under Major Bowlby in the objective area, and most of the balance of well over 200 with Captain Fraser's reserve force west of Ste Roseline.

Reinforcements

Chateau Ste Roseline is a group of ancient, ivy-covered masonry buildings a mile southwest of the Drop Zone. It is surrounded by several hundred acres of vineyards. Some of the buildings date back to medieval times. The mummified remains of fourteenth-century Roseline of Villeneuve are preserved in a nearby Abbey. Prior to the airborne landing Ste Roseline had been selected for the Combat Team Command Post because it was centrally-located, prominent landmark. Its owner, the Baron de Rasque de Laval *, gladly provided the 517th all the space needed.

* At that moment his son, Louis, a Captain in the French Army, was with the French II Corps in the Gulf of Frejus waiting to debark. At the time of this writing Louis is the current owner and Baron.

On arrival at the Chateau in the early afternoon Colonel Graves took stock. S-3 Major Paxton was working at a furious pace but many of the staff were absent. Executive officer Ike Walton and Adjutant Captain Pearce had been injured in the jump. The

S-2 had been captured, and the Communications officer was still enroute from Le Muy.

Reports received over the Artillery radio net indicated that the operation was going well. VI Corps units and Task Force Headquarters had been contacted; the British were attacking Le Muy, and the 509th was in place.

Within the 517th all objectives had been taken, although it appeared that in the southwest defenses were dangerously thin. The first part of the mission had been accomplished, but the regiment had no reserve and was definitely not prepared to attack north or west. The 3rd Battalion was 15 miles away, and Major Boyle and a 1st Battalion group were cut off and in trouble at Les Arcs. The absence of the 3rd Battalion had forced Graves to use his small reserve west and southwest of Ste Roseline. Although the 3rd was enroute to the area it would not arrive until the next day. However, the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion was scheduled to jump in at 1800 and to relieve the 517th in the northwest; if that came off as planned the 2nd Battalion would become available to strengthen the southwest and to extricate Boyle from Les Arcs.

The immediate task was to prepare for the arrival of the parachute and glider lifts. Men had been detailed to clear the drop zone of the anti-airborne stakes, but time was limited. They did cut most of the trip-wires attached to the stakes and found that the mines had not been fused. The rifle battalions were instructed to have guides waiting to pick up their attachments. The 460th, always ready, had run a position area survey for the 602nd Field Artillery and had marked off its gun positions. Some of the 517th Pathfinders, finally clear of Le Muy, had made their way to the landing zone. They set up their equipment, laid out a "T" with fluorescent panels, and were ready when the reinforcing lift came into sight.

Surgeon Paul Vella had set up an Aid Station in a large courtyard on one side of the Chateau. Wounded and injured were coming in fast, but without transportation and with nowhere to send them they had to be held in place. In the meantime Vella and his staff did their best to sedate those in severe pain and tried to keep those near death from slipping over the edge.

Shortly before 1700 C Company First Sergeant Eldon Bolin and another trooper moved toward the landing area to wait for the 1st Battalion's antitank gun section. At Highway N7 they came upon the B Company road block, where two cars had been ambushed earlier by Lieutenant Reardon's platoon. One car -- a low-slung convertible -- appeared undamaged. Two dead German officers lay in the road. The driver of the convertible was slumped back behind the wheel; an antitank grenade had caught him squarely in the back of his helmet, taking off the top of his skull as one would slice open a soft-boiled egg. Blood and brains were all over the back floor. Bolin and his partner dragged out the remains of the driver and with a B Company man rode off to Ste Roseline. At the CP a Headquarters officer turned pale as he viewed the back floor, but thanked them politely. Colonel Graves now had transportation, although it needed a little cleaning up.

The 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion came in between 1804 and 1810. From 1500 feet they made a flawless jump. Over six hundred white parachutes against the blue sky of Provence was a beautiful and reassuring sight at least for the Americans. The Battalion assembled promptly and was mostly clear of the Drop Zone when the glider landings began twenty minutes later .

Three hundred and sixty-six gliders were to arrive on LZ's A and 0. The two landing zones were close together, separated only by the Nartuby River in some places; from the air it was hard to distinguish one from the other .

The two leading serials arrived at 1827, fifteen minutes late. They had tows intended for both LZ's and converged, creating an aerial traffic jam. The third serial for LZ A arrived at 1840 while the first two were still releasing their gliders; to avoid the crowd, the third serial went around the field and came in from the opposite direction. Eight minutes later the fourth serial for LZ A arrived to find a virtual flying circus with gliders criss-crossing the field from all directions.

The last LZ A serial came in at 1905. Most of the gliders from the earlier serials were down by then, but the leading aircraft in this. serial were slow in releasing their tows. Planes in rear climbed to avoid those in front, and released their gliders at 3000 feet or more.

No matter what the order of their arrival, all glider pilots rapidly discovered that instead of a cleared field they had to contend with anti-airborne stakes, trees, vineyards, hedgerows, and houses. Gliders hit the ground at 80 to 90 miles per hour, bumped and scraped, and careened across the field until stopped by a solid object such as a tree or another glider. Later arrivals, finding the field overcrowded, tried to land elsewhere but had little choice.

It was a massacre. Eleven glider pilots and eight men of the 550th Airborne Infantry were killed outright on the two LZ's, and over a hundred glider troops were seriously injured. Fourteen were evacuated to the 517th Aid Station. Many other less seriously injured men chose to go without treatment. Most of the gliders were a total loss. Out of the 327 CG-4's that came in only about 27 were later found to be salvageable.

But even while the dust was still settling, men, jeeps, and guns began to emerge. Within an hour the landing zones were clear and the troops were heading out on their missions. Men of an antitank gun section of the 442nd (Nisei) Combat Team were visibly disappointed when told that no enemy tanks had been encountered.

In gathering darkness the 551st moved toward the positions of the 2/517 northwest of Ste Roseline. The relief began at 1930 and was completed by midnight, except for one platoon of D Company which for some reason remained in place all night. The Germans made a grenade attack on one 2nd Battalion squad while it was pulling back, but there were no casualties and no other interference. The 2nd Battalion moved into bivouac near Ste Roseline, hoping to get a little sleep before daybreak.

At Le Muy all was not well with the British 2nd Parachute Brigade. Although Pathfinder guidance on their DZ had been almost perfect, four planes in the leading serial had been 20 miles off course. In the entire Brigade only 73 out of 126 aircraft had dropped their troops near the Drop Zone. Like the 517th, many British troopers were scattered around Draguignan and Trans-en-Provence. A group of 80 to 100 had come down near the 517th's 3rd Battalion around Fayence. The Horsa glider serial carrying the Brigade's artillery, scheduled to land at 0800, had turned back because of poor visibility.

A primary British D-Day objective was to capture Le Muy before dark. The Battalion assigned to this task was reduced in strength by poor landings. North of Le Muy it ran into a well-organized and alert enemy, which was at that moment engaging scattered troopers of the 517th. By late afternoon the attacking British battalion had captured a bridge over the Nartuby River, but was exhausted and without artillery support could make no further progress.

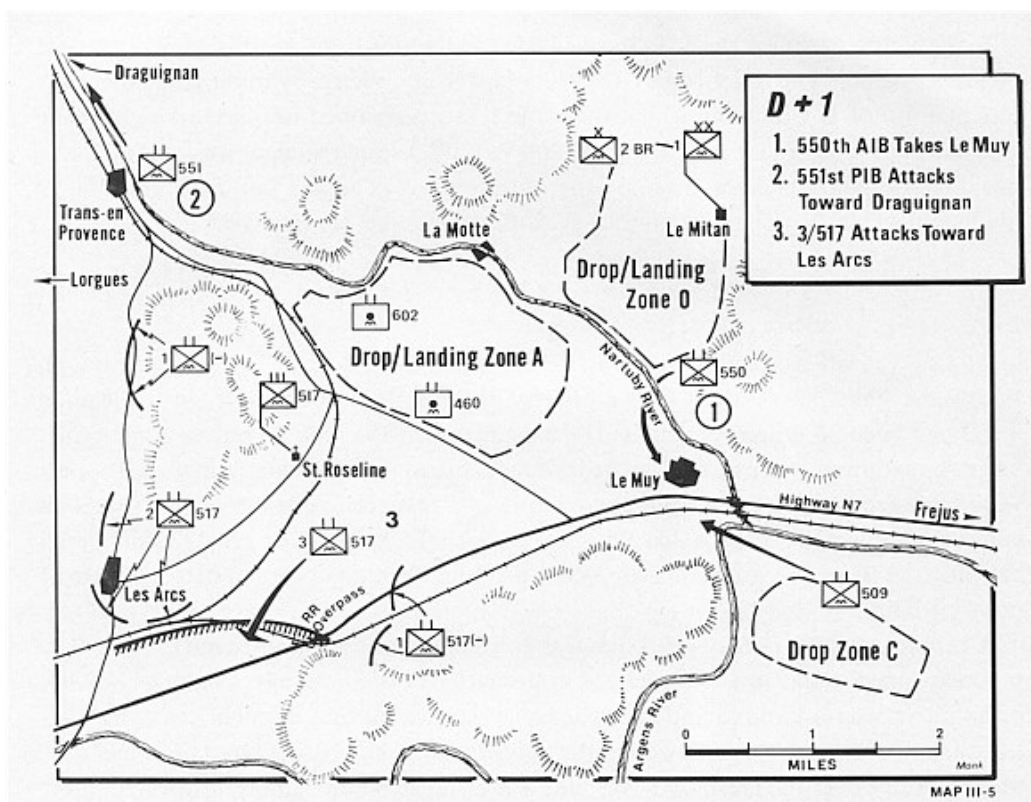
After conferring with Brigadier Pritchard, General Frederick decided to give the job of taking Le Muy to the fresh, newly-landed 550th Airborne Infantry Battalion.

D plus One

Les Arcs is at the intersection of Highway N7 and a road from Trans to Vidauban. Just south of Les Arcs a railroad runs parallel to and north of N7, crossing to the south of the highway at an overpass a mile and a half east of town. Most of the built-up area is along the north-south road above the railroad. At the southern edge of the built-up area Major Boyle and his men had held off the Germans throughout D-Day.

On D plus 1 the 2nd Battalion had a dual mission: to relieve Captain Fraser's reserve on the original 3rd Battalion objective, and to extricate Major Boyle and his men from Les Arcs.

At about 0900 two platoons of D Company under Lieutenant Carl Starkey entered Les Arcs from the north. The 2nd Platoon moved to the south edge of town, contacted some of Boyle's men, and set up a defense a few hundred yards from the railroad station. Jim Witt's 1st Platoon moved through the western part of the village.



Continuing south, they encountered enemy. After a fire fight in which Witt and another man were wounded, the platoon fell back into the western edge of town.

Skirmishing continued though out the day. German efforts to concentrate were broken up by small arms and mortar fire, 4.2" concentrations, and P-51's dropping 500-pounders along the railroad. Eight or ten D Company men were wounded. With the help of a French doctor and German prisoners serving as orderlies, an Aid Station was set up in a local hotel. In mid-afternoon F Company arrived, taking position in the north of the village facing west, and Major Boyle's force withdrew to Ste Roseline.

Confronted with the arrival of American reinforcements, the Germans began to shift towards the vineyards and railroad overpass on the east.

The 1st Battalion (less Boyle's group and the Regimental reserve) had been occupying its objective area since 1130 on D-Day. The Battalion was split into two groups, the largest on a steep bluff named "Roque Rousse" overlooking the vineyards and overpass east of Les Arcs. The smaller group, about half of B Company, was astride N7 a half-mile north. From Roque Rousse observation was excellent over most of the 517th area, particularly to the east of Les Arcs.

Soon after the 2nd Battalion arrived in Les Arcs, German infiltration into the vineyard east of the village became noticeable from Roque Rousse. The enemy came individually and in small groups. By late afternoon it was estimated that several hundred Germans had closed in the locality. The 460th Artillery and the Battalion's 81mm mortars fired several concentrations into the vineyards. Although the infiltration was checked temporarily, the build-up continued.

At 1400 a motorized patrol from the 45th Division appeared at the B Company roadblock.* The recon men wanted to know if the overpass a half-mile west was prepared for demolition. Sergeant Montgomery volunteered to find out, and, moved down the railroad track with his squad. Just short of the overpass they came under machine gun fire. Montgomery and two others were killed. Four were pinned down and unable to move, and one made it back to the roadblock. Whether the overpass was prepared for demolition was still unknown, but it was certain that it had just been taken over by the Germans.

* This was the first contact made by the 517th with the seaborne forces.

The enemy then launched a probing attack against the B Company road block. After an inconclusive fire fight they were driven back, leaving behind three prisoners.

At noon the Germans began a systematic shelling of the American positions on the Ste Roseline hill mass. Most of the shells were ordinary-size mortar and artillery; but at about 1300 one or more guns of extremely large caliber joined in. As each round

struck it shook the earth. Ground tremors could be felt at Roque Rousse, over two miles away. The noise, blast, and detonating power of these shells was tremendous.** In the course of the afternoon thirty to forty of these shells came in on the 1st and 2nd Battalion elements west of Ste Roseline. Two men were killed and over twenty-five wounded. It was apparent that the shelling was intended to cover the German assembly in the vineyard east of Les Arcs.

** It is the author's opinion that this fire came from the 340mm Naval guns at Cape Cepet near Toulon, 30 miles away, and was intended to support a German attack from Les Arcs to Le Muy.

The German infiltration into the vineyard had also been noted by observers on the Ste Roseline hill mass, and was becoming a very serious concern to Colonel Graves.

A 'spoiling' attack, to hit the enemy when they are assembling for an attack and unprepared for defense, is every tactician's dream. A perfect opportunity for such an attack was developing.

Le Muy

A night attack over strange terrain is hardly the best way to introduce a green unit to combat, particularly one which is still shaken from a violent and costly glider landing. Nevertheless the 550th Airborne Infantry Battalion moved out at 0230 D plus I in an attack against Le Muy, which had held firm though out D-Day against the best efforts of veteran British paratroopers.

The leading companies had barely crossed the bridge over the Nartuby when they were caught in the open by German illuminating flares. Machine gun and mortar fire ripped into the attackers and the advance came to a halt. Bugged down, the troops were withdrawn to the start position.

The problem was a complete lack of information, compounded by darkness. Patrols were pushed out (one led by the Battalion 8-2 was captured) and a ford crossing the river 300 yards upstream was found. At 1130 the attack resumed, this time supported by well-coordinated fire. Breaking into the outskirts of Le Muy, the 550th men took up a house-by-house advance, Germans began to surrender in groups of 20 to 30. By early afternoon the town square was reached. At 1600, with 517th 8-2 Captain Dearing acting as intermediary, the German garrison surrendered. Five hundred prisoners were taken and 50 to 75 allied captives were released. At 1630 tanks of the 191st Tank Battalion, guided by the 509th, entered the town from the east. The last major obstacle on the road to the beaches had been removed.

The two 3rd Battalion columns, exhausted by their hike over back mountain roads, converged at La Motte at 1400 and reached Ste Roseline two hours later. Worn-out men sprawled in whatever shade they could find, hoping for at least a night's rest.

Colonel Graves, vastly relieved by the arrival of his long-lost battalion, decided to employ it against the enemy east of Les Arcs next morning. After issuing a warning order to the Battalion and alerting the artillery he called Colonel Ellis, Task Force G-3, to explain his plans .

Ellis stressed the need for urgency. General Truscott wanted to get VI Corps off the beaches, fast, in order to destroy the Germans before they could escape up the Rhone Valley. He did not intend to be delayed by minor pockets of resistance; Le Muy had just been captured by the 550th. It was essential that the Germans at Les Arcs be cleaned out before morning.

Colonel Graves changed his plan. The attack would have to be made before dark, regardless of the condition of the troops.

A coordinated fire plan was worked out between the 460th and Company D, 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion.* One thousand rounds -- including a high proportion of white phosphorous -- would be fired in twenty minutes. The concentration would begin along the railroad track, shift south, and work over the area to cover every inch of ground .

* The 4.2 mortar shell weighted 42.3 pounds, three times that of the 75mm howitzer, and packed a terrific punch.

Despite their weariness the 3rd Battalion troops dropped musette bags, moved to attack positions, and formed up with H on left, I on right, and G in reserve. Due to the impending darkness Colonel Zais directed that the attack would be made on a compass azimuth of 230°. At 1945 the leading companies formed on the line of departure and the supporting barrage began.

Those who witnessed it will never forget it. For twenty minutes 50 4.2" rounds per minute rained down with awesome effect. Great clouds of smoke arose, punctuated by red-yellow explosive flashes. The vineyard was almost literally blasted from the face of the earth. It was a brutal steamroller, exactly as it had been intended. It was hard to believe that any living creature could survive.

Yet survive some did. As the fire shifted south of the railroad the leading companies followed, and were met by machine gun fire from the embankment. Lieutenant Freeman and 1st Sergeant Gaunce were killed. Two others were badly wounded, and the attack was held up at the railroad track. By strong personal leadership several individuals got across the track and brought down machine gun and bazooka fire on houses and hedgerows. The weight of the effort shifted to the right, nearer Les Arcs, and soon the attacking companies were all up and moving through the smoke and burning debris. The Battalion took forty prisoners and as darkness closed in halted for the night at the far edge of the vineyards.

At daylight next morning it was found that the Battalion was still 800 yards short of Les Arcs. The advance was resumed. Contact was made with D Company. A patrol sent south rescued fourteen 45th Division men who were being held prisoner, and went on to ambush and capture a German patrol advancing north. So ended the most serious threat that had arisen in the sector of the 517th.

While the enemy was being destroyed at Le Muy and Les Arcs the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion was driving against Draguignan in its first combat action. Orders had been issued at 1100 for the 551st, with direct support by the 602nd Field Artillery, to seize the town. Through the afternoon and evening the battalion met light resistance. After dark one company came in from the east behind the town and by daylight Draguignan was cleared. The Commanding General of the LXII Corps was captured with his staff and several hundred prisoners.



In the mountains around Seillans-Callian several small groups of American and British paratroopers, orphaned by the departure of their parent units, carried on a little war of their own with the help of the French Maquis.

The two major elements of the French resistance were the FFI,* which supported De Gaulle and the Communist-oriented FTP **. Collectively they were called "Maquis" after the hardy sagebrush of the region. They were especially active in the mountains where the Germans found it almost impossible to track them down. The Maquis excelled at isolated ambushes, but were untrained and poorly-equipped. They usually lost out when they tried to take on sizable German forces.

With the Allied landings on August 5th the Maquis took arms throughout Provence, sniping, bushwhacking, and ambushing small German truck convoys. The accidental parachute landings around Seillans, Tourettes, and Callian led them to believe that the Allies had come to the area in force to stay. Although taken aback when most of the paratroopers packed up and left, the Maquis carried on enthusiastically with the scattered groups left behind.

Soon after daylight, while trying to assemble their men near Callian, Lieutenant Skutnik of Service Company and Sergeant Gibbons of the Engineers were approached, separately, by several Frenchmen looking for help. Gathering up several men, Skutnik and Gibbons followed the Frenchmen to a valley east of Callian and found a fire fight in progress. The Americans joined in and after a few minutes an enemy group of 35 to 50 surrendered. Two vehicles had been destroyed, 6 to 10 Germans killed, and two Americans wounded. Skutnik and Gibbons returned to their outfits and eventually joined the main column enroute to Ste Roseline, leaving the two wounded men at Callian .

* FFI: Free French of the Interior .

** FTP: Francs-Tireur Patriotique -- literally, free lance patriots.

Lieutenant Lempke of Regimental Headquarters assembled approximately 30 Americans and British northeast of Callian. Unable to contact the other columns, they moved southwest and collided with an enemy force of company size. A fire fight began and more Germans arrived. Lempke wisely withdrew, circled around the enemy force, and rejoined the regiment with his men on D plus 4.

Captain Morris, Commanding H Company, landed several miles west of Callian. He rounded up four of his stick but was unable to contact any others. Moving through hills and woods, Morris and his men made it to Ste Roseline on D plus 2.

Many men, through no fault of their own, were unable to assemble or march. This included 30 or 40 of the 517th, 10 or 12 of the 596th Engineers, and 35 wounded or injured.

The wounded/injured groups included Lieutenant Stott of I Company, left at Seillans with an aidman and 6 men; Sergeant Chism of the Medical Section, left at Fayence with a group of 25, including 7 Americans; and Battalion Medical officer Walter "Doc" Plassman, himself injured, who remained at Montauroux tending 15 to 20 others.

Those not wounded or injured who were forced to remain behind included Captain Hooper and Lieutenant Mc Elroy at Callian-Montauroux, and Sgt Heckard, Cpl Deshayes, and Cpl Douglas at Fayence. Accurate records detailing the activities of these men do not exist. Operating with the Maquis and some British troopers also left behind, they staged raids and ambushes, blew road craters and bridges, and harassed the Germans in any way possible.

It appears that the Hooper-Mc Elroy group, with 30 to 35 men, held off the Germans at Callian for some time but were finally driven to Montauroux. Later they left Montauroux, went south, and returned to American control by joining elements of the 36th Division's 141st Infantry.

Sergeant Heckard and Cpl Deshayes of G Company teamed up with an American OSS officer who had been working in the Fayence area, and were later instrumental in securing the surrender of the fortress of Le Roche.

Cpl Douglas of G Company landed near Fayence and joined a group of 15 Americans and British troopers. The Maquis brought them an SCR 300 radio they had found, and with it Douglas contacted other American forces and coordinated Air Force bombing and strafing in the area.

In addition to the above there were undoubtedly many others whose activities, unfortunately, went unrecorded. All did their damndest. While each little raid and ambush may not have seemed to accomplish much in itself, cumulatively they made a significant contribution to the main effort by drawing German forces away from the beaches.



Troopers on patrol.

Les Arcs.

The airborne phase of DRAGOON ended on the night of August 16/17 as the 1st Airborne Task Force was contacted by the seaborne forces and came under VI Corps control. The Task Force was directed to hold the area Le Muy--Draguignan--Les Arcs until passed through by the 36th Division, and then to assemble in place as VI Corps reserve.

On August 17th and 18th the 517th RCT assembled around the Chateau Ste Roseline and enjoyed a brief rest. Tent camps made of multicolored supply parachutes sprang up, and men who had been given up for dead reappeared, as alive and ornery as ever. Some notable jump stories lost nothing in the telling. Aerial resupply bundles were dropped, setting off a mad race to see who could get to them first -- with the edge going to the glider units, which had vehicles. A diehard German machine gun crew at the DZ was knocked out by an A company patrol, but there was no other enemy contact.

The wounded and injured were evacuated to the beach at St Raphael, leaving many vacancies to be filled. Lt Col Zais became Regimental Executive officer in place of the injured "Ike" Walton. Major Paxton was assigned to command of the 3rd Battalion in Zais' place, and Major Herbert Bowlby went from 1st Battalion executive to Regimental S-3. Similar realignments were made at all levels from Battalion to squad.

Company and battery commanders submitted detailed reports on the activities of their units from the jump through D plus 2. Captain Bob Dalrymple's report was bitter. His 596th Engineer Company -- split three ways with the 509th, 3/517, and Regimental Headquarters -- had served valiantly as infantrymen but there had been little need for engineer work. The Company had dropped 58 bundles containing 6,000 pounds of explosives, 2,000 pounds of mines, and 14 mine detectors. Most of it was scattered far from the drop zones and had to be abandoned.

Dalrymple's opportunity to prove the value of the 596th was to come in the near future.

To insure a speedy breakout from the beaches General Truscott had formed 'Task Force Butler', of armor, infantry, and artillery. On August 18th this Task Force rolled through Draguignan, reaching the Rhone on the 21st. Other VI Corps units followed through the Argens corridor. In the south the French II Corps on the coastal road arrived at Toulon on August 21st, and on the 28th forced the surrender of both Toulon and Marseilles .

As Task Force Butler moved through Draguignan the 517th Combat Team marched seven miles east to an assembly area north of Puget-sur-Argens.

The Chateau Ste Roseline was left to slip back into dreamlike medieval serenity. The violent 20th Century had come and gone.

The airborne operation was a remarkable performance, considered by many military historians the most successful of the war. Within 18 hours 9,099 troops, 213 artillery pieces and antitank guns, and 221 vehicles had been flown two hundred miles across the Mediterranean and landed by parachute and glider in enemy-held territory. Despite widely-scattered landings all missions assigned had been accomplished within 48 hours. Two enemy battalions had been destroyed, a Corps headquarters captured, 1,350 prisoners taken, and an 'airhead' of 50 square miles opened for the advance of the seaborne troops.

On the debit side the airborne suffered 9% losses * including 560 killed, wounded, and missing, and 283 jump and glider casualties.

* These statistics are from the AFHQ report. But statistics are always misleading, particularly in an airborne operation when most "missing" eventually find their way in. The 517th Regiment (not including the 460th and the 596th) had 19 killed, 126 wounded, and 137 injured, about 14% This does not include "missing" who for a day or so were numbered in the hundreds. These casualties were relatively light, but the reader should bear in mind that they occurred in the short period of just 2 days.

History is full of "ifs" but it is interesting to speculate on how DRAGOON might have fared without the airborne assault. On good defensive terrain with only a narrow corridor to protect and with all communications intact, it is entirely possible that the Germans could have held off the seaborne assault long enough for reserves to arrive.

DRAGOON might easily have become another "stranded whale" like Anzio.

In early September Marseilles, Toulon, and Port de Bouc* were open and functioning. In October 40% -- 524,894 tons -- of all supplies reaching the western Allies in Europe came through the southern ports. By mid-winter the port capacities had almost tripled. At the end of the war 905,000 troops had been brought ashore through Southern France.

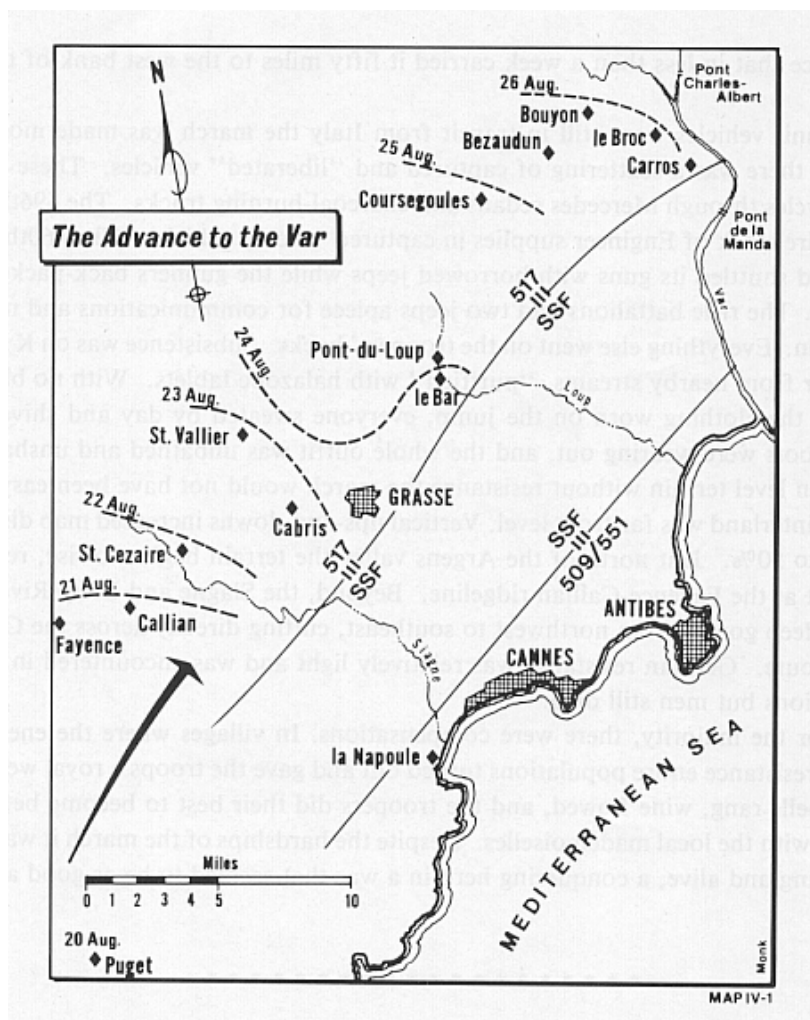
* An auxiliary seaport 25 miles west of Marseilles.

In his book "Crusade in Europe" General Eisenhower said it all. "There was no other development of that period which added more decisively to our advantages or aided us more in accomplishing the final and complete defeat of the German forces than did this secondary attack coming up the Rhone valley."

Chapter IV

The Champagne Campaign

The Advance to the Var



The Combat Team moved north from Puget-sur-Argens on August 20th, beginning an advance that in less than a week carried it fifty miles to the west bank of the Var River.

Since unit vehicles were still in transit from Italy the march was made mostly by foot, but there was a scattering of captured and "liberated" vehicles. These ranged from bicycles through Mercedes sedans and charcoal-burning trucks. The 596th moved its entire stock of Engineer supplies in captured enemy vehicles. The 460th hand-towed and shuttled its guns with borrowed jeeps while the gunners back-packed ammunition. The rifle battalions had two jeeps apiece for communications and medical evacuation. Everything else went on the troopers' backs. Subsistence was on K rations and water from nearby streams, "purified" with halazone tablets. With no blankets and only the clothing worn on the jump, everyone sweated by day and shivered at night. Boots were wearing out, and the whole outfit was unbathed and unshaved.

Even on level terrain without resistance the march would not have been easy. The Riviera hinterland was far from level. Vertical ups-and-downs increased map distances by 30070 to 50070. Just north of the Argens valley the terrain begins to rise, reaching 1,000 feet at the Fayence-Callian ridgeline. Beyond, the Siagne and Loup Rivers ran through deep gorges from northwest to southeast, cutting directly across the Combat Team's route. German resistance was relatively light and was encountered in only a few locations but men still died.

Yet, for the majority, there were compensations. In villages where the enemy offered no resistance entire populations turned out and gave the troops a royal welcome. Church bells rang, wine flowed, and the troopers did their best to become better acquainted with the local mademoiselles. Despite the hardships of the march it was great to be young and alive, a conquering hero in a war that seemed to be as good as won.

As VI Corps moved west the Airborne Task Force reverted to Seventh Army control and was assigned to protect the Army's eastern flank, while the main forces moved up the Rhone valley. The British 2nd Parachute Brigade returned to Italy and was

replaced by the First Special Service Force. Additional artillery and other support was added to the Task Force to beef up its capability for prolonged ground combat.

Protection of the Army's eastern flank meant moving as far east as practicable and then defending the best ground available. The initial Task Force objective was the line Fayence-La Napoule. The 517th was assigned the left, the Special Service Force the center, and the 509th/551st the right in a narrow strip along the coast. Far to the north the 550th Airborne Infantry Battalion and a small reconnaissance detachment patrolled to the Alps .

The German 148th Reserve Infantry Division under Major General Fretter-Pico planned to make a fighting withdrawal to the east. Although damaged in the invasion, the 148th remained a cohesive fighting force. Fretter-Pico intended to stand on successive positions west of the Var, and then withdraw through the Alpine passes into Italy. He hoped to gain time for German reserves to move into the Maritime Alps. The Germans did not intend to fight in Nice, both out of respect for the Allied fleet in the Mediterranean and because they would be vulnerable to Resistance action in the crowded streets. Instead they would stand along the Fayence-Callian ridgeline and the Siagne and Loup Rivers.

In command at Fayence-Callian was a Major Turnov, who had been stranded by the invasion while on leave at St Raphael. With a scratch force of 200 men and a few 20mm antiaircraft cannon Turnov had cleared the area of paratroopers and Maquis, driving Captain Hooper's group back to Montauroux. Turnov put most of his force in the ancient fortress of La Roche in Fayence.

On the 20th the 517th moved north from Puget to pass through the 141st Infantry and seize the line Fayence-Callian. While the 2nd Battalion retraced the route taken by Colonel Zais on D-Day through Callas to Fayence, the 3rd passed through Bagnols toward Callian. The irony of having to go back over a route down which a forced march had been made a few days before was not lost on the troopers. Several pungent remarks were made on the irrationality of the Army in general and the 517th in particular .

In mid-afternoon the 2nd Battalion halted a mile south of Fayence. Although no activity could be seen, a Regimental Headquarters group came under 20mm fire and the fortress of La Roche loomed menacingly on the skyline. It was decided to work the town and fort over with artillery and to patrol for information. In late afternoon the 460th, from position areas at St Paul, began a series of concentrations on Fayence.

On D-Day many American and British paratroopers had been left stranded in the Fayence-Callian area. While these included small groups of wounded and injured under Sergeant Chism at Fayence and Lieutenant Plassman at Montauroux, an able-bodied majority worked with the Maquis to harass the Germans in every conceivable way. The enemy did not bother Chism and Plassman -- probably because they were considered a form of life insurance -- but continued trying to track down the others.

Sergeant Heckard and Corporal Deshayes of G Company made contact with an American OSS officer. This was a Captain Hanna, who had been parachuted in a month before D-Day to organize the Resistance. On the evening of the 20th a "Maquisard", informed them that the German commander in Fayence wanted to discuss surrender terms. The three met with Major Turnov in a house near the fortress.

Captain Hanna put on a magnificent bluff. Although he had no contact with the 517th, he told the German commander that Allied paratroopers were massing in overwhelming strength for an all-out assault. Unless the Germans surrendered immediately, he said that he was fearful of the consequences; they might even be turned over to the vengeful French. The discussion continued for three hours, punctuated by shellfire .

Major Turnov finally gave in. He would surrender on condition that the shelling be stopped, and that he and his men would become American POW's and not be turned over to the French. It was agreed that at 0700 next morning the Germans would stack their weapons outside the fortress and come out under a flag of truce.

Captain Hanna provided an FFI driver and vehicle to return Turnov to the fort, and sent Deshayes along to protect the German officer from the French. Corporal Deshayes escorted Turnov into the fort, but as he turned to leave was informed that he was to remain as a guest of the Germans until the shelling stopped. It suddenly dawned upon Deshayes that he was being held hostage.

Providentially, the shelling ceased in a half-hour. Deshayes was invited to drink a glass of wine with the Germans, and they toasted the end of their war .

The shelling had been lifted to allow reconnaissance patrols to enter Fayence to obtain information in preparation for the attack in the morning. Several patrols entered the town. Lieutenant Walter Irwin returned with an accurate plot on the location of the 20mm guns. Next morning as the 2nd Battalion prepared to go into the attack a column of 184 Germans emerged from the fort, their hands held high.

Callian was seized after skirmishing involving 3/517, the 141st, the Maquis, and the Germans. In a small house-to-house fight T /5 James Bryant, wounded by a grenade, killed one German and captured another. Waving a pistol and holding his captive as a shield, Bryant demanded that the remaining enemy surrender. Twenty-eight Germans came out with their hands up.

By noon the entire Fayence-Callian area had been secured. An important by-product was the recovery of the groups of wounded and injured men who had been left behind on D-Day. These included Lieutenant Stott's at Seillans, Sergeant Chism's at Fayence, and Lieutenant Plassmaq's at Montauroux. Third Battalion Headquarters men arriving to "rescue" Plassman found him in hospital whites, in complete control of the situation. With the help of a local dentist and a priest, he had taken over a small sanitarium and was healing the sick without regard to nationality. On the preceding night a detachment of German engineer troops had occupied the village under command of a depressed, English-speaking captain. Several wounded Germans had been placed in Plassman's care, one of whom died. The Germans had evacuated the village just before the arrival of the 3rd Battalion.

After the seizure of Callian-Montauroux the 3rd Battalion moved toward St. Cezaire, four miles north. The town occupied a strong natural defensive position on high cliffs overlooking the Siagne River. Although it appeared deserted a patrol found that it was held by several hundred Germans. An attack was scheduled for 1900, with G Company to go around in an encirclement while I Company moved in frontally.

While the attacking companies moved into position the artillery ranged in. After repeated heavy concentrations no enemy could be seen, and observers concluded that the enemy must have evacuated the place. Company I waded across the Siagne. As they began up the cliff the artillery lifted.

As if on signal the Germans emerged from shelter and brought down heavy mortar and machine gun fire upon I Company, halfway up the cliff. With extraordinary courage the troopers continued to climb, and as darkness fell they closed in with rifles and grenades. By midnight St Cezaire had been taken. Twenty-one Germans were killed and an unknown number wounded. The assault companies lost five dead and twenty wounded.*

* Companies G and I received a Task Force commendation for this action. See Appendix C.

The enemy's determination to hold St Cezaire was evidenced by the mines and booby-traps found by the Engineers. The 596th removed 32 Tellermines from a field north of the village. Within the town numerous booby-traps were found in alleys, pathways, and trails leading to wells. Booby-trapped Tellermines and cheveaux-de-frix were removed from the road leading to St Vallier .

The fight at St Cezaire eliminated the last serious resistance in the 517th zone west of the Var. On August 23rd the 1st Battalion passed through the 3rd and occupied St Vallier-du-Thiey after a ten-mile hike over a barren mountain. St Vallier had been a stopover for Napoleon on his return from Elba. The arrival of the 517th was the second event of consequence that had ever occurred there. It was celebrated with Gallic hospitality. Company C established its CP at a sidewalk cafe and a splendid time was had by all.

While the 1st Battalion was enroute to St Vallier the 2nd moved to Cabris. On the 24th all three battalions occupied high ground north of Grasse. A 3rd Battalion patrol to Le Bar-sur-Loup found an enemy detachment preparing to blow up a bridge over the river. Despite the patrol's best efforts, the bridge was blown and the enemy detachment pulled out. The 3rd Battalion outposted the high ground on the far side of the Loup. Another day of hard marching brought the rifle battalions to Coursegoules, Bezaudun, and Le Broc, 10 to 12 miles northeast of Grasse. The 517th had far out-distanced the SSF on right, who had a hard fight in crossing the Loup at Villeneuve.

Some of the sea-tail vehicles had arrived from Italy and the Combat Team enjoyed a few days' rest. New OD clothing was issued and Ten-in-One rations provided a welcome relief from the steady diet of 'K' rations.

On August 26th the 1st Battalion sent a C Company rifle platoon to Carros, overlooking the Var. An FFI detachment was reported to be surrounded by Germans and in need of help. On arrival at Carros the platoon found plenty of FFI but no Germans. Before returning to the Battalion the platoon leader decided to take a look at the Var River. The troopers worked their way down a winding trail to the river bank and moved south for a mile. At the Pont de la Manda a party of French workmen reported that the far end of the bridge was guarded by only two German sentries.

The Var in this vicinity is about three-quarters of a mile wide. It was almost dry could be easily crossed without getting one's feet wet. The center span of the bridge had been blown, but looked as though with a little engineer work it would be made passable for trucks.

Corporal Perkins and PFC Richards volunteered to cross the bridge. To disguise themselves as civilian workmen they wrapped sweatbands around their heads, stripped to the waist, and pulled their pants legs out of their boots. Borrowing a wheelbarrow, they put their weapons into it and proceeded to push it directly across the bridge. The ruse allowed them to get close. A few feet from the far end of the bridge the sentry fired upon them. Perkins and Richards grabbed their weapons and killed the sentry, the shot another German trying to get away. After a leisurely look around the two came back across the bridge and rejoined their platoon. They had been the first American soldiers to cross the Var.

At midnight on 27/28 August Captain Bob Newberry's E Company formed behind a ridge west of the Var near the Pont Charles Albert. They were led by an FFI guide and accompanied by 460th Battalion S-2 Jim Lantz. Their mission was to cross the Var and seize La Roquette.

It was very dark. The troops climbed the ridge, filed over a rugged gorge, and set out across the rocky river bed. They had been assured that water would be only ankle deep, but found the main channel a waist-deep torrent 30 feet wide. One man was swept downstream (but rescued) and a mortar baseplate was lost. On the far side they struggled up another steep ridge. It had been blasted by shellfire all afternoon. Soot and ashes combined with wet uniforms to transform the troopers into chimney-sweeps. Above La Roquette the company halted and waited for dawn.

At first light a motorcycle with sidecar was ambushed coming down the road from Levens. Two Germans were killed and a dispatch-case was sent back for S-2 evaluation.

Intermittent mortar fire came in upon the company through the day. Captain Lantz adjusted his battalion's fire upon La Roquette. This was difficult in the steep, rugged terrain. One round would fall short and the next would be far over. After a half-hour Lantz, growing exasperated, grabbed the microphone and growled, "Are you sure we're both using the same Goddamned map?"

Registration was finally accomplished and Newberry led his men southwest along a wooded ridge. An attached Battalion Headquarters machine gun section set up a killing zone to prevent German withdrawal. E Company moved in under cover of several heavy artillery concentrations. After a brief fight 15 Germans were killed and 77 surrendered. Two Americans had been slightly wounded.*

* Task Force Citation at Appendix C.

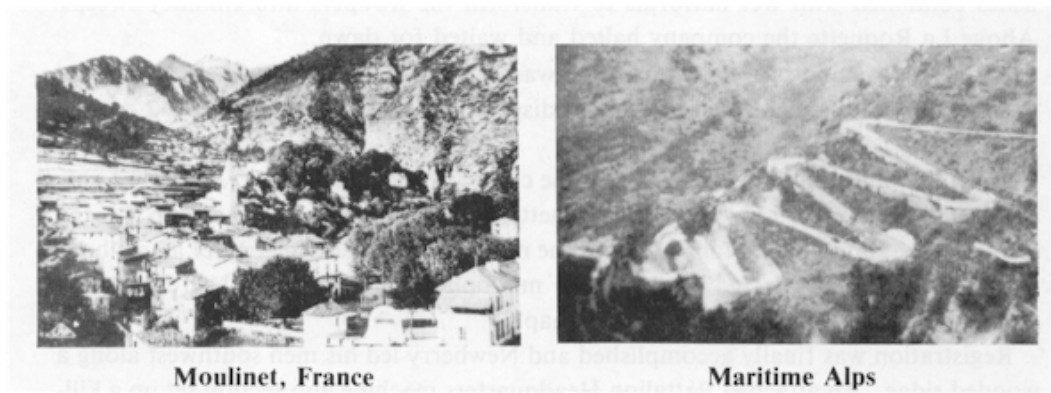
The balance of the 2nd Battalion quickly exploited the bridgehead by moving into La Roquette. Patrols to Levens found that the Germans had hastily evacuated. While the 2nd Battalion patrolled to the east, the 1st moved to Plan du Var .

The crossing of the Var brought new problems for the 596th Engineers. The river could be crossed on foot, but getting vehicles over it was another matter. The existing bridges had been badly damaged by American bombing and the retreating Germans.

It was more practical to build fords, but the Germans had mined and booby-trapped all the likely fording spots. In some areas anti-airborne stakes with attached booby-trapped artillery shells had to be removed from the river bed.

The 3rd Platoon of the 596th worked for a week putting in a vehicular ford at St Martin, downstream from the Pont Charles Albert. Several hundred mines and booby-traps were removed or destroyed in place. On August 30th three 596th men were killed while removing a booby-trapped artillery shell.

The balance of the 596th worked for several days under Task Force control at St Laurent, where the Var flows into the sea. An aircraft landing strip was put in, and a damaged railroad bridge was demolished to obtain the steel for new construction. While engaged in this work the Engineers found a unique new antipersonnel device. Consisting of a Teller mine with two wooden hemispheres attached, it was apparently intended to be rolled down hillsides into attacking troops. Fortunately, the infantry of the 517th RCT never encountered this curious device.



East of the Var the Maritime Alps rise precipitously from the Mediterranean. The zone of the 517th may be visualized as a large triangle with its apex at the crest of the Authion Massif, 6,380 feet high, north of Turini. The west leg of this triangle is the Vesubie River, which rushes through deep gorges to the Var near Levens. On the east is the Bevera River; which runs south from the Authion to Sospel and turns east to the Italian frontier. At the base of the triangle is L'Escarene, where roads from the west and south converge to go north to Turini and northeast to Sospel.

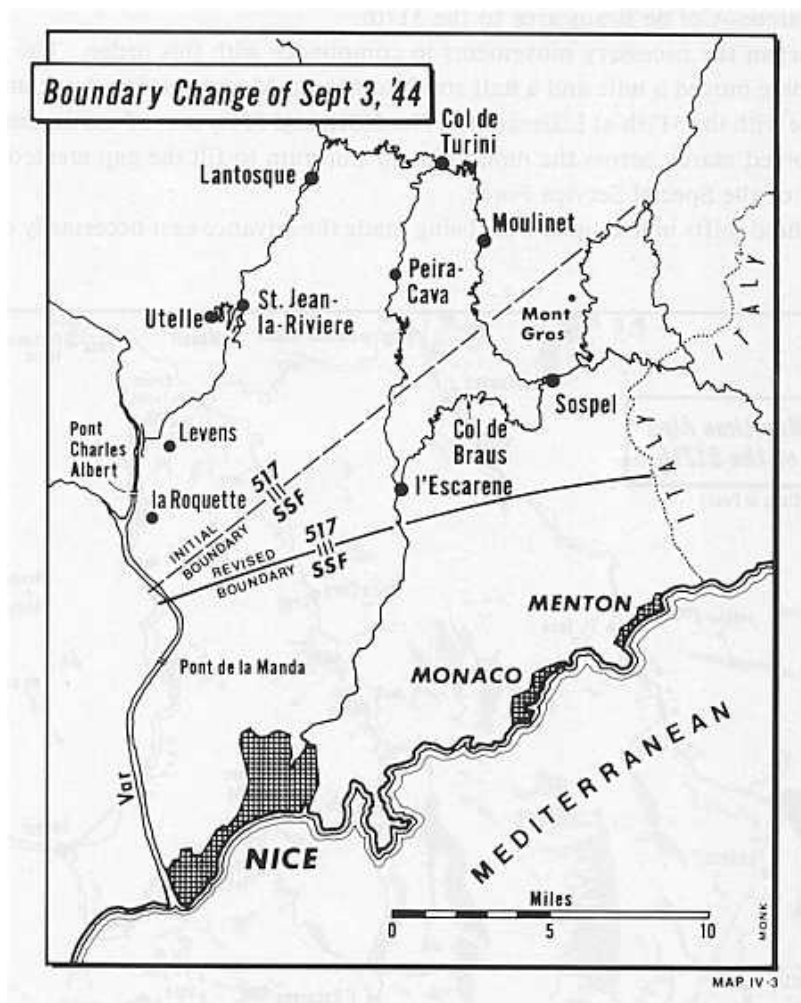
Between the Vesubie and the Bevera several ranges of mountains extend south from the Authion. The eastern is the highest range, with peaks from 5,500 feet near Turini to 3660 at Tete de la Lavina. Beyond the Bevera another mountain range runs southeast from the Authion to Mangiabo (5,900 feet) and Mount Grosso (4,140 feet) overlooking Sospel.

The mountain ranges formed strong defensive barriers against advance from the west. Tete de la Lavina, in particular, controlled the approaches to Col de Braus and the L'Escarene--Sospel road which led to Italy. It was the German MSR * and vitally important to them.

* MSR-Main Supply Route.

By the end of August all units of the Airborne Task Force were across the Var and advancing against little resistance. The Germans had apparently withdrawn into the mountains. The 1st Battalion moved into the Vesubie Valley, occupied St Jean-la-Riviere, and sent a company forward to Lantosque. Signs of stiffening resistance appeared on August 31st when a 1st Battalion motorized patrol* was ambushed east of La Bollene. Three men were killed, two wounded, and a jeep destroyed. Battalion executive Don Fraser distinguished himself by going to the scene and retrieving a wounded man under heavy fire.

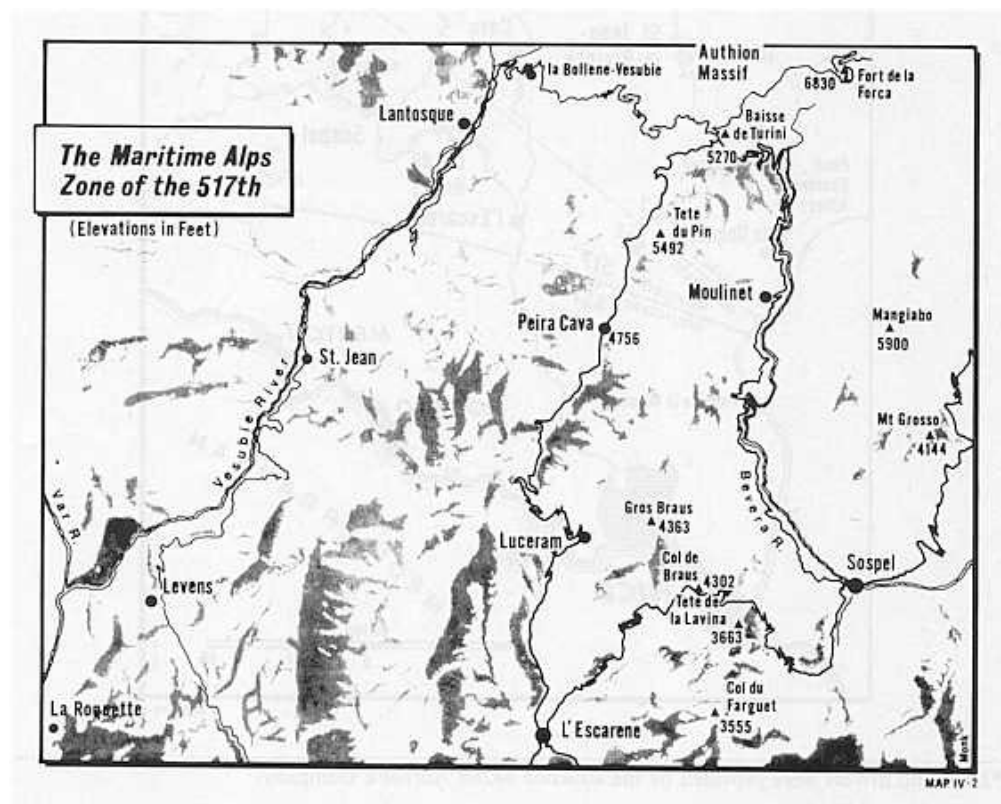
* Jeeps and drivers were provided by the attached 442nd Antitank Company.



On September 1st the Special Service Force occupied L'Escarene, passed through Col de Braus, and captured Tete de la Lavina against slight resistance. In the coastal zone the 509th and 551st were approaching La Turbie, northwest of Monte Carlo.

Two days later Task Force Headquarters issued an order changing zones of responsibility. The 509th and 551st were to move from the coast to the north, between the 517th and the 550th. The Special Service Force was to shift south to the coast, leaving the L'Escarene--Col de Braus area to the 517th.

Units began the necessary movements in compliance with this order. The Special Service Force moved a mile and a half south to Mount Meras, leaving detachments to coordinate with the 517th at L'Escarene. The 509th and 551st moved north, and 2/517 made a forced march across the mountains to Luceram to fill the gap created by the departure of the Special Service Force.



While these shifts in locations were being made the advance east necessarily came to a halt. The enemy took swift advantage of this unexpected windfall by reoccupying Col de Braus and Tete de la Lavina with a fresh formation, newly arrived from northern Italy. This was the 34th Infantry Division, veterans of the Russian front. Now the 517th was to find that it had to fight a savage battle to recapture ground that had already been taken once before.

The Fight for Col de Braus

One company of the 2nd Battalion arrived at Luceram on September 3rd and the rest of the Battalion closed on the following day. As a first step in taking over his new zone, Colonel Seitz detailed D Company to check the tunnel* at Touet de L'Escarene, scout out the L'Escarene--Sospel road, and occupy Col de Braus.

* Several days earlier the SSF had fought a small battle with a German force which retreated into the tunnel's mouth. The check was to determine whether any Germans remained there.

D Company's command arrangement was unusual. Lieutenant Loren James had inherited command after Dave Armstrong was injured in the jump into France, but by mutual agreement Lieutenant Carl Starkey, nominally executive officer, functioned as "field company commander."

Lieutenant Starkey selected a platoon, checked the tunnel and found nothing, and headed up the hairpin bends for Col de Braus. The road had been extensively blown, cratered, and mined. It was impassable for trucks and dangerous on foot. Starkey had been told that Col de Braus was unoccupied, but when a sniper opened fire he began to suspect that he had been misinformed. The platoon halted briefly, resumed the march, and came under fire again. Another resumption of the march was met by machine gun fire. Feeling that "he'd be damned if one lousy sniper was going to stop him," Starkey led his troops off the road to the northeast.

Circling left, the platoon moved for a mile or so up steep slopes, finally arriving at a 30-foot sheer rock wall. Continuing to the left would put them far off course. They had to go up the wall. Lieutenant Starkey moved forward with two scouts, watching the top of the cliff for signs of enemy. He stumbled over a tripwire and a stunning explosion occurred. One scout was wounded and Starkey was dazed and deafened.

This would have been more than enough to stop most men, but not "muscles"*** Starkey. A little further on he found a place with foot and hand-holes leading to the top of the wall. The platoon came forward and Lieutenant Starkey led the climb up, pausing halfway to observe, "Ain't this a hell of a way to make a living?" One by one the troopers followed him to the crest.

** A term of endearment bestowed upon him by platoon member Fred Canziani.

The ridge was occupied by a platoon-sized German force. They had apparently relied upon the mined cliff for security, and were taken completely by surprise. Seven enemy were killed and eleven captured.

More Germans arrived and began a series of counterattacks, supported by mortar and artillery fire. The troopers formed a semi-circle at the cliff's edge, placing the wounded and prisoners in the center. As the shelling grew heavier and the attacks came deeper around his flanks, Lieutenant Starkey decided to bring up more men.

After dark platoon runner Felix Povinelli made his way through German patrols back to the Battalion position. Next morning the balance of the Company arrived with machine gun and mortar attachments from Battalion. Lieutenant Leonard Cooper's platoon reinforced Starkey just as the Germans began another counterattack. Through another night and day D Company hung on under incessant shelling and counterattacks.* The dead, wounded, and prisoners were evacuated on the morning of September 7th, and that evening Company G arrived to take over the position.

* Task Force Citation at Appendix C.

What had begun as a routine patrol into supposedly unoccupied territory had developed into a major battle.

On September 6th Task Force headquarters, apparently unaware that a fresh German formation had arrived on the scene, issued another order. This one directed the establishment of a defensive position on the mountains beyond the Bevera, requiring the capture of Sospel. Coming at a time when D Company was fighting desperately to gain a foothold at Col de Braus, this new order was not well received. It has been reported that Colonel Graves, ordinarily a mild-spoken gentleman, gave voice to several uncomplimentary remarks.

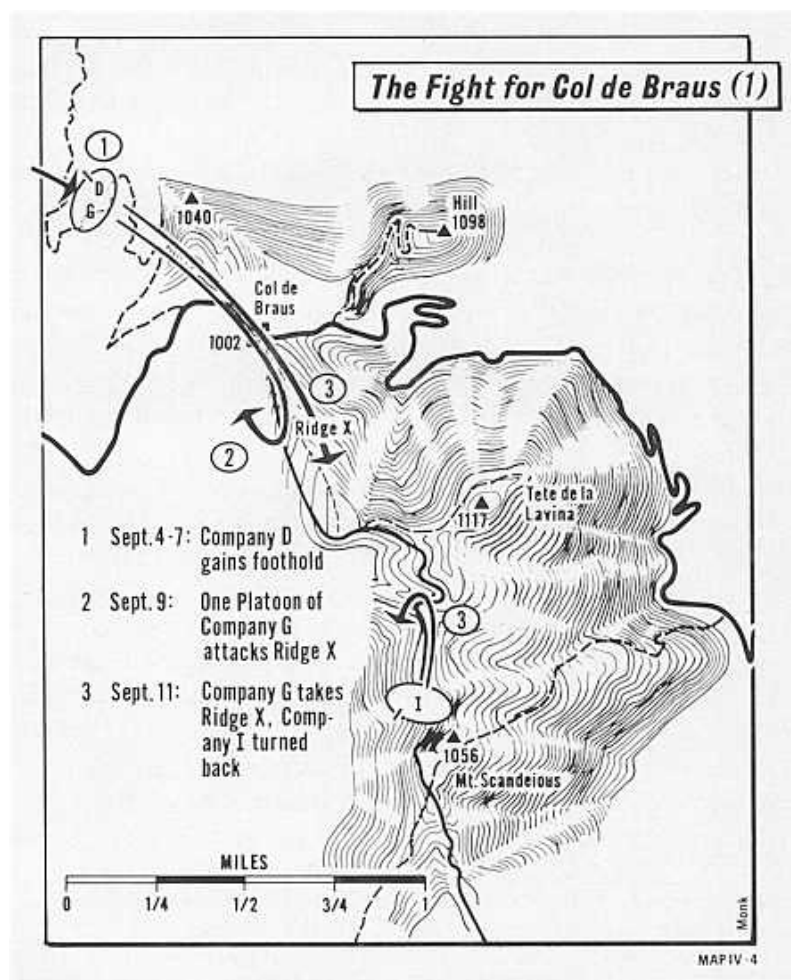
Faced with the necessity for capturing Sospel, Graves decided to pass the 3rd Battalion through the 2nd.

The 3rd Battalion had arrived in L'Escarene on September 5th. On receiving his orders, Colonel Paxton sent Company I directly east cross-country to contact the Special Service Force at Mount Meras and led the rest of the Battalion over the route established by Company D. Battalion Headquarters remained at L'Escarene.

The Germans had infiltrated back over the route of D Company's advance. Several sharp actions had to be fought to push them aside. On September 7th G Company relieved Starkey's D Company platoons under heavy fire. While the 2nd Battalion men fell back into reserve, Colonel Paxton and his staff sized up the situation.

Col de Braus, consisting of the road to Sospel and a few buildings, was several hundred yards to the southeast. A steep, narrow ridge (called "The Bloody Stump" and Ridge X") extended south for several hundred yards from Col de Braus. At the western base of the ridge a trail led south to Mount Scandeious, a mile away. The Germans held the road and the buildings at Col de Braus, and were dug in along Ridge X. American observers counted twenty-two log-and earth bunkers.

The entire area was dominated by Tete de la Lavina, three-quarters of a mile southeast. Lavina would have to be captured before Col de Braus could be considered secure, but to get at Lavina, Ridge X had to be taken.



At 1300 on September 9th G Company's 2nd Platoon under Lieutenants Arthur Ridler and Dick Spencer* moved into the attack supported by a strong artillery concentration. The Germans let the troopers get close, but when the Americans passed the first bunker the enemy let go with everything they had. The Germans fought at point-blank range with grenades, machine pistols, and "Panzerfaust" antitank projectiles.

* Both Ridler and Spencer had left hospitals (without waiting for the formality of being discharged) to rejoin their outfit.

Germans rushed from the buildings to man a 75mm PAK gun and an MG 42, and enemy reinforcements began to arrive from Lavina.

Outnumbered and outgunned, the platoon fell back, rallied, and tried again. At 1800 the platoon returned to the start position. Four had been killed, including Lieutenant Ridler, and ten wounded including Lieutenant Spencer. One man who had been given up for dead crawled back after dark.

Next day the guns at Mount Agaisen entered the fight.* The area around Col de Braus came under direct fire from high-velocity, flat-trajectory, disappearing guns.

* This was part of a southern extension of the Maginot line built in the 30's, reaching from Switzerland to the Mediterranean along the Italian frontier. There were four underground forts in the Sospel area: Mounts Grosso, Barbonnet, Agaisen, and Fort St Roche. Each fort had underground barracks, command posts, and all facilities needed for prolonged defense. Only the guns at Agaisen could cover Col de Braus; the others were all oriented to the east. However, they were useful shelters for troops and supplies, and Mt Barbonnet, opposite Tete de la Lavina, afforded excellent observation over Col de Braus.

Anything that moved during daylight was blasted, and interdiction fire continued during darkness. Attempts at counterbattery were futile. The 460th's 75mm shells burst harmlessly against concrete and armor plate, and Task Force 105's and 155's were equally ineffective. As the guns at Agaisen completed each fire mission they were lowered beneath the surface. It is doubtful that the Germans even knew they were being fired upon.

A carefully-planned attack was set up for September 11th. Colonels Paxton and Cato had decided that the supporting artillery fires were being lifted too soon, allowing the Germans to man their positions before the Americans arrived. This time Cato planned to hit them a second time as the troopers closed in. G Company was to go after Ridge X once more, and Company I would attack north to link up from Mount Scandeious.

At H-Hour Company G moved out. As the artillery lifted the Germans emerged from shelter only to be hit by a second barrage. Company G overran Col de Braus and Ridge X without a casualty. Colonel Paxton moved his CP into a building at Col de Braus and the Battalion Aid Station set up across the road.

Nothing had been heard from Company I. Battalion Executive Captain Joe McGeever ("Big Mac") set out for Mount Scandeious, taking with him Sergeant Dan Brogdan. They found the I company Commander in a state of nervous collapse. Captain McGeever decided to personally lead an attack to link up with G Company, and selected an I Company platoon commanded by Lieutenant Reed Terrell.

The German positions between Mount Scandeious and Ridge X were strong. Machine guns in well-camouflaged bunkers covered the gently sloping ground with grazing fire. The enemy was determined and had beaten off several I Company patrols. The troopers tried to warn McGeever, but he brushed them aside, saying, "We'll breeze through there and link up in a half hour." The platoon formed up and moved out, McGeever and Terrell leading.

As chance would have it, there was another Terrell in I Company. This was Aid Man Wilbur (Bill) Terrell, a second or third cousin of the lieutenant. What happened next is best told in Bill Terrell's words;

"...I was directly behind the point, which consisted of Captain McGeever, Lieutenant Terrell, Sergeant Brogdan, and a private whom I did not know ... We advanced to the top of the hill without incident. The point disappeared over the crest of the hill, and there was immediate gunfire, then silence. Everyone hit the ground. Knowing full well that someone had been hit up ahead, I got up and followed the path through the underbrush.*

* Pvt. Willis Woodcock.

"I came into a clearing and upon six German soldiers who were surrounding Sergeant Brogdan. They were as startled as I was, and turned their guns on me. I did some quick gesturing, explaining that I was a medic. I was searched for weapons ...they took a pair of scissors and scalpel and I was left alone. They went back to the circle around Sergeant Brogdan.

"I went first to Captain McGeever, who was lying on his back. He was already gone. I suspect he died instantly, for he had been stripped of all personal belongings. I then went to the Private, who was on this back unconscious but breathing, and then to Lieutenant Terrell, who was conscious and in great pain. His right hip and buttock were practically blown away, with a great loss of blood. I put a large gauze pad over the wound and got a morphine ampule into his leg.

"The private started breathing very hard, and I knew I couldn't take care of both men. I made it known to the Germans (who were just leaving with Sergeant Brogdan) that I wanted to go for help. They sent a young soldier with me, why I do not know.

"As I came back over the crest of the hill, I kept shouting, 'Don't shoot, this is Terrell, , but as soon as the Jerry was spotted behind me, everybody fired. I hit the dirt. The German was hit in the abdomen. I then put a square pad on him to keep his insides from spilling out.

"Lieutenant Maciag ... then questioned me on whether we should attack or hold off. I said, 'Hell, I've got to go back over there and get two men.' They pulled back off the hill.

"I went slowly back over the hill. I knew they (the Germans) would be waiting, but they were gone. I went first to the Private and tried to raise him up. He died in my arms. I heard a shout, look uphill, and a Jerry had a sight on me. Someone . . .I never knew who ...shot him.

"I then got Lieutenant Terrell up and half-carried and dragged him back to our lines . . ."*

* Lieutenant Reed Terrell survived through the gallant actions of his cousin. Doctors at the hospital where he wound up told him that "another ten minutes and it would've been too late."

It was a very bad time for the 3rd Battalion and the Regiment. "Big Mac" had been a courageous and capable officer with a charismatic personality. He was admired and respected by officers and enlisted alike, and his loss was deeply felt.

As the battle for Col de Braus developed the 460th fired from 300 to 500 rounds daily. Continuous enemy counter-battery fire came in upon the Battalion position, a mile north of L'Escarene. On September 5th a five-round enemy concentration killed one man, wounded nine, and forced the Battalion CP to set up in the railroad tunnel. One enemy round landed squarely upon an A Battery howitzer.

On September 9th C and D Batteries moved into position on Plan Constant, abreast of the infantry. From this commanding location they could fire almost over open sights, but were subjected to mortar fire and patrol action. Three men who wandered away from their Battery were hit by an enemy patrol. One American was wounded and two captured.

A week of trying to capture the Col de Braus--Tete de la Lavina area had cost 147 casualties, including 21 dead, 123 wounded, and 3 captured -- the equivalent of a rifle company. It was clear that continued piecemeal attacks would only play into the enemy's hands and produce longer casualty lists. The key to the area was Tete de la Lavina, and a major effort was going to be required to take it. Colonel Graves directed the next five or six days to be spent in preparation for a full-scale assault with massive fire support.

North of Col de Braus the 2nd Battalion had worked around the back trail from Luceram, cleared Plan Constant, and was pushing to gain Hill 1098 (Cime de Ventabren). This was an east-west cliff with vertical sides and a knob at each end, which overlooked Col de Braus and provided excellent observation into Sospel. Lieutenant John Lissner's F Company held the western knoll, and the Germans clung to the one on the east, a few hundred yards away. With only enough room to deploy a platoon, each attack had to be head-on because of the sheer cliffs on the flanks. Company F attacked Hill 1098 once on September 13th, twice on the 14th, and once more on the 15th. The first three tries were beaten back. On the fourth attack, the Germans gave up the eastern knob but launched an immediate counterattack; F Company was forced back once more. Hill 1098 became another objective for the planned big attack, and was titled "Lissner's Folly" in honor of the redoubtable F Company commander.

Supply and evacuation of the front-line companies was precarious. With the main road from L'Escarene to Col de Braus impassable for vehicles, all ground communication with the 2nd Battalion and Companies a and H was over the winding back road from Luceram. Company I at Mount Scandeious was isolated. Cut off from the rest of 3rd Battalion by the German bunkers projecting from Tete de la Lavina, it could be reached by vehicles only through the Special Service Force sector. This involved a long roundabout trip over winding mountain trails, with the last 700 yards a dash under direct fire from the guns at Agaisen.

The 596th Engineers had their hands full. A 3rd Platoon squad was removing mines from the Col de Braus area within minutes after its capture, and other Engineer detachments worked under constant artillery fire to keep the trail from Luceram clear .

But the trail from Luceram was only a stopgap measure. The major Engineer effort was reopening the road from L'Escarene to Col de Braus. From September 11th to 18th the 596th's 1st Platoon concentrated on rebuilding the road where "cliff blows" had dropped two long sections into the valley below, leaving a sheer vertical wall. First a footpath was widened to permit the evacuation of wounded. Then air compressors were borrowed, and men with pneumatic drills worked while hanging from safety ropes over the 400-foot drop truly a job for paratroopers. Footings were driven for retaining walls. As the walls were built up gravel was hauled in. In seven days the road was open. Captain Dalrymple, with justification, called it "the toughest and most important job" the outfit ever had.

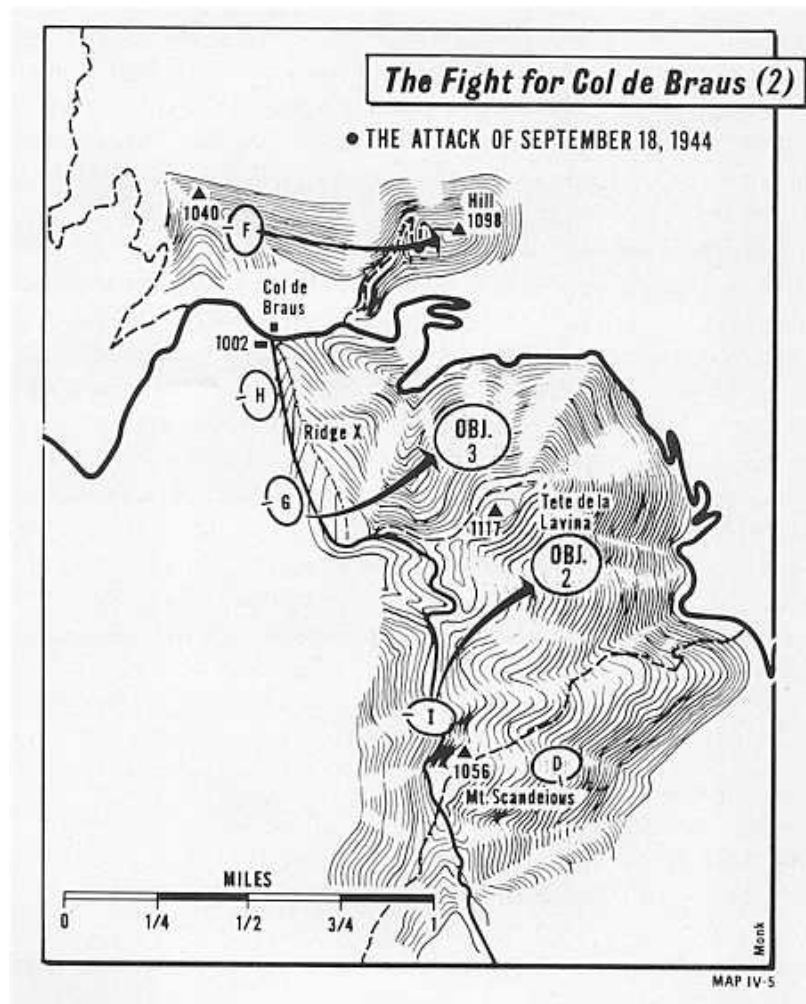
On September 16th Company D was pulled out of 2nd Battalion reserve to occupy Mt Farguet, on left of the Special Service Force, to free I Company for the attack. Concurrently, Company H occupied the reverse slope of Ridge X.

The attack was set to go at 0800, September 18th. Tete de la Lavina was divided into two sub-objectives --Number 2 on the southeast, to be taken by Company I from Mt. Scandeious, and Number 3 on the northwest for Company a from Ridge X. H Company would remain in battalion reserve, prepared to assist either of the assault companies. On the extreme right, D Company would support and maintain contact with the SSP. On the far left, F Company would go for Hill 1098 as soon as Tete de la Lavina was captured.

With three rifle companies in the assault and two more in support, over half of the regiment's fighting strength was being committed on a front of a little over a mile. Supporting fires would include Naval gunfire, a battalion each of 155, 105, and 75mm howitzers, and a company of 4.2" mortars.

On the night of September 17/18th 3rd Battalion S-2 Howard Hensleigh led a a Company patrol to the edge of the German positions on Lavina. Splitting into two groups, the troopers prowled around the enemy bunkers and returned with much

information including the location of an alarm clock used to regulate the changing of sentries. The patrol was undetected. There were no indications that the enemy was expecting anything out of the ordinary.



In the last hours of darkness preparations were completed. Flame-thrower teams attached to the assault companies checked their weapons. Units were briefed to the last man. Colonel Graves moved into an OP on Ridge X. Off the coast, the French cruiser Lorraine moved into position.

This one had to go.

At 0800 on September 18th Tete de la Lavina exploded in a sheet of steel and flame. Task Force Artillery was concentrated on Objective 2. TOT* air-burst howitzer shells sheared tree limbs and split trunks, and Naval guns blew huge craters and uprooted trees. The 4.2" mortars blanketed Objective 3 with smoke and burning phosphorous. At 0830 G and I Companies launched their attack. The fires shifted eastward while the troopers fired bazookas from the hip to mask their lifting. White phosphorous grenades were thrown into bunker entrances and ventilating shafts to burn the Germans out. Those showing any disposition to fight were nailed as they emerged.

* TOT: "Time Over Target", an artillery technique in which firing times are carefully calculated, so that each round arrives on target at the same time regardless of the distance of the guns from the target.

By 0900 Lieutenant Birder's I Company had reached the far edge of their objective. The artillery shifted to Objective 3, and the 4.2" mortar fire was placed on the reverse slope of Lavina. G Company worked from bunker to bunker and by 1100 had taken Objective 3. The supporting fires then shifted to Hill 1098, and Company F secured the eastern knob against slight resistance.

The surviving Germans were dazed and shaken. Even on the Russian front they had seen nothing like this. Sixty-one enemy surrendered and 30 to 40 were killed. The prisoners were herded up and sent to the rear, some with their clothes still burning. Four Americans had been slightly wounded in the attack.

Enemy return fire was swift. Even as the attack began mortar and artillery came in on Ridge X and Lavina, killing Lieutenant Thomas of H Company. As the troopers overran their objectives the guns at Agaisen began to pound the forward slopes of Lavina and 1098. The Americans withdrew to the reverse slopes, outposting the crests. Over the next few days several counterattacks were beaten off. One came within ten feet of the American riflemen, but the loss of their troops on Lavina had crippled the German capabilities and the counterattacks did not pose a serious threat. Having been driven from Lavina and Hill 1098, the Germans fell back into the Sospel forts and the mountains overlooking the Bevera.

Col de Braus was finally secure, but it had not been cheap or easy. Total American losses in the drive for Col de Braus were closely comparable with those of the enemy.

On September 20th and 21st the 3rd Battalion, in need of rest, exchanged positions with the 1st Battalion. The 3rd took over the comparatively quiet area of Peira Cava, and Colonel Boyle's men began to learn about "The Barber" who handed out close shaves from Mount Agaisen. The main supply road beyond Col de Braus was named "The Bowling Alley". Vehicles or men exposed for even a few seconds were sure to draw one or two rounds. Artillery and mortar exchanges went on constantly. The usual patrol and counterpatrol games were played, but the front remained unchanged for the next 5 weeks. The Combat Team maintained surveillance of Sospel and the Bevera Valley on a 15-mile front. The requirement for further advance was suspended.

Neither the Americans nor the Germans had any intention of becoming involved in any further heavy engagements in the Maritime Alps. The war was being decided elsewhere. Both sides were on defensive missions and were content to keep each other under observation. The situation became one closely resembling the static battlefields of the First World War.



Sospel, France



Fort St Roche

Sospel

At 1420 on September 3rd the clock in the steeple of St Michael's Cathedral in Sospel stopped. It had been hit by an American artillery shell, the first of many thousands that would fall upon the town during the next fifty-five days. The "Siege of Sospel" had begun.

War was no stranger to Sospel. The town had been settled since the Bronze Age, and had endured countless sieges and battles since the Romans established a military outpost there in the First Century A.D. Now its most severe trial was beginning.

In 1944 the population of Sospel had dwindled from a prewar 3,815 to less than 2,000 women, children, and elderly men. The younger, able-bodied men were away with the Maquis, the French Army, or in German labor camps.

The Maritime Alps region had been first occupied by the Italians in 1940.* Their rule was benevolent compared to that of the Germans, who came in 1942. The Germans practiced the same brutal policies they followed in all of their occupied territories: -- deportation of Jews, forced labor, material "requisitions", and vicious reprisals against the Resistance. Maintaining control of the local population was the task of SS police detachments, made up of the same sort of thugs and criminal riffraff that operated the death camps. German commanders were aware of and condoned these SS activities; by allowing the SS to do its dirty work, the Wehrmacht was able to keep its hands clean, preserving the fiction of the "honor of the German Army".

* In June 1940 the Sospel population was evacuated in anticipation of an Italian attack. They were later returned, but it is interesting to note that they were temporarily settled in Les Arcs, La Motte, Lorgues, and Trans-en-Provence -- where the paratroopers who entered Sospel four years later landed.

In Sospel on August 12 fifteen Maquis who had been captured in an SS sweep were executed after torture. On August 31st -- just a few days before the arrival of 1/517 -- twelve men, mostly teenagers, were murdered by the SS in the Turini Forest near Peira Cava.

As the Airborne Task Force approached in early September, Sospel came under a German reign of terror. Men were taken hostage and forced to maintain the roads and recondition the forts. Food and property were requisitioned, a curfew was enforced, and suspicious persons were "interrogated".

American artillery and mortar fire grew more intense as the battle for Col de Braus developed. On September 11th the hospital was hit by a white phosphorous shell and burned. The sick and wounded were evacuated to a local hotel, which in turn was hit a few days later. By mid-September, most of the buildings in town had been hit several times, and 10% had been destroyed. People lived in basements, dugouts, and under bridges. Any movement during daylight drew fire. Movement after dark was punishable by death as a curfew violation.

Inevitably part of the fire intended for the enemy hit the civil population instead. While the Germans remained under cover the civilians were forced to emerge to seek food and work on labor projects.

On September 29th the population of Moulinet -- 600 persons -- was evacuated under SS guard. The Regimental S-3 journal for that day reported, "Enemy horse-drawn and motor convoy observed moving from Moulinet to Sospel. Artillery fire placed on road, results unknown."

To the population of Sospel the American halt at Col de Braus was inexplicable. They knew nothing and cared less about the military factors. Terrified and starving, they only knew that with liberation practically at their doorstep, they were trapped between German savagery and American fire.

Peira Cava

The resort village of Peira Cava is astride a knife-edged ridge 4,500 feet high, 5 miles north of Luceram.* In 1944 it contained a small French Army caserne, a few hotel-bars, and 20 to 30 villas. A single road ran north through dense pine forests from Peira Cava to Turini, near the crest of the Authion Massif.

* Fifteen miles by road. There are 16 to 20 "lacets" (hairpin bends) between Luceram and Peira Cava,

The 517th's involvement at Peira Cava consisted entirely of patrol, counter-patrol, and outpost actions. Nothing much of any consequence occurred there. It was the next best thing to a rest camp. However, one could get killed on patrol at Peira Cava just as permanently as in the Battle of the Bulge. The enemy troops in the area were mostly young, poorly trained, and inexperienced. They were no match for the paratroopers, and usually got the worst of it.

With the September 30 shift in locations the 1st Battalion had been assigned Peira Cava as its zone of action. Colonel Boyle led the Battalion up the hairpin bends from Luceram. A few Germans were dislodged from Peira Cava after a short fight and the troopers settled down to occupy the place. One platoon took position at Tete du Pin, at 5,500 feet the highest point in the Combat Team zone. Supplying the platoon was accomplished by a string of pack mules with local mule skinnners. Tete du Pin was named "Spook Hill" because of the pervasive Alpine gloom. Poet-laureate Ed Johnson composed a quatrain on the "squirrels in hobnailed boots" that haunted the place.

An enemy field order had been captured which indicated that there was an enemy platoon-sized strongpoint at Turini. On September 7th Sergeant Bill Delaney took a patrol out to test the validity of this information. The enemy outpost was found exactly where it was supposed to be. After a brief fight the Germans took off and the patrol returned with maps, photos, and documents. Next day a larger patrol took a different route to the same outpost, killing two Germans without American loss.

On September 16th a reconnaissance patrol led by Sergeant Bob Maple spotted a 20-man German work party digging in front of Tete du Pin. The Germans had been planting "schu" (shoe) mines across the trail leading to Turini. Maple disarmed one and brought it to the Company CP. Since Germans were reported to be notoriously methodical, it was decided that they would be back to finish up the job next day. Two rifle squads set up an ambush near the minefield before daylight next morning. At 1100 a column of enemy troops arrived carrying shovels, pickaxes, and mines. The ambush party had planned to let the entire group go by before opening fire, but an enemy officer stepped off the trail. It was the last step he ever took. Six Germans were killed, five captured, and the rest fled.

That night three survivors came in to surrender at Tete du Pin. Another ambush was put out next day in the hope that the Germans would come to retrieve their dead, but the enemy failed to respond.

A spur east of Tete du Pin provided an ideal observation post with an excellent view of the Moulinet Turini road. On one occasion a 460th Forward observer at this OP saw two teams of Germans lined up, playing soccer near the Moulinet road. He called for "Battalion five rounds," without preliminary registration. The Fire Direction Center demanded justification and was told, "Jerries playing football." The mission was fired and the ball game broken up.

The 1st Battalion troopers figured that it was only a question of time before they got involved at Col de Braus, and they were correct. Peira Cava was too good to last. On September 20-21 the 1st and 3rd Battalions exchanged positions. The 3rd Battalion continued active patrolling, and the Germans stepped up their anti-patrol measures. As Battalion S-2 Hensleigh relates:

"There were a number of patrols while we were in Peira Cava. 1st Sergeant Kievet of Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, was in line for a combat commission. We set him up to lead a patrol through the high ground east of Peira Cava. Captain Roberts, the 460th liaison officer, was with us for artillery Support. We selected one man to fire the first Shot if we found Jerries.

"We did. They were sawing logs for bunkers and getting set to make a fortified defensive position on ground we patrolled frequently. The Germans were relaxed in the warm Autumn weather ...we spread out "as skirmishers" and moved in quite close. The nearest German was reading, leaned up against a tree. The man designated to fire the first shot carried a "grease gun " (Cal. 45 MJ Submachinegun). He stood up, aimed from the hip, and pulled the trigger.

"The grease gun's clip fell out and landed on a rock. The resulting clatter seemed deafening. During all this the German soldier kept right on reading. We were no more than fifteen feet away. The No. 1 man then pulled out an old French revolver. He took aim and fired point-blank at the German, killing him. We all started firing ... A bazooka team fired at a half-complete bunker. This shot caused our only wound. A man was too close behind the bazooka and got Some sand blown into his face . . .

"This discouraged the Germans from moving closer to Peira Cava. Kievet got his commission. At the close of this action, Captain Roberts slipped and went over a steep cliff with his SCR-300 radio. We salvaged Roberts, but I am not sure we recovered the radio . . ."

On another occasion Colonel Paxton took his staff and company commanders to look over the terrain above Peira Cava. Moving along a densely-wooded trail, Paxton stopped short at an opening to let two soldiers pass ahead. The two were cut down in a hail of small arms fire.

The command group fell back, and Colonel Paxton detailed Lieutenant Fuller's platoon to return to destroy the German ambushers. The platoon surprised the Germans while they were eating lunch and opened fire. Most of the enemy surrendered almost immediately, but one diehard continued to man his machine gun until he was killed. Fifteen Germans were captured, one of whom died soon thereafter .

On October 23-25 the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion took over the sector. The 3rd Battalion went into Regimental reserve at Berre-les-Alpes. So ended the 517th RCT Involvement with the resort village of Peira-Cava.

From September 15th to October 11th the 3rd Platoon, 596th Engineers, was detached from direct support of the RCT and was charged with removing mines and obstacles from the Nice Civil Airport. This was a challenging and dangerous job. The Platoon removed 1500 mines and explosive devices,* demolished 13 Flak towers and two pillboxes, and removed 3,000 feet of sea wall that the Germans had put in as an anti-landing obstacle. In the course of this work five Engineers were killed when a truck loaded with Tellermines blew up. The truck's driver had been underneath working on the engine. He was seriously injured and died later. This tragic accident brought the number of 596th men killed in action since arriving in France to eleven more than most infantry rifle companies.

* 967 Teller and similar mines; 511 Schu mines; 7 Booby-traps; and fifteen 270mm artillery shells.
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Except for the relief at Peira Cava the 517th RCT sector remained unchanged for the five weeks from September 20th to October 28th. Companies switched positions within Battalions and rotated in and out of reserve. Patrol and counterpatrol actions continued and artillery and mortar exchanges were incessant. The 460th maintained close observation of the Sospel Valley from a string of OP's running from Tete de la Lavina through Hill 1098, Plan Constant, and Tete du Pin. An average of 415 rounds were fired daily, usually in about 20 fire missions per day, from the Battalion position areas around Touet de L'Escarene.

In this period the 596th 1st Platoon laid 12,200 feet of concertina barbed wire and 1500 feet of anti-personnel mine fields in front of and near the infantry positions at Col de Braus, Hill 1098, and Plan Constant. The 2nd Platoon and other 596th elements maintained roads and bridges in the Combat Team zone. As the weather grew colder the Engineers began to give thought to keeping the roads open under conditions of snow and ice. Sources of gravel were located and marked for future reference.

Impromptu mine fields laid by the rifle battalions continued to give the Engineers -- and everyone else -- headaches. These usually consisted of hand grenades rigged with trip wires. They were unrecorded and unmarked, becoming a source of danger when the unit that put them in moved on. Much 596th effort went into locating these do-it-yourself mine fields, and either marking or removing them.

From about October 15th to 27th there was a considerable increase in enemy mortar and artillery fire. The mortar fire appeared to be "unobserved" * and there were few casualties, but on October 23rd this fire forced the abandonment of a 460th OP on Hill 1098. It was quickly relocated on an adjacent ridge. The source of the enemy 105mm artillery fire was not precisely located, but it seemed to be coming from the reverse slopes of Mount Grosso.

* "Unobserved" ... Fire delivered solely by map, without an observer to make adjustments. This fire usually follows a random pattern and is generally inaccurate, particularly with mortars.

Beginning on October 23rd, 30 to 50 rounds daily fell around the RCT CP at L'Escarene. The most popular target -- the Col de Braus -- Hill 1098 area -- received 200 or more rounds of all types daily.

In Sospel conditions continued to deteriorate. The civilian food ration was set at the starvation level of 1 3/4 ounces of bread daily and the same amount of meat weekly. Even that was hard to provide as the German increased their demands. Each day the Germans took 30 men for forced labor and held five hostages the hostages often being elderly people who had volunteered to act in that capacity.

In mid-October German service troops from northern Italy arrived and began to dismantle installations, evacuate supplies, and take up telephone wire. Artillery and mortar fire was increased to use up stocks, and the three bridges over the Bevera were prepared for demolition.

The bridges on the east and west were relatively new, but the one in the center dated from the 11th Century and was of considerable historic and architectural interest. It had little military value. The gateway in the toll tower was too small for trucks to get through; even jeeps could not negotiate the narrow streets on the north side. Nevertheless it was packed with explosives like the others.

On October 20th the German commander announced that the Sospel population was to be evacuated to northern Italy. Mayor Domerego made a counter-proposal that the Germans obtain a 24-hour truce and allow the people to go west to join the rest of liberated France. Of course, this was denied and the matter remained at an impasse.

An interpreter between the German command and the local Public Safety committee learned on October 27th that the Germans were going to evacuate the town that night. Measures were taken to safeguard the sick and wounded in the Hotel des Etrangers near the heavily-charged east bridge. At 2100 the bridges were blown, a few last salvos fired, and the Germans now reduced to a covering shell quietly packed up and left.

That night the explosions were heard on the American side. Next day Lieutenant George Giuchici led an F Company patrol into Sospel. He found bridges blown and the Germans gone. Leading infantry units moved up to occupy Mounts Agaisen, Grosso, Grazian, and Mangiabo. The troopers were amazed by the strength and size of the fortifications on Agaisen and Grosso, and wondered why the Germans had abandoned them.*

* Why the Germans gave up the Sospel forts is unknown. It was not due to American pressure. The enemy withdrawal was probably an economy-of-force action, and possibly related to their preparations for the Ardennes offensive.

The 596th, following closely, found the roads an incredible mess of craters, mines, and booby-traps. An Engineer detachment removing a booby-trapped abatis near Mount Barbonnet had to stop work several times because of enemy artillery fire, drawn by a Red Cross convoy with civilian relief supplies. They finally succeeded in clearing the road and the balance of the RCT closed in Sospel. The 460th occupied positions on the reverse slope of Mount Agaisen and the CP set up near the Golf Hotel, east of town.

This time the incoming Americans met no cheering crowds, flowers, or wine. Instead they were greeted with cool indifference. The people had little to celebrate. In fifty-five days of siege forty-four had been killed and over a hundred wounded by mortar and artillery fire. The hospital and the bridges had been destroyed. All buildings had been ravaged and many were no longer fit for habitation. Sospel was the last town in France to be liberated in World War II. The people knew this and could not understand why .**

** With time the wounds have healed. A delegation of visiting ABTF veterans was received with great hospitality and

enthusiasm in Sospel in August, 1984.

The Germans had withdrawn well into Italy, leaving only a few outguards at the Col de Brouis on the road to Saorge and Tende. American activity was confined to patrols to Plena, Olivetta, Col de Brouis, and Moulinet. With the slackening of American pressure the Germans began to filter back into the area. Positions on Mount Grazian and Mangiabo were probed by squad and platoon-sized combat patrols. Casualties were light. Only scattered long-range artillery fire came in, although (to the amusement of the troops) 20 to 30 rounds landed daily near the Regimental CP .

On November 4th a house sheltering 17 men of the 2nd Battalion blew up, killing five men and wounding five more. The place had either been booby-trapped or a delayed-action charge had been left in place. This set off a spirited search of all occupied buildings with negative results.

On the same day the 1st Battalion was relieved by the 3rd and reverted to reserve in Sospel. Colonel Paxton, not wanting his Headquarters to be "behind the Regimental CP", set up in the Golf Hotel, under direct enemy observation. His Headquarters men spent the next week or so dodging shellbursts.

Rumors of an impending relief were circulating. With winter coming on and the war apparently fizzling out, there was a general feeling that it was high time to get out of the Maritime Alps. The rumors became fact when between November 13th and 16th the RCT was relieved by the 14th Armored Infantry of the 19th Armored Division, fresh off the boat at Marseilles.*

* This was only temporary. Between November 10th and 23rd the area was taken over by the 442nd Combat Team, which remained until March, 1945, when it was relieved by the French Army.



Armistice Day, 1944. Nice, France.

La Colle-sur-Loup, six miles west of Nice, had been chosen as a staging area pending the next move. Task Force Headquarters had apparently decided that discipline and morale had declined and would be restored by foot-marching, so the Combat Team walked all the way. *

*Colonel Graves had asked for trucks but was turned down.

The troopers were quick to detect the aroma of chicken ordure. Taking trucks from an area beyond enemy observation -- such as L'Escarene -- would have made sense, but walking all the way made no sense to 20th century Americans. The map distance from Sospel to La Colle is about 36 miles. With vertical gradients and road twists it comes to about 50. This was well within the troopers' capabilities but it seemed totally unnecessary, and that rankled.

Nevertheless the disgruntled "grunts" (as they would be called in a later war) marched from Sospel to La Colle. The first night was spent at Pointe de Contes shivering around bonfires while ice formed on ponchos. On the second day they emerged upon the Nice Plain, going straight through the city along the Promenade des Anglais to bivouac at the racetrack at Cagnes-sur-Mer. A short hike on the third day past villas of the super-rich brought them to La Colle, thus completing a giant circle that had begun in August.

The Combat Team closed at La Colle on November 18th. Pup-tent camps were set up and efforts were made to catch up on administration, sadly neglected since August.

Inspections were held and clothing and equipment issued to replace worn-out gear. Duffel bags that had been left in Italy rejoined their owners and five hundred replacements were assigned.

On December 1st the 517th was assigned to XVIII Airborne Corps and directed to proceed to Soissons in Northern France.

The movement of the RCT for five hundred miles up the length of France resembled a migration of hoboes in the Great Depression. While vehicles of all units went overland, the rank-and-file infantry, artillery, and engineers moved by 40-and-8 boxcars, which indeed bore the legend "40 hommes -- 8 chevaux". Three trains had been provided, roughly one for each battalion with attachments. Each platoon-sized group of 35 or so was assigned a boxcar, a bale of hay, and several cases of C or 10-in-one rations. Sleeping was done anywhere room could be found; some ingenious souls made hammocks by slinging ponchos and shelter halves from the ceiling. Rations were heated on Coleman burners, but washing and shaving were pretty much out of the question.

The three trains were loaded at Antibes on December 6th and for the next few days rolled across France on a schedule determined by the French railway workers' union. Each crew could only work within its own locality, and every fifty miles the trains stopped to change crews. With no scheduled stops and no toilets on board, the question of how the men were to relieve themselves became a matter of urgency. Desperate men began jumping off whenever the train slowed down; often it started up again without stopping, leaving them behind. Men on the first two trains could wait for the next to come along, but those on the third were stuck in the middle of France. A few decided "to hell with it" and enjoyed a self-granted pass.

The first two trains arrived in Soissons on December 9th and the third came in next day. The first two had suffered a noticeable loss of passengers, but the third was so overcrowded that men were hanging on between cars.

With the help of the 508th Parachute Infantry, the advance detail had prepared the Caserne Gouraud for occupancy and the transition from train to caserne was relatively painless.

The 517th RCT had now accrued over a hundred days of combat experience. The courage and stamina of its members had been proven beyond doubt. Mistakes had been made, but a lot of things had also been done right.

However, in only a few instances had the Combat Team been opposed by an enemy of equal determination. In the coming winter months the outfit was to undergo its most severe test as the Germans threw in their last reserves in a desperate gamble.



Chapter V

The Ardennes: Backs to the Wall

Soissons

Winter in northern France is often miserable. It was raining as the 517th arrived in Soissons and continued through the Combat Team's twelve-day stay.

The immediate task was to scrape off several month's accumulated grime, recondition equipment, and absorb the five hundred men who had joined at La Colle. About half of these newcomers were to replace combat losses and most of the balance was to provide a third rifle squad in each rifle platoon. Under the old set-up of two rifle squads and a mortar squad a few days of combat often reduced the platoon to a few crew-served weapons teams. The added riflemen provided staying power and flexibility; Rifle company enlisted strengths jumped from 120 to about 150, and company officers and NCO's worked to fit in the new men.

A Training Directive was issued to cover the next eight weeks. Training was to begin with; a return to basics and work up through unit tactical exercises, to reach readiness for a large airborne operation in the Spring -- hopefully, the crossing of the Rhine. The dank parade ground of the Caserne Gouraud came alive with platoons and companies vigorously doing calisthenics and marching around in circles.

Regimental Headquarters felt that the appearance and tone of the officers had slipped deplorably and took corrective action. The evening meal at the Hotel Lion D'Or became a military formation. Dress uniform was required. At the appointed hour captains and lieutenants filed solemnly into place at long dining tables. On entry of the Regimental Commander or his executive, all took seats and ceremoniously took on camouflaged C-rations. The meals were not quite gastronomic triumphs, but they were served in style and the general atmosphere was quite elegant.

After dinner those not on duty drifted into the lobby to watch the rain beating against the windows. A few adventurous souls ventured out in search of the fleshpots of Soissons but returned disillusioned. This staid industrial town was still recovering from four years of German occupation and was not at all like the Riviera.

Every American airborne unit in Europe was now part of General Matthew B. Ridgway's XVIII Airborne Corps. This included the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions just back from Holland, and the 517th and other separate units up from the Mediterranean. Additionally, the 17th Airborne Division was now in England and was scheduled to come across to France in the near future. The airborne was a large and boisterous club. All paratroopers belonged to it and many had friends in other outfits. Towns around Rheims Soissons swarmed with troopers off the line and out to celebrate. Raucous reunions were held in local bistros, and stories were swapped of battlefields from Phenix City * to the bridge at Nijmegen.

* Phenix City, Alabama, was just across the Chattahoochee River from Columbus and Fort Benning in Georgia. Phenix City's sole source of income was the Army payroll and many sporting institutions such as "Parachute Blondie's" flourished there.

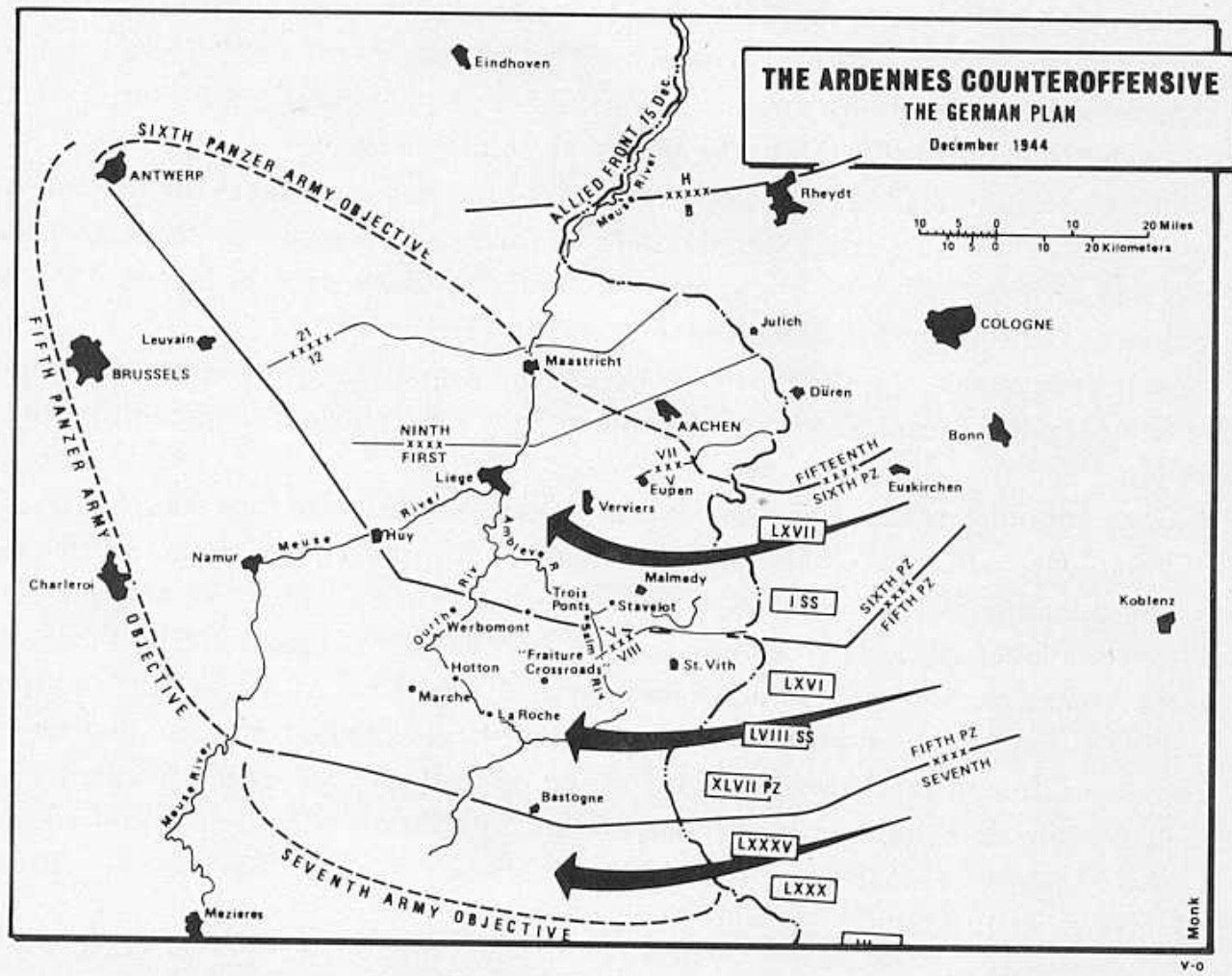
While the various headquarters kept track of the tactical situation at the front most paratroopers below field grade were content to follow the progress of the war in the "Stars and Stripes". Victory had seemed within grasp a few months before, but apparently the Germans had not received the word and continued to fight. The First Army was heavily engaged in the Huertgen Forest and around the Roer River dams, but most troopers didn't care very much as long as they were not in it; come Spring, one more jump and the whole show would be over .

Nature cannot be denied. The raging male hormones that made the troopers splendid fighters also often led them into trouble when out of combat. Venereal disease rates had been high in Italy and Southern France, where usually only barroom pickups had been available. In a well-meaning move to combat VD, a group of 517th medical officers set up a quasi-legal institution dubbed the "Idle Hour Athletic Club", staffed by willing young ladies who were selected after medical examination. As soon as the place opened for business the Chaplains raised opposition. The affair threatened to become troublesome, but became academic when at 1000 on December 18th the RCT was alerted to be prepared to move on two hour's notice "due to the enemy breakthrough in Belgium".

During the night of December 15/16 the German Army launched its last great offensive of World War II, striking with three Armies against weak American positions in the Ardennes region of Belgium and Luxembourg. This offensive was Hitler's personal inspiration. He formulated the broad plan and undertook day-by-day direction of events. Hitler's objectives were to

seize the port of Antwerp, drive a wedge between the Americans and the British, and force the western Allies to consider a negotiated peace. These objectives proved to be far too ambitious for the German forces available, but for a few days sensational headlines were created in newspapers in London and Washington.

Preparations for the offensive had been made in utmost secrecy. The Allies were taken totally by surprise. Indications that something was in the wind had appeared but were disregarded. The Germans were credited with the capability of making a small local attack, but the possibility of a major, all-out offensive was given no credence at all.



The Germans made their main effort with the Sixth SS and Fifth Panzer Armies, while their Seventh Army on left made a limited holding attack. The enemy broke through two overextended American divisions with little difficulty but ran into trouble as they tried to extend the shoulders of the penetration. The Sixth SS Panzer Army was blocked on the north at the Elsenborn ridge. Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army was delayed at St Vith by the stubborn defense of the 7th Armored Division, and was stopped on the south at Bastogne.

The SHAEF reserve -- XVIII Airborne Corps -- was released to First Army on December 17 and set up at Werbomont, 17 miles south of Liege. On December 18th - 19th the 82nd Airborne fanned out from Werbomont, while the 101st was assigned to VIII Corps at Bastogne. XVIII Corps was given the 30th Infantry and 3rd Armored Divisions in addition to the 82nd, and assumed control of the 7th Armored at St Vith and of the remnants of the 106th Infantry Division. General Ridgway's task was to block further German advance and to reestablish contact with VII Corps on the south.

Although most of Sixth SS Panzer Army was blocked at the Elsenborn ridge, a German armored task force -- Kampfgruppe Peiper * of the 1st SS Panzer Division -- succeeded in making a narrow penetration. The Kampfgruppe was blocked by a valiant Engineer detachment at Trois Ponts and was bottled up in the Stoumont La Gleize Cheneux locality by elements of the 30th, 3rd Armored, and 82nd Airborne Divisions.

* Peiper had two battalions of tanks and one of infantry, reinforced with AAA and artillery. From December 16th to 20th Peiper's force murdered 350 American POW's (including 88 at Malmedy) and over 100 unarmed Belgian civilians, including

women and children.

While the 7th Armored hung on at St Vith and the 82nd held along the Salm River, a dangerous new threat was developing in the south. The L VIII Corps of Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army moved through the gap between St Vith and Bastogne, and drove west for the Meuse.

Movement orders came for the 517th RCT at 1100, December 21st. Colonel Graves set out for Werbomont with his battalion commanders and a few staff officers while the troops formed on the Caserne parade ground to wait for trucks. One Battery of the 460th and a platoon of the 596th was attached to each rifle battalion for movement. The order of march was to be 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, through Namur to Werbomont. Warnings were issued to avoid Bastogne by then known to be surrounded if cut off.

Trucks from a variety of sources began arriving in mid-afternoon. At 1800 the 1st Battalion rolled out, followed within a few hours by the 2nd and 3rd. It was a long, miserable, sleepless night. Sleet, snow, and freezing rain fell continually.

The Command group was preceded by Lieutenant Carl Starkey in a radio-equipped jeep. He moved from town to town by bounds, checking to make sure the way was clear. At Namur he was told to rejoin his unit.

Colonel Graves' group arrived at XVIII Corps headquarters in the morning of December 22nd. General Ridgway concluded a short briefing by saying, "The commander of the first battalion to physically arrive will report to General Rose, commanding the Third Armored Division, at Manhay when this briefing is finished."

This was Colonel Boyle's Battalion. When the Corps 0-3 completed the briefing, Boyle set out to find Manhay, while Graves and the others reconnoitered for assembly areas around Werbomont.



Habiermont, Belgium

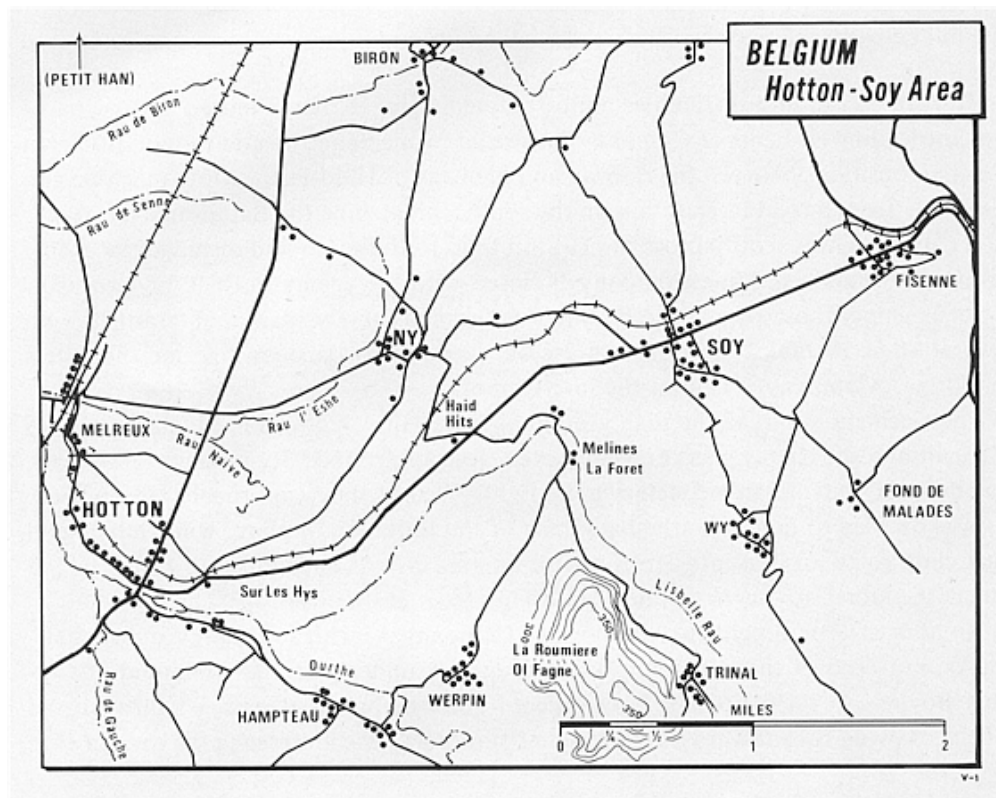
Without a map or a guide, Boyle finally found Manhay by the simple expedient of asking a truck driver. General Rose assigned him his mission, and an officer guide led him to CCR * at Soy.

* CCR: Combat Command Reserve, a tactical headquarters at the same level as regiment or brigade.

The 1st Battalion convoy was met at Namur and directed to Soy. The balance of the RCT closed into assembly areas near Habiermont, two miles east of Werbomont, by midnight, December 22nd.

The 3rd Armored Division was in trouble. It had arrived in the area west of the 82nd Airborne with only one Combat Command.** Three small task forces moving south on a 12-mile front between Manhay and the Ourthe River had collided with the German L VIII Corps moving northwest. A German Panzer Task Force had driven between Soy and Hotton, threatening the Division trains at Hotton with encirclement and cutting off contact with Headquarters CCR at Soy. XVIII Airborne Corps had promised the 3rd Armored a battalion of the 517th on its arrival, but insisted that the Division must also push on to capture Dochamps and Samree to the south.

****** Combat Commands A and B had been detached. General Rose had only Combat Command Reserve and the 83rd Reconnaissance Battalion left at his disposal.



Soy--Hotton (1)

At 1600 on December 22nd the 1st Battalion detrucked under long-range tank cannon and artillery fire near a small patch of woods a mile north of Soy. Seven trucks with two-thirds of C Company and part of B were found to be missing, but there was no time to wait or to look for them. The situation demanded an immediate attack.

The mission was to clear the area between Soy and Hotton of enemy and to establish a stable line of resistance between the two towns.

The Battalion stacked bedrolls and moved through Soy under light artillery fire. The line of departure was crossed at 1715 with Company A leading, Company B following and echeloned left, and the remaining platoon of C Company following in Battalion reserve. Headquarters Company light machine guns were attached to the rifle companies, and the 81mm mortar platoon was positioned to support.

The ground over which the attack from Soy had to move gave every advantage to the Germans. Maneuver was restricted by the cuts through which ran the Hotton road, by a stream bordering the road on the south, and by the German position atop the nose of the hill between the two towns which provided observation over the barren ground to the north.

The attack ran into difficulties almost immediately. A few hundred yards west of Soy the leading elements of Company A were hit by machine gun and cannon fire from German positions between the railway and highway at Haid-Hits. More machine gun fire came from a road intersection on the south, threatening the Battalion's left flank.

B Company was sent to cross the Hotton road to the south and dislodge the enemy group. As darkness came Company B closed with the enemy in thick underbrush. Two machine guns were silenced, but the Germans threw in a counterattack with several Mark IV tanks. Two tanks were knocked out by bazooka fire and the others withdrew. Company B held at the intersection.

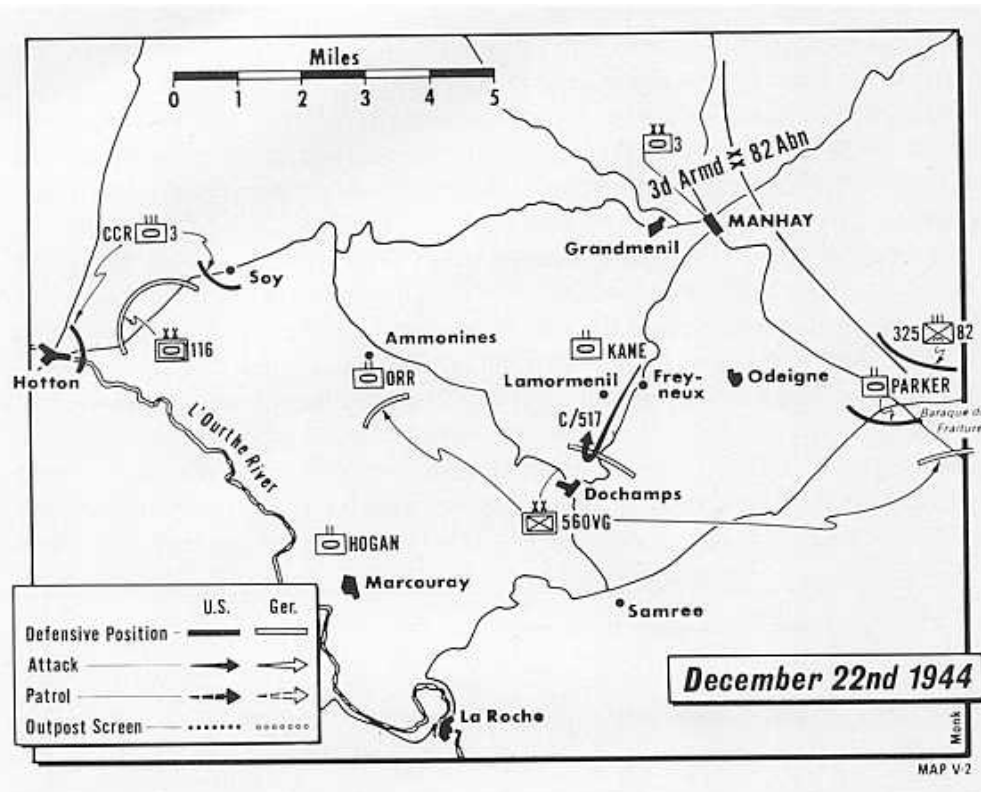
The Germans still held the high ground at Haid-Hits. Control in the darkness was difficult and the enemy was contesting every foot of ground. By midnight the attack had deteriorated into an inconclusive fire fight. Clearly, a new approach was required. It was decided to hold with the main part of the Battalion in place, while moving an encircling force around into Hotton from the north. At daylight both forces would renew the attack to converge upon Haid-Hits from east and west.

An hour after midnight two platoons of Company A, with four tanks and six half-tracks, moved over the northern route through Wy under personal command of Colonel Boyle. At 0630 Boyle's force entered Hotton, but as it wheeled through the village to swing back toward Soy, strong resistance was encountered at the eastern edge of town.

When the 1st Battalion launched its attack on the evening of December 22nd the enemy force between Soy and Hotton was Kampfgruppe Bayer of the 116th Panzer Division. Bayer had attacked from the southeast on December 21st in an attempt to gain a crossing of the Ourthe River, but met strong resistance from 3rd Armored Division and Engineer elements at Hotton and took positions between the two towns to await orders. Although General Kreuger, commanding the L VIII Corps, had hoped to cross the Ourthe at Hotton he became wary on learning of the unexpected resistance.

His mission was to get to the crossings of the Meuse without becoming involved in heavy action along the way. Since a safer crossing of the Ourthe had been found to the south, in the evening of December 21st Kreuger ordered the 560th Volksgrenadier Division* to relieve the 116th Panzer between Soy and Hotton on the night of December 22/23rd. While Colonel Boyle's force was rolling through Wy, elements of the 1129th Regiment took over from Kampfgruppe Bayer. The relief was undetected. The 116th Panzer broke contact, moved south, and crossed the Ourthe at La Roche.

* "The "Volksgrenadier" Divisions are not to be confused with the "Volksturm" home-defense militia. The VG Divisions were a regular part of the Wehrmacht, each with three regiments of two battalions plus artillery, engineer, and other support. They were well armed with self-propelled guns at company level and often with MP 44 automatic carbine.



The exchange of German units made little difference to the 1st Battalion. Whether they were fighting tankers or grenadiers was immaterial. What did matter was that the Germans were numerically strong, well-armed, and held commanding ground.

At dawn on the 23rd executive officer Major Donald Fraser's five platoons (three B Company, one A, and one C) renewed the attack toward Haid-Hits. Once more they were held up by machine gun and mortar fire. The plan of attack was revised. Major Fraser took charge of the forces north of the railroad, while S-3 Captain John Dugan assumed command of those below the track. Nine tanks came up from Soy; three mediums and two lights joined Fraser and two mediums and lights went to Dugan.

Thus rearranged and reinforced, the attack jumped off again at 1215. Enemy antitank fire opened up when the Americans were five hundred yards east of Haid-Hits. Within five minutes all four tanks with Dugan were knocked out. Dugan's force crossed over the railroad to join Fraser, and the remaining tanks returned to Soy.

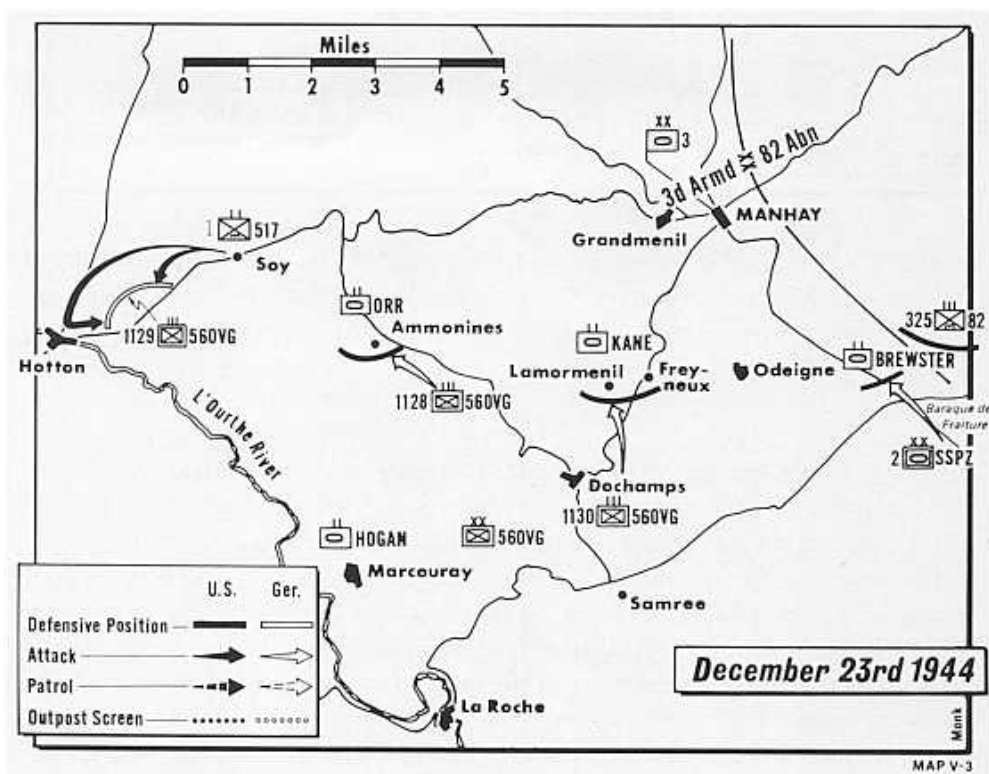
The fight continued throughout the night. In the dense underbrush visibility had been 10 to 30 yards in daylight. After dark it was reduced to a few feet. The temperature dropped close to zero, and the troops were approaching exhaustion. Nevertheless they plugged away, gaining a few feet at a time.

The lone C Company platoon was on the left of Fraser's force, driving to gain the crossroads at Haid-Hits. Platoon leader Harry Allingham, ahead of his troops, was hit by a burst of machine pistol fire. Badly wounded, Allingham fell in a ditch and told his runner, PFC Nolan Powell* to bring the platoon forward. A second burst of fire killed the courageous Allingham and set off a white phosphorous grenade he had been carrying. In plain sight of the enemy, Powell directed the riflemen into place.

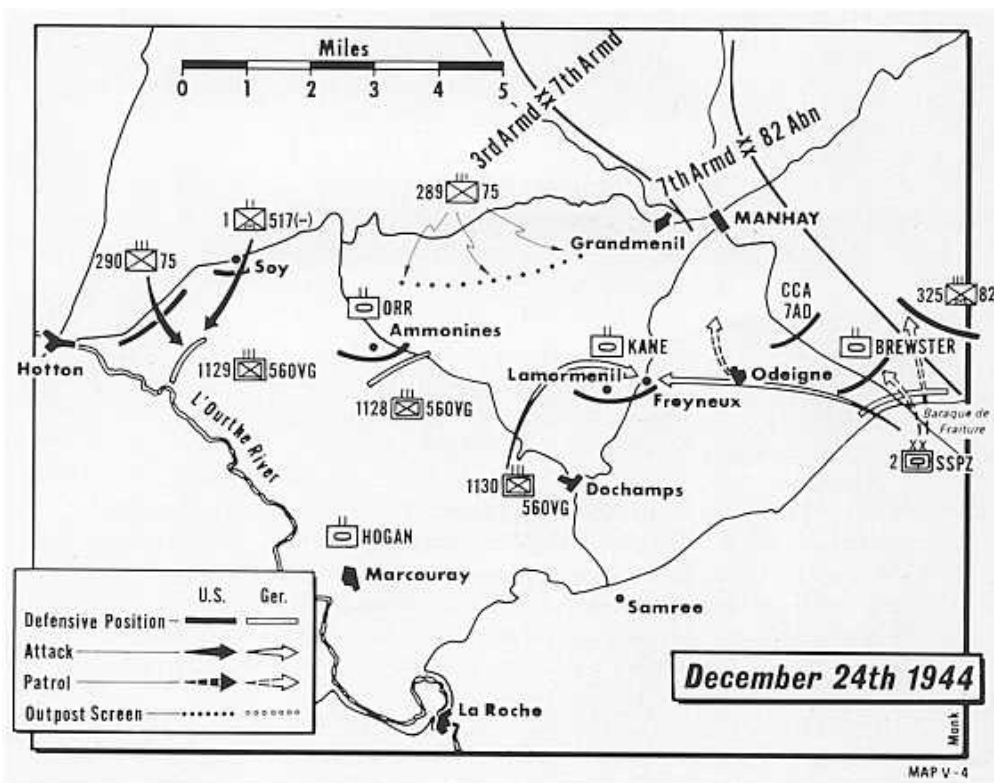
* Powell had been nominated for the DSC in Italy; it was awarded later .

Assistant Platoon Leader Lieutenant Carl Hornsby then took over. The men worked forward in small groups, firing at flashes and sounds. An English-speaking German called out, "Merry Christmas, Americans!" Two more C Company men were killed and five wounded, but the platoon gained the crossroad. PFC Melvin Biddle of B Company advanced alone, picking off Germans with his rifle. He later was credited with killing seventeen and silencing several machine guns.*

* Biddle was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for this action, the only such award in the 517th RCT.



On the evening of December 23rd the overall situation of the 3rd Armored Division had not improved. Although the Soy-Hottot penetration was being contained and might soon be eliminated, Task Force Hogan on the west was cut off at Marcouray, Task Force Orr in center was blocked, and the 2nd SS Panzer Division threatened Task Force Kane on the east. General Rose told CCR Commander Howze at Soy, "Impress on every individual that we must stay right here or there will be a war to fight all over again, and we won't be here to fight it."



By daylight of the 24th the 1st Battalion had eliminated all resistance at Haid-Hits.

The troopers dug in, expecting a counterattack, but none came. At 0815 two more medium tanks came forward from Soy, and the attack moved out once more. Resistance was noticeably weaker. Fraser's force was opposed by 10 to 15 riflemen and two self-propelled guns. The American tanks knocked out the SP guns, and the riflemen were taken care of without difficulty. At 1130 Fraser joined Boyle in Hotton.

The first part of the Battalion's mission -- elimination of all enemy between Soy and Hotton -- had been accomplished. The second part, establishing a stable line of resistance, went much easier. The return from Hotton to Soy was unopposed. Twenty-odd Germans came out of hiding to surrender. Most of Company B took position at Sur-les-Hys and one platoon set up a road block a mile west of Soy. The remainder of the Battalion went into CCR reserve at Soy at 1630, almost exactly forty-eight hours after the attack had begun.

General Rose no longer had to worry about the Soy--Hotton penetration, but now a major threat was developing in the east.

WAR DEPARTMENT
Bureau of Public Relations
PRESS BRANCH
8 September 1945

Infantry Scout Leader
Wins Medal of Honor

Private First Class Melvin E. Biddle, 21-year old paratrooper of Anderson, Indiana, has been awarded the Medal of Honor for leading his entire battalion in a five kilometer penetration of strong German assault positions in Belgium last December 23 and 24, during the Battle of the Bulge, the War Department announced today.

In blasting the path through densely wooded terrain with rifle and grenades in a space of 20 hours, Private Biddle killed 17 Germans with 19 shots from his M-1 rifle, and knocked out three machine gun emplacements unassisted. He also assisted in reducing one other machine gun emplacement, two heavy tanks, numerous crew served weapons, their crews and supporting riflemen.

Possessed of keen sight and hearing, the Anderson paratrooper was able to move through thick underbrush to kill the enemy after locating their cleverly concealed foxholes and machine gun positions.

Private Biddle's exploits began as the 1st Battalion of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment launched an attack from Soy to Hotton, Belgium, for the purpose of clearing the woods between the towns of German-armored infantry which had encircled Hotton and was threatening Soy, garrison of noncombatant American troops.

As lead scout of Company B, leading element of the battalion, Private Biddle led out through the dense woods and undergrowth. Armored support for his outfit had brush in a 360 degree arc. Biddle waited until the enemy gun swung away from him, dashed forward and killed his 11th German with two quick rifle shots.

The machine gun on the Anderson youth's right flank became his next objective. He crawled to within 20 yards of the gun, threw his last grenade into the emplacement and followed the explosion with a rifle charge. He killed the gunner and assistant, but the ammunition bearer got away.

Reaching a clearing in the woods, Private Biddle halted the battalion moving up behind him in the woods and obtained permission to lead three other scouts on patrol to investigate a tank movement he had heard in the woods ahead.

Almost immediately, the patrol ran into heavy German fire and Biddle elected to go on alone. He sent the other scouts back to the main column with the information that he had decided to infiltrate the German lines under cover of approaching darkness.

For several hours he wandered among German positions. Unable to speak German, he could not answer the challenges of Nazi sentries and was shot at several times. Once an enemy patrol sought to encircle Biddle, but he coolly eluded them despite the fact that one German stepped on his hand.

Private Biddle reported back to his battalion commander with information concerning the enemy's disposition of weapons, the exact location of two heavy tanks and the pattern of widely deployed infantry. This information enabled the battalion's armor and infantry to flank the German strong point, reach its objective far ahead of plans and avoid numerous casualties in the next day's attack. In addition, American armor moving in at dawn knocked out the two German tanks before they could return the fire.

It was Private Biddle who again led the advance at daybreak. His first action was to locate and destroy another German machine gun emplacement -- a job that necessitated his moving out in the open. Alternately rushing and crawling, he worked within 50 yards of the machine gun and killed both members of the crew and two supporting riflemen with four rounds from his M-1. Other Germans, without the support of automatic weapons, became panicky and fled to permit Biddle's unit to move ahead again without a casualty.

Task Force Kane

While the main part of the 1st Battalion was pulling the tiger's fangs at Soy--Hotton, C Company was twisting its tail eight miles away.

At 1530 on December 22nd Captain La Chaussee, commanding C Company, awoke from a catnap to find his truck halted at a road fork. Unable to keep up with the convoy and unsure which way to turn, the driver had stopped at the fork. La Chaussee dismounted and waved the other five trucks off the road. He had Company Headquarters, one and a half rifle platoons, and three 60mm mortar squads, a total of 6 officers and 87 men. There were plenty of officers and mortars but only five rifle squads .

Flagging down a passing jeep, La Chaussee found XVIII Airborne Corps and 3rd Armored Division Headquarters. At Manhay General Rose personally briefed him on the situation. The 1st Battalion, 517th, had been sent to CCR at Soy, but Corps was pressing for results in the Dochamps--Samree area. The General said, "I'm sending you to the hottest spot on the western front tonight, to Task Force Kane."

At 1700 the trucks carrying C Company rolled south to Freyneux, two miles below Manhay. North of the village the trucks halted. While the men dismounted La Chaussee reported to the Task Force commander, Lieutenant Colonel Matthew Kane.

Kane was in a deep underground cellar surrounded by squawking radios. His force consisted of a medium tank company with reconnaissance, antitank, and artillery elements attached. They had been advancing south during the day but had been held up by strong resistance at Dochamps, two miles south, and had returned to Freyneux.

The paratroopers were to take Dochamps by night attack. Kane regretted that he could not provide an artillery observer, and suggested that the attack follow a narrow-gauge railroad running from Freyneux to Dochamps.

It seemed like a pretty tall order for five rifle squads, but at 2045 the troopers formed on the railroad track and moved out. A half-mile below Freyneux two Americans were found in a wooden building beside the track. They were a lieutenant and a private from the 7th Armored Division, who claimed to have been cut off and to be trying to find their way back to American lines.

"You don't know what you're getting into," the lieutenant said. "The whole German Army is out there."

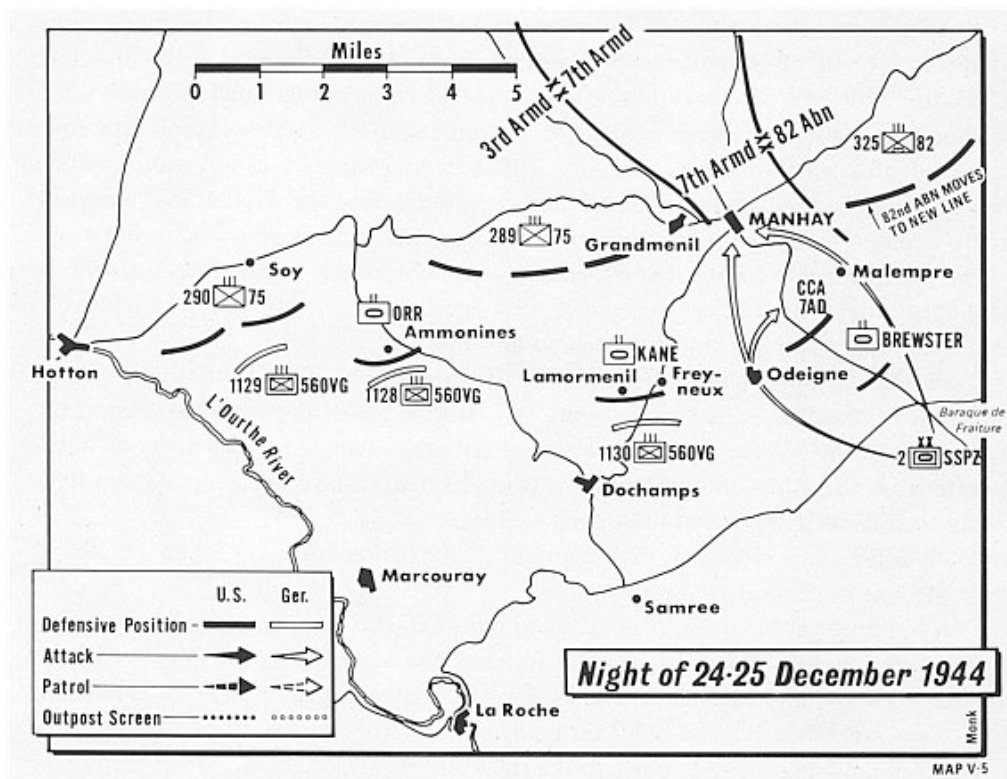
Four hundred yards further south the company came to an open field with woods on the far side. Spotting movement, the lead scout challenged, "Coleman?" * A voice replied, "Vass?" and the fight was on. Two Germans had been manning a machine gun. One was killed but the other escaped.

* The password and countersign that night was "Coleman--Burner."

The company made a wide circle to the right and reentered the woods. Enemy contact was immediate. Taunting the Germans to draw fire, the troopers called out, "Hey, Herman, come out where we can see you!" As the enemy fired in response they were cut down. In an hour the Germans quit, leaving ten or twelve dead. One American had been killed and four wounded.

At the southern edge of the woods the railroad turned sharply west around a deep ravine. Dochamps was a few hundred yards beyond the track. Sergeant Tom Kerr led his squad down into the ravine. As they began to climb the far side several machine guns opened fire, and Kerr saw an enemy column moving in on his right. At the same time grenade explosions and machine pistol fire on the left rear of the 2nd Platoon indicated that a counterattack was beginning.

The plain fact was that there were too many Germans and they were alert and ready. Dochamps was not going to be taken by five rifle squads. While Beaudoin's 2nd platoon held off the counterattack on their left, De Coste's 1st moved back along the railroad. At a cluster of wooden buildings (where they had encountered the 7th Armored men) the company posted security and waited for dawn. A four-man litter team set out for Freyneux carrying a wounded man, guiding on the railroad track.



A dense fog had settled in and it was almost daylight. When the litter team had gone a few hundred yards they heard voices, saw blurred figures, and dropped to the ground. As they lay motionless a long column of Germans passed by, carrying rifles with fixed bayonets.

At dawn machine gun fire opened on C Company from the north. Most of it went high overhead. In a few minutes the machine gun fire stopped and shadowy figures emerged from the fog. They were wearing long, ankle-length overcoats. American troops didn't have overcoats like that. Lieutenant Beaudoin stuck a machine gun out of a ground-floor window and held the trigger down, catching the German column head-on at a range of 15 feet.* The Germans and Americans, equally surprised, exchanged grenades and rifle fire at point-blank range.

* Twenty-three German dead were counted, at this spot alone, a few hours later.

Room was needed to spread out. The troopers fell back to a group of stone buildings a hundred yards northwest.** The Germans attacked with what appeared to be two rifle companies on a front of several hundred yards. The Americans gave back as good as they got. It was the heaviest fire fight for C Company since its first day in Italy.

** This was the village of Lamormenil. Lacking maps, the troopers had not even known it was there.

After an hour the German attack petered out and a column of tanks and half-tracks, part of Kane's force, rumbled into the village. The tankers and paratroopers set up a joint defense, but the enemy made no effort to close in. Instead, tanks (or self-propelled guns) brought down fire on the village from the south and east. By late afternoon half of Lamormenil was in ruins. Buildings were burning and power lines hung limp from poles. As each house was smashed in, the troopers fell back to the next.

Apparently unaware of the realities, higher headquarters ordered a new attack to begin on Dochamps at 1400. An hour before the scheduled jump-off, better sense prevailed and the attack was cancelled. Lt. Colonel Kane left for his trains area two miles to the rear. Command passed to the Task Force executive, Major Cochrane, at Freyneux and Captain La Chaussee was charged with the defense of Lamormenil.

The tankers stripped their vehicles to loan their "bow"*** machine guns to C Company, which used them to form an improvised machine gun-platoon. At darkness a CP was set up, outposts sent out, and the Task Force settled in for the night. Sporadic flat-trajectory fire continued.

*** The "bow" gun was in the assistant driver's place in each tank. The tank company (Co. D, 32nd Armored Regiment) was short men and had no assistant drivers, rendering the guns surplus.

The Fraiture crossroads, three miles east of Freyneux, was critical to both the Americans and Germans. At this junction the Liege-Bastogne road crossed the east-west road from Vielsalm to La Roche. The Germans needed the crossroads to protect the right flank of Kreuger's Corps moving west. The Americans had to hold it to prevent German expansion north.

On December 22/23 the crossroads was being defended by Major Arthur Parker with a scratch force consisting of elements of the 106th Infantry and 7th Armored Divisions, plus Company F, 325th Glider Infantry. Opposing Parker was an outpost screen of the 560th Volks Grenadiers, which was awaiting the arrival of the 2nd SS Panzer Division.

The 2nd SS Panzer was at full strength in men and equipment.* During the night of 22/23 December 2nd SS Panzer relieved the 560th and the next day went to work on the crossroads. At about 1600 heavy artillery concentrations fell upon Parker's force. Twenty minutes later two companies of tanks and an entire regiment of Panzer Grenadiers closed in. By 1800 the crossroads was overrun. Only 44 out of 116 men of F /325 made it back to American lines.

* Brutal even by German standards, 2nd SS Panzer had massacred the entire population of Oradour-sur-Glane in France during the summer .

That night 2nd SS patrols worked north and west. At Odeigne, a mile and a half east of Freyneux, the Germans encountered an American outpost of five light tanks and a few riflemen. The Grenadiers illuminated their target with flares and attacked. The outpost withdrew, leaving Task Force Kane's eastern flank wide open.

On December 24th elements of two German Divisions hit Task Force Kane in three separate attacks. The 560th Volks Grenadiers attacked from the west, and the 2nd SS Panzer came from the east and northeast.

The first attack came at daylight, when alert TD gunners at Freyneux spotted enemy armor and infantry in the northeast. When the armor was within easy range the gunners opened fire. The armor fell back and the German infantry followed.

At Lamormenil enemy tanks began moving from west to east above the village at 0800. With two tanks, Lieutenant Eldon MacDonald** went out to meet the threat. In a short duel two Mark IV's were knocked out and one American SP 105mm howitzer was lost. The Mark IV's had apparently been outriders for a larger force. At 1000 observers at Lamormenil saw German armor and infantry approaching Freyneux from the northwest. A hundred enemy infantrymen were crossing low ground formed by a tributary of the River Aisne. They were dangerously close to Freyneux, and were backed up by tanks and SP guns.

** Commanding Company D, 32nd Armored Regiment.

American fire opened from Freyneux, and C Company put its improvised machine gun platoon into action. Eleven guns firing 125 rounds per minute hit the Germans with twenty rounds per second. Under this cross-fire the enemy attack wavered. One courageous German officer made an unforgettable sight waving his men forward until he was cut down a hundred feet from Freyneux.

With the fight hanging in balance the American Air Corps tipped the scale. Thirty fighter-bombers arrived overhead. With splendid flying and a lot of luck, they began strafing and bombing the German attack. Columns of black smoke rose as they scored upon enemy armor. By 1100 the attack had been stopped cold.

A few Luftwaffe fighters arrived, and a dogfight swarmed overhead. Planes from both sides went down, but the Americans seemed to get the best of it. After ten minutes the skies cleared.

At noon the 2nd SS made a third try for Freyneux. While enemy tanks on high ground to the northeast brought down direct fire, Panzer Grenadiers gained a foothold on the eastern edge of the village. Major Cochrane radioed C Company for help. Lieutenant Tom De Coste's platoon moved to Freyneux and cleared the village, capturing one officer of 2nd SS Panzer .

With only one platoon left at Lamormenil a tightening-up of positions was required. While the 2nd Platoon was shifting a squad, a German Volkswagen jeep raced up on the blind side of a house. Two Germans jumped out shooting. In the melee that followed Lieutenant Beaudoin and two NCO's were killed. The Germans -- also killed -- were from 2nd SS Panzer. One was a Captain, and an overlay found in his dispatch case indicating a shift in unit boundaries was sent to Major Cochrane at Freyneux.

After the failure of their third attack the Germans gave up on Freyneux-Lamormenil. Intermittent direct tank fire continued to ravage both villages through the afternoon, but the enemy made no further effort to advance. Just before dark American observers on a rooftop in Lamormenil watched a long column of German vehicles moving north through Odeigne, a mile and a half away. The enemy column was heading for Manhay.

General Von Manteuffel had placed great importance upon the necessity for pushing Task Force Kane aside as a preliminary to the advance on Manhay. In a postwar report he wrote bitterly that "... the attack ordered for the 24th [at Verdennes, west of the Ourthe] was repulsed, as were the attacks by the other two Divisions of this Corps in the neighborhood of Lamormenil. The enemy had succeeded in blocking the whole front of the LVIII Panzer Corps."* The 1130th Regiment of the 560th Volks Grenadiers sustained such severe losses in the attacks upon Freyneux that it was temporarily out of action.**

* "The Fatal Decisions", (Chapter) New York, 1956.

** US Army in WW II: The Ardennes, Battle of the Bulge

While Colonel Boyle's men were attached to the 3rd Armored Division the balance of the RCT kept busy. The morning after arrival in Belgium G Company was detailed as a security force for the XVIII Airborne Corps CP. Soon after the Company took up positions General Ridgway emerged, hand grenades slung from his harness. He took a look around and said, "Boys, I want you to know this CP is staying right here. We're not moving."

The RCT (less 1st Battalion and a Company) was attached to the 30th Infantry Division near Malmedy. The CT Headquarters opened at 1000, December 23rd, at Xhoffraix. During the rest of the day the 2nd and 3rd Battalions closed in and prepared in-depth defensive positions behind the front line held by the 30th. The 596th Engineers planned mine fields, demolitions, and abatis. This continued through the 24th. On Christmas Day the RCT was released from attachment to the 30th and returned to XVIII Corps Control, moving to Ferrieres. One wag suggested that the RCT's mission was to bolster Belgian morale by appearing in as many places as possible.

There is an old military adage that 'artillery is never in reserve'. When the RCT was attached to the 30th Division, the 460th tied in with 30th Div Arty and fired 400 rounds in missions south and east of Malmedy. Returning with the RCT to Ferrieres, Colonel Cato's Battalion reinforced the fires of 7th Armored Division Artillery. During the nine days in Belgium in December the 460th fired more than thirty TOT's.

Soy-Hotton (2)

The 1st Battalion's attack of December 22-24 had forced the elements of the 560th Volks Grenadier Division between Soy and Hotton to withdraw to the south. The new German positions extended from the wooded hill mass of La Roumiere 01 Fagne northeast through Wy, a mile south of Soy. The Germans were still too close for comfort. Only the overextended line held by Company B, 517th, protected the 3rd Armored Division Trains at Hotton and Headquarters CCR at Soy.

Two regiments of the 75th Infantry Division, fresh from the United States, were attached to the 3rd Armored by VII Corps* on December 24th. General Rose decided to use these regiments to seize high ground south of Soy and Hotton on the west, arid overlooking the Aisne River on the east.

* On December 23rd the 3rd Armored Division was released from XVIII Airborne Corps and placed under VII Corps, which

was building up west of the Ourthe River

On December 24th the 290th Infantry Regiment was preparing defensive positions at Petit Han, 6 miles north of Hotton. At 1600 the Regiment was ordered to assemble at Wy for an attack to begin at 1800 -- which allowed two hours to reconnoiter, prepare plans and issue orders, and move 6 miles to the line of departure. Much confusion followed and finally the time for the attack was changed to 2300.

The 1st and 2nd Battalions were chosen for the assault. The 2nd Battalion on right was to capture La Roumiere while the 1st on left was to seize Wy. The Regimental reserve was to be the 3rd Battalion at Haid-Hits. Around 2230 the 2nd Battalion, 290th, closed behind the Soy-Hotton road. There had been no daylight reconnaissance and little time even for map study; the assault companies were to venture out into the dark over rugged, unknown terrain and hope for the best. The Divisional supply system was not functioning. Extra ammunition for the attack had not been issued. The riflemen were carrying 10 clips per man, 80 rounds apiece. Additional ammunition offered by B/517 was rejected.

The assault companies crossed the Soy-Hotton road at about midnight, waded the Lisbelle River, and emerged from the woods at the edge of an open, snow-covered field a mile from their objective. All was confusion. They stopped to reorganize, and it was full daylight before the formations were straightened out.

From the La Roumiere hill the German 1129th Regiment watched -- probably with amazement -- as 2/290th moved out into the open. The Americans presented ideal targets against the snow background, and the Grenadiers took full advantage of their opportunity. The leading companies were raked over with mortar, artillery, and machine gun fire. American casualties were catastrophic.* Most officers of the attacking companies were killed or wounded. By 0800 the survivors were pinned down in the open, out of ammunition and with mounting casualties. The infantrymen were not lacking in courage but were victims of incredible mismanagement and incompetence.

* Captain Ben Sullivan, 1st Battalion Surgeon, told Colonel Boyle that 900 casualties from the 290th were treated at his Aid Station. This figure seems high but even if it is halved the casualties of the 290th were horrific.

At 0800 the Regimental reserve was committed, with the effect of throwing good money after bad. The 3rd Battalion followed the same route, came in on left of the 2nd, and was also pinned down. By noon of Christmas Day the 1st Battalion, 290th was near its objective but the other two battalions were still held up, floundering in front of the La Roumeire hill.

At 1430 Colonel Howze ordered Colonel Boyle to gather up all available 1st Battalion forces and secure La Roumiere. B Company was holding a tenuous MLR from Soy to Hotton and could not be touched. This left Company A, a platoon of Company C, and the Battalion Headquarters Company machine gun platoon -- actually a reinforced company.

An hour before dark the 1st Battalion (minus) moved south from Soy and west across the wooded hill of Melines la Foret. Crossing steep cuts in the Trinal road, the column began up the eastern slope of La Roumiere. Resistance was encountered as the leading elements hit the right flank of the 1129th Grenadiers. Artillery was called in, and Lieutenant Henry Kleinendorst's A Company platoon followed closely. By 1730 the 1st Battalion had cleared the reverse slope of La Roumiere and forced the Yolks Grenadiers to withdraw to the south.

Colonel Howze placed Colonel Boyle in command of all forces on La Roumiere -- including both Battalions of the 290th -- with instructions to get the whole mess straightened out and establish a solid defense. Through the night Boyle and his staff worked putting his own units and those of the 290th in place along the line Melines-la Foret-Werpin-Hotton. No 290th Battalion Commanders or staff members could be found; Colonel Boyle had to deal directly with seven or eight companies.

During the night Task Force Hogan, which had been surrounded and out of gas at Marcouray, came in on foot. They had been out of contact and did not know the password, but all came through Colonel Boyle's defenses safely and without incident.

At daylight a few isolated Germans, awakening to find themselves surrounded by Americans, surrendered. At 0800 Colonel Boyle was informed that the 1st Battalion was to be relieved. The morning and part of the afternoon was spent in completing the organization of positions, and at 1500 the weary 1st Battalion left La Roumiere, assembled at Soy, and mounted trucks to report back to 517th RCT control.

It had been a rough four days.*

* For this action Colonel Boyle was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the 1st Battalion a (Presidential) Distinguished Unit Citation. See Appendix C.

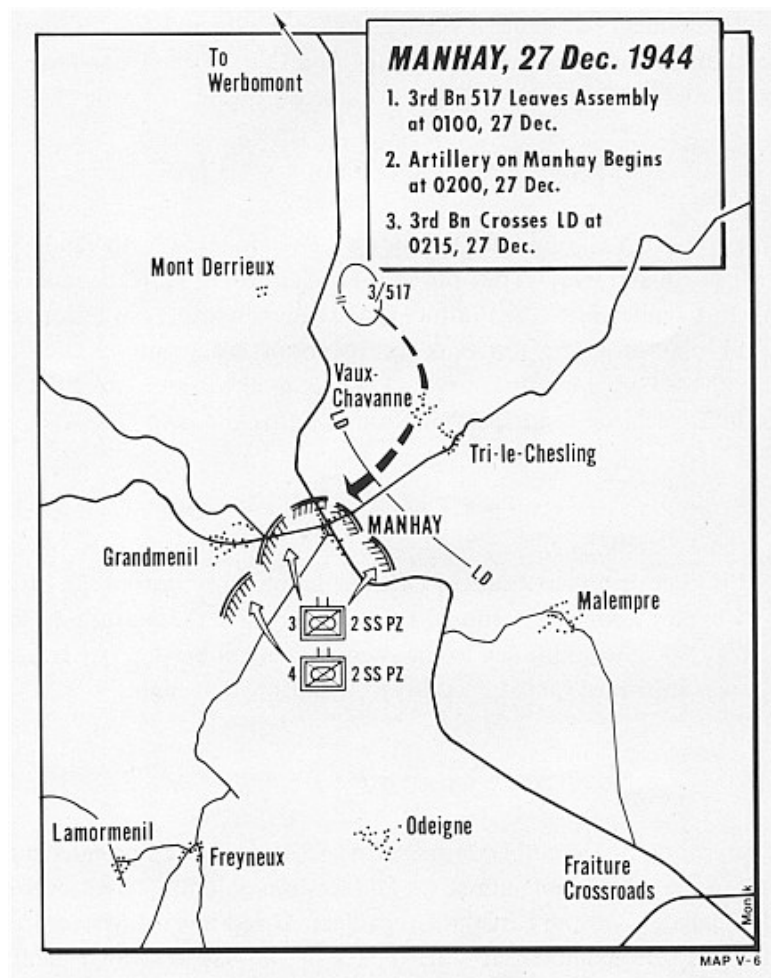
Christmas and the following day were quiet at Lamormenil-Freyneux. Unable to dislodge Task Force Kane, the enemy had bypassed it. The area was between two German divisions, neither of which was inclined to expend men where they had already failed.

The Task Force had been left in place to cover the deployment of the 289th Infantry north of the Aisne on December 24th-25th. This having been accomplished; C Company men patrolled north and west to find a route of withdrawal. On the 26th contact was established with the 289th and a trail suitable for vehicles and clear of Germans was found. Just before dark a smoke barrage was placed around Lamormenil-Freyneux and the paratroopers rode out on the tanks.** The Task Force left behind ten dead Americans and eight disabled vehicles. Next morning C Company rejoined its parent Battalion at Izier.

** The SS Officer who had been captured at Freyneux met with a fatal accident and failed to survive the trip.

Manhay

The fall of Manhay to the 2nd SS Panzer Division on Christmas Eve sent shock waves throughout the Allied Command.



After the loss of the Fraiture crossroads on December 23rd, General Ridgway had directed the 7th Armored to take over a narrow sector between the 82nd Airborne and the 3rd Armored. Since its withdrawal from St Vith, the 7th Armored was low in strength in men and vehicles. Men were exhausted, and only half of the vehicles left were in running condition. Nevertheless, a battalion of tanks and one of armored infantry were rounded up and placed under CCA at Manhay. Complicating matters was the fact that the 3rd Armored Division south of Manhay was under VII Corps. The two armored divisions were responding to different headquarters, and direct exchange of information was limited.

Field Marshal Montgomery* visited XVIII Corps Headquarters on December 24th. Always a believer in the "set piece" battle, Montgomery found the American line shaky and overextended. A general realignment was directed for the night of the 24th/25th, with the 82nd Airborne to pull back to a shorter line from Trois Ponts to Vaux Chavanne. CCA, 7th Armored, was to take up positions north of Manhay.

* Montgomery had been placed in command of all Allied forces on the north of the German penetration.

While trying to push Task Force Kane aside on December 24th, the 2nd SS Panzer patrolled to the north and west. They found the area north of Odeigne relatively clear of Americans, but a mile above the Fraiture crossroads ran into Task Force Brewster .

This was a tank platoon and a few tank destroyers of 3rd Armored Division, with Company C, 509th Parachute Infantry. To bypass Brewster, 2nd SS Divisional engineers put in a corduroy road from the Fraiture crossroads to Odeigne.

CCA moved into position northeast of Odeigne in the afternoon of the 24th. Relying for security in part upon 3rd Armored Division forces to the south, the Command was unaware that Odeigne had fallen to the enemy the night before. After arriving in position CCA was informed of the decision to withdraw that night.

In the late afternoon of December 24th the 2nd SS Panzer Division moved out with two Panzer Grenadier Regiments abreast. The western column passed over the new road through Odeigne. On the east the Grenadiers circled toward Malempre.

At 2230 the CCA Command Group started back to Manhay to arrange details of the withdrawal. A German tank fell into the column; at Manhay it suddenly turned and opened fire. Concurrently a small group of Germans hit the CCA positions above Odeigne from the west. Caught by surprise while preparing to withdraw, 19 American tanks and 100 men were lost. One tank company and another of armored infantry managed to withdraw with their vehicles to the northeast.

Task Force Brewster turned northeast only to find the Germans behind them at Malempre. With the permission of higher headquarters, Brewster's force abandoned their vehicles and escaped on foot.

Before daylight, through mischance and a combination of errors, the 2nd SS Panzer Division held Manhay.

From Manhay the Germans could continue north toward Liege or turn against the flank of the 3rd Armored and/or the 82nd Airborne. Urgent directives descended upon General Ridgway demanding that Manhay be retaken at all costs.

At noon on Christmas Day a 3rd Armored tank-infantry force advanced upon Grandmenil from the west. Through error American fighter-bombers were vectored upon the force. 29 Americans were killed and most of the vehicles destroyed. A few hours later a 7th Armored attack from the north employing the 424th Infantry* was beaten back with one-third casualties.

* The 424th was the only surviving infantry regiment of the 106th Division.

The 2nd SS Panzer probed east and west without success. It was turned back at Tri-le-Chesling by the 325th Airborne Infantry. West of Grandmenil a courageous soldier of the 289th Infantry knocked out a leading German tank in a defile, and elements of the 3rd Armored and 75th Infantry Divisions blocked the advance of the others.

Through the night of the 25th and morning of the 26th American air and artillery plastered Manhay. High-level demands for its recapture continued. Finally despairing of obtaining decisive results elsewhere, General Ridgway turned to his Corps reserve, the 517th RCT at Ferrieres.

The call came at 1400. The 517th was to attach one battalion to the 7th Armored for the specific purpose of retaking Manhay. The 3rd Battalion** was given the mission. Colonels Graves, Paxton, and Cato reported to the 7th Armored CP, where the general plan of attack was decided and supporting fires were arranged. Colonel Paxton then went on personal reconnaissance while his Battalion moved to an assembly area a mile northwest of Vaux Chavanne.

** Less Company G, plus one platoon of the 596th Engineers and a section of the Regimental demolitions platoon.

Paxton found that the forward positions of the 48th Armored Infantry were almost two miles further north than had been indicated on the 7th Armored Division situation map. This meant that his battalion would have to cross two miles of terrain covered with snow and underbrush, in darkness, before reaching the line of departure.

At Vaux Chavanne Colonel Paxton issued his attack order at 1830. The attack would jump off at 0215 after a ten-minute TOT by eight battalions of artillery. The formation would be column of companies, I leading, H following. The line of departure was just west of Vaux Chavanne, a thousand yards northeast of Manhay. The Battalion machine guns were attached to the rifle companies, and bazooka teams were to be well forward.

No other battalion of the 517th had the experience of the 3rd in closely following massed artillery. Lessons learned at Les Arcs and Tete de la Lavina were now to be put to use. With two companies, the 3rd Battalion was going to take on what appeared to be a reinforced battalion of SS Panzer Grenadiers -- a fair match.

After issuing his attack order Colonel Paxton, accompanied by Colonel Graves, set up his forward CP in a ruined building just west of Vaux Chavanne. At 0100 the 3rd Battalion left its assembly area, arriving in the attack position about 45 minutes later. As they formed on the line of departure Paxton joined them, and at 0200 the artillery concentrations began. Over 5,000 rounds were fired in four concentrations, one directly upon Manhay and three on its southern approaches.

At 0215, five minutes after the artillery lifted, Captain Jim Birder's I Company moved out. Colonel Paxton, apparently feeling that the time required to reach the village would allow the Germans to man their positions, called for a repeat of the artillery. The fire came in promptly, but one salvo landed directly upon Lieutenant Stott's platoon, which was leading I Company* and nine others were killed and several wounded. Despite this tragedy, I Company pressed on with Lieutenant Dick Jackson's H Company close behind, firing bazookas, throwing white phosphorous grenades, and shooting anything that moved. The Germans were stunned by the artillery fire and caught off-balance by the speed and violence of the attack. In fifteen minutes half the town was cleared and by 0330 the last pocket of resistance was eliminated.

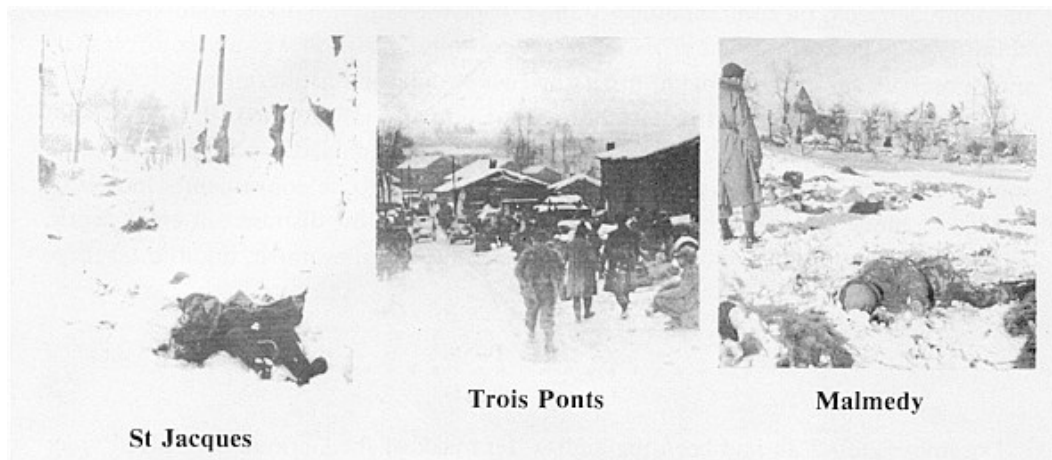
* Whether this tragic accident was due to the artillery landing short, or the troopers advancing too soon -- or both -- will never be known. In any event, it is certain that by following the artillery closely the 3rd Battalion took far fewer casualties than would otherwise have been the case.

Approximately 50 Germans were killed and 29 captured.** One enemy tank and several other armored vehicles had been destroyed. The 3rd Battalion suffered 24 casualties, including ten dead. Almost all had been the victims of supposedly friendly artillery fire. The enemy were identified as members of the 3rd and 4th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiments of the 2nd SS Panzer Division.

** More prisoners might have been taken, but the 3rd Battalion had just returned from the Malmedy area where it had seen and heard of the results of the massacre of American prisoners. After Malmedy it was not easy for an SS man to surrender.

A small counterattack at 0400 was driven off. The 596th Engineer Platoon removed mines and an abatis from the road to the north, allowing three medium tanks from 7th Armored to reinforce the defense. By daylight all was in good order. General Ridgway no longer had to put up with demands and directives to retake Manhay.

The 3rd Battalion held its position at Manhay for the next week. Although the line had been restored and the 2nd SS Panzer had been turned back, the village continued to be the hottest of hot spots. On December 27th three American P-38's, apparently assuming that Manhay was still held by the Germans, strafed and bombed the Battalion positions, killing three men. The 2nd SS Panzer continued to make life miserable for the paratroopers.



The village lies in a broad, shallow depression overlooked by higher ground on all sides. German tanks and antitank guns kept the streets covered with enfilading fire; often the shells would ricochet several times before exploding. A tanker standing in his turret was hit squarely and killed. The shell did not explode for several hundred yards. A briefly-visiting TIME magazine correspondent wrote an article describing Manhay as "the town of running men" because any movement at less than a dead run was likely to be costly, if not fatal.

The Battalion kept reconnaissance and combat patrols active. One night a patrol raided and destroyed an enemy OP, reducing the effectiveness of the harassing fire considerably.

Other than the Germans, the only living being the Battalion had found initially in Manhay had been an old woman who was determined to remain in what had been her home. However, after two days, another emerged -- an American soldier who had been hiding in the chimney of a ruined house since the German capture of the town.

Hearing voices speaking English, he finally decided to risk coming out of his hideaway. It turned out that he had a brother in the 460th. Colonel Paxton had him escorted to the rear, and called Colonel Cato to arrange a pass so that the two could meet.

On December 28th the RCT was attached to the 7th Armored Division. Colonel Seitz' 2nd Battalion was moved into a blocking position above Manhay in the vicinity of Mont Derriex, on commanding ground astride the Manhay--Liege road. Although about two miles north of the crossroads, the Battalion position was under direct German observation, and became a target for enemy tank and artillery fire.

Next day the RCT (less 3rd Battalion, less Company G) returned to XVIII Corps reserve. The Headquarters and 2nd and 3rd Battalions remained in place, while the 1st moved to Harre, five miles north of Manhay, in order to be conveniently located if needed to block or counterattack. The Regiment was now disposed in great depth, with the 3rd Battalion (minus) at Manhay, the 2nd two miles north, and the 1st three miles north of the 2nd.

December 26th-27th had been the high-water mark of the German offensive. Over the next few days attacks at Erria and Sadzot were broken up by the 82nd Airborne and 3rd Armored (with the help of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion) but elsewhere the front remained quiet.

For nine critical days the 517th RCT had served as a "fire brigade" of the southern flank of XVIII Airborne Corps. Enemy penetrations had been decisively defeated at Soy-Hotton and Manhay, the 2nd SS Panzer Division had been badly hurt, and the 560th Volks Grenadier Division had been crippled. Germany's last great gamble had run its course.

Both sides now waited for the Americans to make the next move.

Chapter VI

The Ardennes: Counterattack

The Attack from Trois Ponts

Early on New Year's Day the 517th RCT was attached to the 82nd Airborne and alerted to go into the attack. It was to relieve the front-line battalions of the 505th Parachute Infantry with one battalion that night. Further information was to be forthcoming later .

The 1st Battalion was selected to make the relief. While the troops began marching from Harre, Colonel Boyle and his company commanders moved by jeep to the 505th Regimental CP for briefing by Colonel Ekman and his staff.

The 505th held a two-mile sector on the left of the 82nd. Lt Col Vandervoort's 2nd Battalion was on the east near Trois Ponts, and Lt Col Keyser's 3rd on the west at Basse Bodeux. The 505th had been on this line since Christmas Day. It had been quiet with only intermittent mortar and artillery fire. Opposing the 505th were elements of the 62nd Volks Grenadier Division.

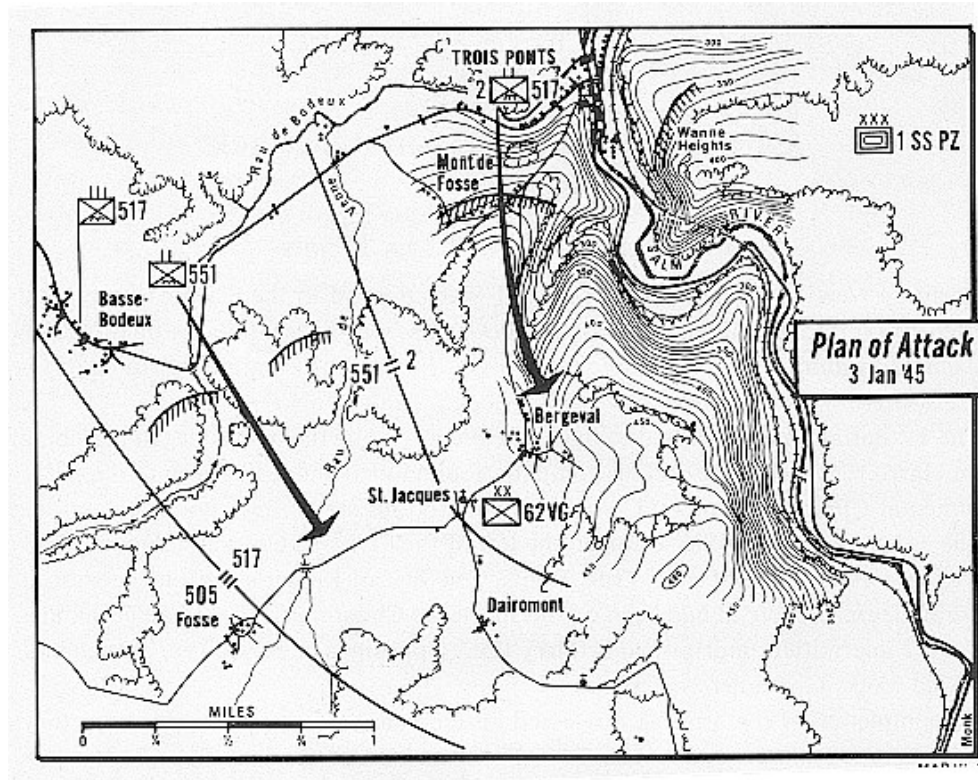
On completion of the briefing Boyle and his commanders toured the positions they were to take over, A Company near Trois Ponts and C Company at Basse Bodeux. A 517th platoon would relieve each 505th rifle company. Telephone wire, ammunition stocks, and mortar baseplates would remain in place.

The 1st Battalion arrived after dark. Guides led the platoons into place; patrols were sent to the front and flanks, communications checked, and reports rendered. By midnight the relief had been accomplished, apparently without enemy detection. The 505th moved to assembly areas and the 517th men settled into their newly-acquired foxholes.

Major Tom Cross had never completely recovered from his broken right leg, incurred in the jump into Southern France. When the RCT moved to Belgium Cross had been on duty at an XVIII Airborne Corps rest center in Paris. He borrowed

transportation, made his way to Belgium, and (after almost passing into German lines) found the 2nd Battalion in its blocking position near Mont Derrieux. The Battalion CP was in a farmhouse and smoke was curling cozily from the chimney.

Cross arrived immediately after movement orders had been received. Colonel Seitz told him to gather up an advance party and scout out an assembly area near Trois Ponts. He assembled Company guides in a courtyard behind the CP, but as he began briefing a high-velocity shell came through the building and exploded. One man was killed and all the others wounded, including Tom Cross -- this time in the left leg and head. All were evacuated and a new advance party was assembled and sent out.



Some considered Tom Cross the unluckiest man in the regiment -- others, the luckiest.

The 2nd Battalion vacated the building just before another barrage reduced it to rubble, and closed in its assembly area northwest of Trois Ponts after dark. Colonels Seitz and Vandervoort were old friends, and they exchanged information as 2/517 closed into its assembly area. Vandervoort told Seitz, "Dick, there's nothing out there. If I were going to stay here, I'd occupy that little village (Mont de Fosse) with a platoon."

Colonel Paxton's 3rd Battalion was relieved by elements of the 75th Infantry Division at Manhay beginning at twilight. The relief was completed by 1800, and the Battalion moved by truck to an assembly area north of Basse Bodeux.

Another Battalion was attached to the RCT for the attack. These were old friends,

the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion, which had come in on D-Day in Southern France and fought with the Airborne Task Force in the Maritime Alps. The 551st had moved to Belgium with the other XVIII Corps units, arriving on December 21st. After an initial attachment to the 30th Infantry Division the 551st had come under the control of the 82nd Airborne, staging a successful night raid into enemy territory at Noirfontaine on December 27th. The 551st was at Rahier, 5 or 6 miles northwest of Basse Bodeux, and would move into the attack from that location.

The RCT order was issued at 1400 January 2nd. The First Army was to attack at 0800, January 3rd, with VII Corps driving south to link up at Houffalize with the Third Army. The 82nd would protect the VII Corps left flank and clear the west bank of the Salm River.

The 517th, with the 551st attached, would attack on the extreme left of the 82nd, with the 505th Parachute Infantry on its right. On the left was a vacuum. The boundary between the 82nd Airborne and the 30th Infantry Divisions ran along the Ambleve

and Salm Rivers. The nearest troops of the 30th were at Stavelot, far to the east of the Ambleve. There was no physical contact between the 82nd and the 30th, and the 30th was not taking part in the January 3rd attack.*

* This was to become a source of trouble for the 517th, particularly the 2nd Battalion. General Ridgway had asked that the 30th take part in the attack but was turned down by the First Army.

The 517th would attack with the 551st on right and 2/517 on left, both battalions passing through positions held by 1/517. The 2nd Battalion's objectives were Trois Points west of the Salm, Mont de Fosse, and the west bank of the Salm in its zone. The 551st was to seize a series of numbered objectives and continue east to the Salm.

The 3rd Battalion would follow the 2nd to protect the regiment's exposed left (eastern) flank. The 1st Battalion, after being passed through, would revert to reserve and prepare to assist the others. ,

The 460th was in general support. An automatic weapons section of the 80th AAA A W Battalion was attached to each assault battalion, and a platoon of Company B, 628th Tank Destroyer Battalion, would follow the 551st under Regimental control.

The Battalions received the Regimental order in mid-afternoon, leaving a little over two hours for reconnaissance. Colonels Seitz and Joerg (commanding the 551st) took out reconnaissance parties, but a heavy snowstorm arose and little could be seen. Since the attack would begin soon after daylight, their knowledge of the ground would have to be based on map study.

The area was typical of the Ardennes, with steep wooded hills and swampy lowlands interspersed with open fields. In the dense pine woods were mazes of logging trails, shown on the map as roads. Many had become overgrown since the map survey was made and no longer existed.

The line of departure was the Trois Fonts--Basse Bodeux road. The assault battalions had to attack uphill across a wide expanse of open snow-covered fields to gain their first objectives. In the 551st zone, woods 400 to 500 yards southeast of Basse Bodeux would provide some concealment once the open field had been crossed, but in the 2nd Battalion zone there would be little or no cover for 1000 yards. Near the center of the Regimental zone Mont de Fosse, 440 meters high, dominated the entire area and provided observation all the way from Trois Pons to Basse Bodeux.

East of the Salm the terrain was threatening. Trois Fonts is split by the Salm River , with most of the built-up portion of the town west of the Salm. The west portion of the town was reportedly unoccupied, but the Germans held the far side of the river in strength. A few hundred yards east of the Salm the Wanne Heights rose abruptly to a height of 400 meters, overlooking the town and the valley to the west which 2/517 had to cross.

Both assault battalions would be under direct observation before they reached the line of departure, and could expect to come under fire from Mont de Fosse. The 2nd Battalion would also be under observation and fire from the Wanne Heights on its left flank.

In the path of 517th's advance were the 183rd and 190th Regiments of the 62nd Yolks Grenadier Division. About 150 to 200 Germans had been digging in at Mont de Fosse for five days, and the enemy was also dug in along the woodline southeast of Basse Bodeux. The Yolks Grenadiers were reported to be poorly trained, but they occupied commanding ground. Little training is required to pull a trigger .

Across the Salm were elements of the 1st SS Panzer Corps, with the 1st SS Panzer Division (minus), the 18th Volksgrenadier Division, and miscellaneous SS, Volksgrenadier, and Parachute units. The enemy east of the Salm was not going to be hit by the January 3rd attack, and would be free to reinforce the 62nd Volksgrenadiers anywhere west of the Salm at any time.*

* Little or none of this information was available to the attacking battalions.

Last -- and at least as important as terrain -- was the morale. factor. The Germans believed their own propaganda, which told them that they had scored a tremendous victory in the Ardennes. All they had to do was hang on, and the western Allies would sue for a negotiated peace.

Trois Pons was the hinge upon which the First Army attack would swing, the Germans were going to put up a stiff fight to keep the door open.

January 3rd dawned clear and bitterly cold. New-fallen snow had drifted against fences and hedgerows, eliminating much cover. The snow was now knee-deep. As the assault battalions approached the line of departure the 460th fired short

concentrations.*

* After the attack began the 460th was told that it would be limited to 500 rounds per day. This allotment was extended before darkness 3 January 1945.

The 551st came under mortar and artillery fire while forming behind the Trois Ponts--Basse Bodeux road. An artillery forward observer was killed and a 60mm mortar squad became casualties. This delayed their start, but at 0900 the 551st jumped off with a yell, two companies abreast. The left company, hit by flanking fire from Mont de Fosse, pressed on valiantly; the right company made somewhat better progress, and in an hour the 551st gained a foothold in the woods southeast of Basse Bodeux.

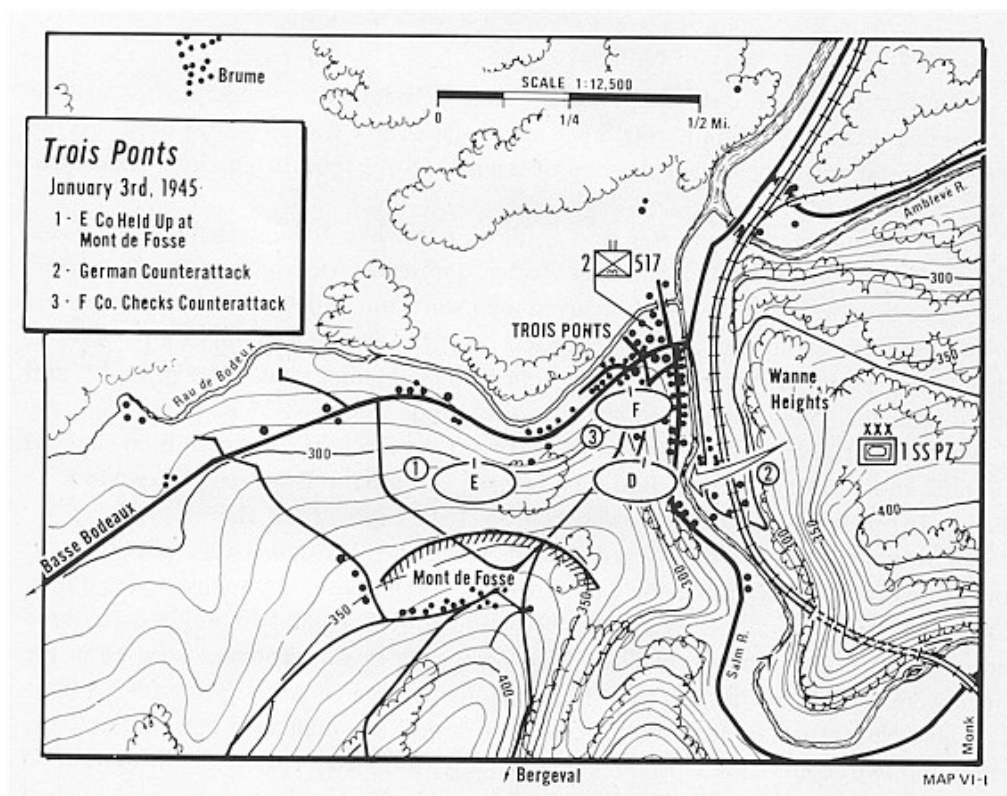
The 2nd Battalion crossed the line of departure promptly at 0800 with E on right, D on left, and F following D in Battalion reserve. Company E was to go for Mont de Fosse, D for Trois Ponts, and F was to protect the exposed left flank.

On Mont de Fosse 150-odd Volks Grenadiers watched E Company advance over the open snowfield and waited. The Germans -- outnumbering E Company -- were dug in around the farm buildings. When Newberry's men were within two hundred yards the enemy opened up with well-planned final protective fires. Troopers exposed in the open were hit by machine gun fire; those in defilade became targets for artillery, mortars, and Nebelwerfers. Lieutenant Joe Kisilwicz began to maneuver his platoon to the right, but two scouts were killed and he was badly wounded. Within a half-hour, 20 to 30 men were down including Captain Newberry. Unable to advance, E Company had no choice but to lie there and take it.

On the Battalion left D Company cleared Trois Ponts house-by-house, meeting only sporadic fire from east of the Salm. At 0900 D Company reported that it had seized its first objective.

Major General James M. Gavin, commanding the 82nd Airborne, arrived in the 517th area soon after the attack jumped off. At Basse Bodeux he was joined by Colonel Graves, and together they moved toward Trois Ponts. On the way they encountered Colonel Seitz with his command group. Colonel Seitz requested additional artillery support. General Gavin promised that it would be made available,* and left to return to Basse Bodeux.

* No additional artillery became available. (Letter, R.J. Seitz to author .)



On the Wanne Heights German observers watched the American attack move out across the Trois Ponts--Basse Bodeux road. Artillery was brought to bear, and a strong force was sent to counterattack across the Salm. The bridge had been blown, but the river was easily fordable. The Germans waded the Salm, took position on the west bank, and opened fire.

D Company, emerging from Trois Ponts into the open area to the south, was hit on left flank and rear by heavy machine gun fire. Company commander Carl Starkey and a dozen others were hit, and the Germans charged to overrun the Americans.

Captain John Lissner's F Company was close behind D. Lissner deployed his men quickly and opened fire. The Germans, caught on their own flank, halted and shifted some of their fire to F Company. Lissner and several others were wounded and Lieutenant George Giuchici took command.

The 460th hit Mont de Fosse with repeated 75mm concentrations, but the Germans were well dug in and the fire had little effect. In an effort to bring direct fire to bear upon the enemy positions, the attached Tank Destroyed platoon was brought into action. The leading vehicle ran over a Teller mine buried beneath the snow, and the others backed off to a safer location.

Colonel Seitz, grasping for any means to help E Company, decided to commit F Company in an envelopment against Mont de Fosse from the east. As Seitz began to radio instructions to F Company he learned of the counterattack that had just hit.

With a few runners, he moved across the Battalion front no easy thing under fire in the snow. He found Lissner wounded and out of action, many others wounded and dead, and George Giuchici engaged in a heavy firefight with the counterattacking force.

The Battalion was caught in a murderous cul-de-sac, under fire from front and flank. The enemy counterattack was finally halted, but for the rest of the day the Germans maintained a heavy volume of fire from Mont de Fosse, the Wanne Heights, and the west bank of the Salm. Over a hundred Americans lay dead, wounded, and dying in the snow.

All rifle company commanders and half the platoon leaders had become casualties. Through the afternoon the troopers lay in the freezing cold behind what little cover they could find. The slightest movement drew fire, and casualties continued to mount. Mercifully, darkness came early. At twilight evacuation of the wounded began. Carl Starkey, himself hit twice, directed the evacuation of his company's wounded and refused to leave until they had all been taken care of. His behavior was typical of the others.

The 1st Battalion had become Regimental reserve when the assault battalions passed through. As the reserve commander, Colonel Boyle had a vital interest in the progress of the attack. From his CP at Brume he had an unobstructed view of the entire area, and he watched as the 2nd Battalion was held up in front of Mont de Fosse. At 1200 Boyle told executive officer Major Donald Fraser to get A and B Companies ready to move, and headed for the Regimental CP at Basse Bodeux.

General Gavin was highly dissatisfied with the 517th's lack of progress.* Returning to the Regimental CP at Basse Bodeux, he lectured Colonel Graves and stabbed his finger at a map, pointing to St Jacques and Bergeval. "I want those towns by daylight tomorrow", he said and left.

* In "On to Berlin" General Gavin states that "the 517th seemed to have difficulty getting off its line of departure." This is true, and the reasons why are explained in the preceding pages:--enemy resistance was much stronger than had been reported, and the open left flank invited (and drew) a counterattack.

Colonel Graves turned to his staff and said, "Get Boyle." Bill Boyle was waiting outside the door. Together, Graves and Boyle studied the problem and its possible solutions. Boyle suggested that his Battalion should follow the 551st and strike obliquely for St Jacques--Bergeval, using the concealment provided by the woods. Graves recognized the merits of Boyle's plan, but he also wanted early action against Mont de Fosse. Finally he decided to have F Company, the 2nd Battalion reserve, tag along behind the 1st Battalion and peel off toward Mont de Fosse as soon as Boyle's men hit their objectives.

In the late afternoon B and C Companies assembled on the eastern outskirts of Basse Bodeux. The long-anticipated Christmas turkey had arrived and the troopers ate on the run. The turkey ration was based on the Battalion's strength before it had been committed with the 3rd Armored. There was more than enough to go around, but no time to enjoy it.

Company A was under fire on the hillside northwest of Trois Ponts and would join the Battalion later. With B, C, and part of Headquarters, the strength of Colonel Boyle's force was about 250. Company F had managed to disengage and withdraw and was at the rear of the column under Lieutenant Giuchici.

As darkness fell a guide arrived from the 551st and the column moved out. Although it was only a mile and a half, the move to St Jacques required five hours. In the darkness and dense underbrush it was found that the only way to keep the column

together was for each man to hang onto the equipment of the man in front. After several hours the guide reached the point where he had last seen the 551st. Now there was neither sound nor sight of it.

Boyle took a compass bearing and struck out to the east. Shadowy buildings appeared, and the artillery fired a marking round. Two or three tracked vehicles started their engines and began rumbling around. Bazooka men were called forward, and Captain Dean Robbins deployed B Company. One platoon went right in an encirclement while the others advanced straight ahead. Enemy soldiers forming in the street were cut down by a B company machine gunner.* Riflemen worked down the street firing and throwing grenades. In a half-hour the capture of St Jacques was complete and it was C Company's turn.

* A photograph of this scene was published in LIFE magazine under the caption "War in the West Goes on in the Snow." The article that appeared with the photo was totally fictional.

A newly-captured English-speaking prisoner said that Bergeval was held by only 15 Germans who wanted to surrender. Taking no chances, C Company maneuvered into position. Five German outguards were taken by surprise and killed.

After an artillery concentration the troopers waded out into the snow. An enemy automatic weapon opened up and the artillery concentration was repeated. The company charged, three platoons abreast, yelling and shooting from the hip. In a half-hour they worked to the far edge of the village, halted, and sent back detachments to finish off any enemy holdouts. One hundred and twenty-one Germans were captured including two officers -- a far cry from "fifteen." An additional twelve or fifteen had been killed and perhaps 20 escaped to the south. In the street in operating condition were two jeeps and a half-track, still bearing the markings of the unfortunate 106th Division.

As the Company command group entered a building in the center of the village a field telephone rang. It must have been the German command trying to find out what was going on. Unfortunately, no one at hand spoke German, and after a few futile "Allo?" 's the party on the other end impolitely hung up.

Colonel Boyle's night flanking attack had succeeded beyond all expectations. At a cost of two casualties to the attacking force, St Jacques and Bergeval had been seized, 150 Germans captured, and 30 to 40 killed.**

** It must be borne in mind that the attack would not have been possible without the hard fighting of the 551st and 2/517, which created the gap and held the enemy in place while Boyle's men hit from the flank.

As C Company started for Bergeval, Lieutenant George Giuchici led F Company from the woods and turned north. Just before daylight the Company hit Mont de Fosse from the rear. German resistance fell apart. A few enemy escaped, some were killed or captured, but most laid low-. They had shown no mercy to the Americans and they expected none. It was safer to remain in hiding until the riflemen had passed, and try to surrender later as the opportunity arose.***

*** Later that day 75 Germans came out of hiding at Mont de Fosse and surrendered to the 460th's Major Kinzer and Regimental S-2 Lieutenant Neiler, who happened to be passing through the area.

Suffering heavy losses, the 551st had advanced during the afternoon of January 3rd to an area southwest of St Jacques. Along a sunken road leading to Fosse they met strong resistance and were hit by self-propelled guns. The Battalion spent the freezing night between St Jacques and Fosse, and on the morning of the 4th began to advance southeast toward Dairomont.

At daylight on the 4th the 2nd Battalion reorganized and moved to the high ground overlooking the Salm, where they had a clear shot at isolated groups of Germans trying to escape along a road bordering the river. The 3rd Battalion followed the 2nd to protect the still-exposed left flank against any renewed counterattack.

Although their first line had been cracked the Germans were far from finished in the Salm River sector. In addition to the counterattack at Trois Ponts, elements of the 18th Yolk Grenadiers had been sent to reinforce the 62nd. On the night of 3/4 January a detachment of the 5th Parachute Regiment -- strength about 200 -- crossed the Salm and moved west to take up a defensive position east of Bergeval.

During the daylight hours of January 4th, B and C Companies tried to get some rest. At about 0700 the Germans launched a small counterattack on B Company at St Jacques, using self-propelled guns accompanied by infantry. This was easily beaten off. For the rest of the day the Germans brought mortar and self-propelled gun fire down upon the area, but made no further attempt to advance. In mid-afternoon A Company and the balance of the Battalion arrived. The Aid Station and CP opened for business and ammunition was distributed.

Regiment urged Colonel Boyle to move to the high ground overlooking Bergeval, telling him that the 551st and 2/517 were already there. Despite this pressure Boyle decided to wait for darkness to make the move.

A broad stretch of open ground lay between Bergeval and the ridge. Moving across open ground in daylight had proven disastrous in too many recent instances. There was still no radio contact with the 551st or 2/517, and no accurate fix on their locations.

An hour before dark a long column of troops was sighted about a half-mile away on the ridge east of Bergeval. In the fading twilight it was impossible to tell whether they were American or German. They could not be contacted by radio, but this was not unusual. The best guess was that they were part of the 2nd Battalion moving south from Trois Ponts.*

* This may have been the reduced-strength 5th Parachute Regiment, or part of the 62nd VG falling back from the Mont de Fosse area.

At 1900 the Battalion began moving to the ridge, A Company leading, followed by the Command Group and C Company.** In the deep snow the move took several hours. At about 2200 A Company arrived in position. Colonel Boyle ordered C to pass through A, and Lieutenant Howard Bacon with a patrol to contact the 551st on the south.

** B Company was left to secure the St Jacques-Bergeval area.

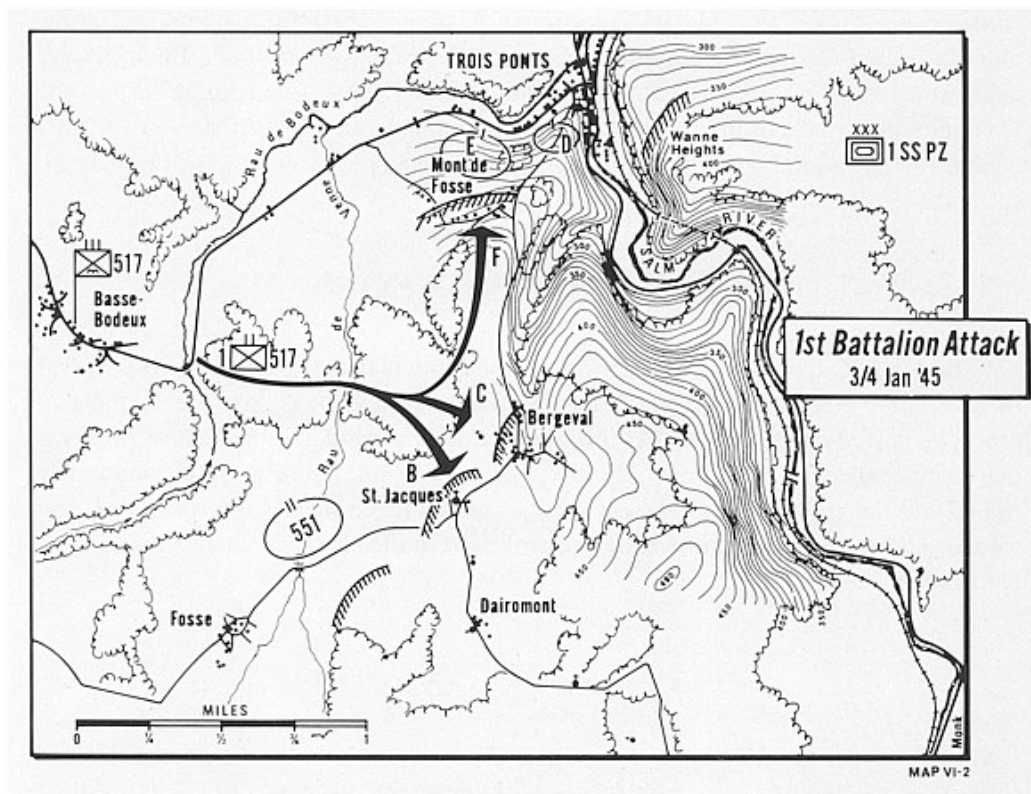
In a half-hour Bacon returned with his patrol. He had gone a half-mile south and found the area empty: no 551st, no Germans. Deciding to make a personal check, Boyle retraced the route with Bacon and the patrol. It was as reported. His right flank was wide open.

Meanwhile C Company had passed through A, moved north for two hundred yards, and discovered German communication wire along an east-west trail. Engines were heard starting up on the west, and a German soldier pulling a sled stumbled into the Company and was captured. It all seemed to indicate an enemy force on the left, behind the Battalion. The Company formed a perimeter and sent a patrol west to investigate.

With A and C Companies in position, Colonel Boyle decided to return to Bergeval to coordinate efforts to find the 551st. With Intelligence NCO Bob Steele and two others he moved down the hill. As they reached level ground and headed for Bergeval they were challenged in German and dove for the ground. A burst of automatic fire ripped into the group from a few feet away. Colonel Boyle was hit three times. A few seconds later a tremendous racket of fire broke out to the northeast, in the direction of C Company.

Moving down the trail to the west, the C Company patrol found a manned 76mm antitank gun. Behind it was a half-track with the engine running. PFC Herb Loken fired a bazooka. The gun and half-track were put out of action, and the crew killed or wounded. Another half-track started up and rumbled east, passing through the entire company. Not a shot was fired. Too startled to react, the troopers were thrown off-balance by a large white American star on the side of the half-track. An MG 42 opened up from fifty feet away, ending all doubt. Five men were hit. A second 76mm gun joined in, firing at almost point-blank range. C Company responded with fire and dug in furiously, pushing aside the snow and hacking at the frozen ground. Battalion was called by radio, without success. PFC Bill Quinn was sent to the Company command group to act as a runner.

Quinn was told to go to Bergeval and tell Colonel Boyle that the Company had run into a large enemy force on the left flank. If possible, Battalion should send another company around to hit the enemy from the east. Quinn crawled off toward Bergeval. Unknown to C Company, he was captured.



Bob Steele leaned over his prostrate Battalion commander. Colonel Boyle, badly hit and going into shock, said, "Go to Bergeval and tell Major Fraser C Company is in a big fight on the ridge."

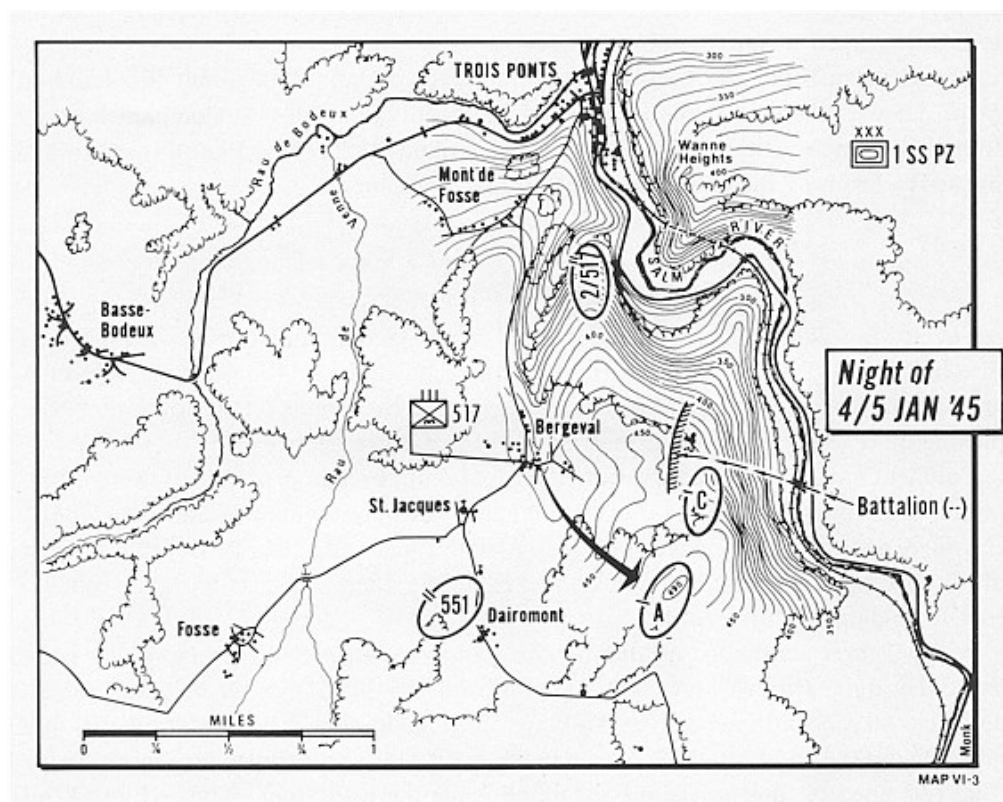
"I'm not leaving without you," Steele replied.

"I gave you an order. Leave me and go on to Bergeval."

Steele thought quickly. Boyle was far too big to carry. The only way to move him was going to be to get him angry, to injure his pride.

"Your trouble, Colonel," he said, "Is that you don't have the guts to help yourself."

An enraged Boyle came to life. No one talked to him like that. He struggled to his feet, and leaning on Steele, hobbled into Bergeval.



The fight on the ridge continued throughout the night, becoming steadily more violent. Ranging in by sound, Artillery Observer Henry Covington brought artillery fire within fifty yards of the American position. The Germans responded with mortar, artillery, and Nebelwerfer fire. One round caught a 3rd Battalion platoon in Bergeval, resulting in 17 casualties.

The Germans began a series of efforts to break out to the east. C Company had run out of some types of ammunition and was low on others. Only one machine gun out of nine was still operating -- the others were frozen up or out of ammunition. Privates Adamak and Ubell had kept their gun in operation by urinating upon it. They dragged the machine gun across the company perimeter to break up the last German attack.

Just before dawn Private Charles Tucker guided an A Company platoon into position. The A Company men hit the Germans from the east. Enemy fire dwindled and died out. Tucker went to bring up more men, but when they arrived the fight was over.

As the morning fog lifted details of the area became clear. Two shattered 76mm guns and wrecked half-track were fifty feet away. German dead were scattered over an acre of ground. Thirteen Germans emerged from a bunker to surrender, but the rest had escaped by circling north and east.

The German force had been a reduced-strength battalion* of about two hundred men. They left behind forty to fifty dead and twenty prisoners. C Company had lost twenty-four men including the Company commander. The 3rd Platoon, which had borne the brunt of the action, was reduced to seven men.

* This fight is entered in XVIII Corps and 82nd Airborne records as a 'strong counterattack' but is not mentioned in 517th S-2 and S-3 journals (probably because the Headquarters was in movement when it occurred.) It would have been a great deal worse if 517th troops had to root out this dug-in force during daylight.

The 3rd Battalion had closed in the Bergeval--St Jacques area during the night. At first light the 3rd moved to assist the 1st, taking positions on the ridge on right of A and C Companies. Colonel Paxton's men combed the woods to the south and east, picking up a few stragglers but meeting no organized resistance.

Colonel Graves now placed Major Bob McMahon, executive officer of the 3rd Battalion, in command of the 1st. McMahon had a warm, outgoing disposition; a USMA classmate of Boyle, he thought of his men first and was well liked. Boyle left a big pair of boots to fill, but McMahon quickly picked up the traces. The 1st Battalion remained a formidable fighting force. With all three Battalions on the high ground west of the Salm the front was comparatively quiet for two days. On January 6th the 30th Division made a limited-objective attack south across the Ambleve River, gaining a few thousand yards and pinching out the 2nd Battalion. Next day the 3rd Battalion was given responsibility for what remained of the front along the Salm, while the RCT (minus) moved into 82nd Airborne Division reserve near Arbrefontaine. Regimental Headquarters moved just outside of

the village. The 1st Battalion closed in an assembly area to the north, and 2nd Battalion went to Goronne, three miles southeast. The 460th remained in support of the 3rd Battalion.

The 1st and 2nd Battalions got a little rest, although the cold continued unabated and there were frequent heavy snows. Medical inspections were held. To no one's surprise, it was found that many men who had been unable to remove their boots for over a week were suffering from severe exposure and frostbite. Over a hundred cold casualties were evacuated, reducing rifle company strengths to an average of eighty to ninety men -- from an average of 150 that had begun the Ardennes campaign.

The 504th Parachute Infantry had now closed along the Salm and was given responsibility for the entire sector, picking up 3/517 and the 551st in place. The only enemy force remaining west of the Salm was at Rochelival, a tiny village close to the river bank one and a half miles southeast of Bergeval. The 551st was given the job of cleaning out this pocket.

On January 7th the 551st attacked. Tree-bursting enemy artillery shells took a heavy toll, killing the widely-admired Battalion Commander Lt Colonel Wood Joerg. The left assault company was decimated by flanking machine gun fire while crossing an open field. Fighting almost to the last man, the 551st seized the village, killing an estimated 50 Germans and capturing over 200. Only 100 to 150 men remained out of over 600 that had crossed the line of departure four days before. It was a tragic finish for a fine Battalion.*

<p>* Two weeks later the 551st was deactivated and surviving members were sent as individual replacements to other airborne units.</p>
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On January 9th Company G was released from Corps Headquarters security detail and began the long march to rejoin its parent unit. On the same day the 3rd Battalion, circling around the 551st, closed on the bank of the Salm at Petit-Halleux. The area was infested with "bouncing Betty" anti-personnel mines which popped out of the ground when stepped on. They were then supposed to explode at waist height; but, apparently due to the cold, they failed to detonate. Nevertheless, they were a nerve-racking nuisance.

That night advance details of the 75th Infantry Division arrived to make arrangements for relieving the 82nd Airborne in the area. It appeared that at some time in the near future the 75th was going to attack east across the Salm. To get them off to a good start, 3/517, under direction of the 504th, crossed the Salm and seized Grand Halleux on January 10th, meeting only isolated sniper fire. By dark the 3rd Battalion had secured defensive ground around the town and was patrolling east and north.

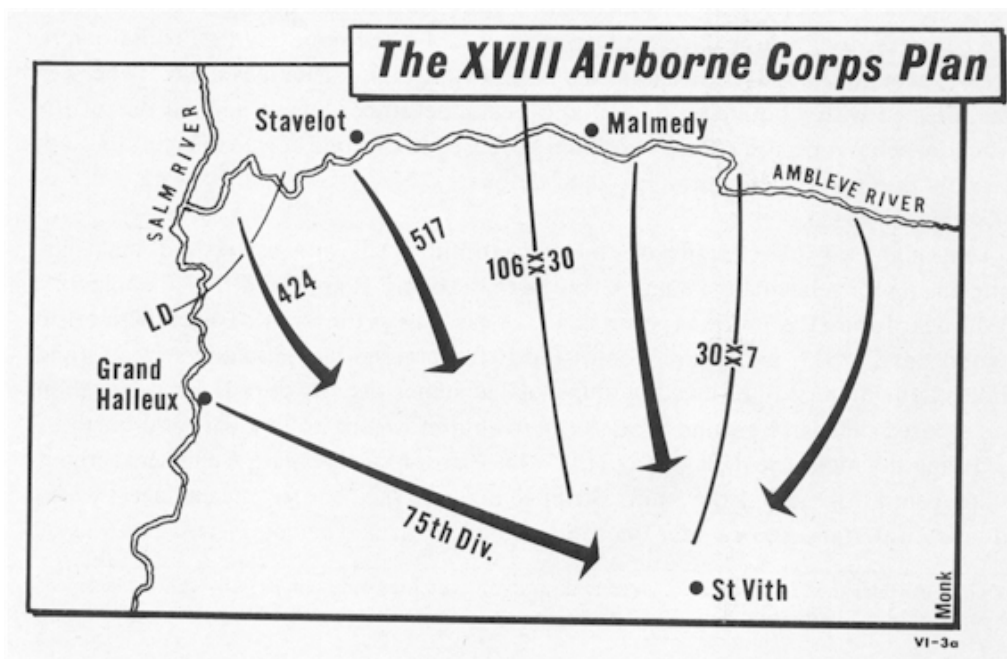
During the night Lieutenant Ray Hild's 1st Platoon of the 596th Engineers threw a trestle-bent bridge across the Salm. Stripped down to their shorts, the engineers worked in icy water and snow under intermittent mortar fire. The completed span was 60 feet long and 5 feet wide, allowing supply and evacuation jeeps to cross the river. By daylight a built-to-order bridgehead existed, ready for the 75th to take over.

On the 'other side of the hill' things were not looking quite as promising as they had a week before, Hitler's reaction to news of the January 3rd attack was "the originally planned operation (seizure of Antwerp) is no longer promising of success."

As the American First and Third Armies grew closer to link-up at Houffalize, the Fuehrer directed the withdrawal of Dietrich's Sixth SS Panzer Army. The SS began to withdraw on January 9th and were gone by the 22nd, leaving the regular Wehrmacht and Volksgrenadiers to fight the battle. This did not help the morale of the ordinary German soldier.

The Drive for St Vith

With the German penetration about to be cut off at its waist at Houffalize, First Army's next effort was to be the recapture of the important road junction of St Vith. The job was given to General Ridgway's XVIII Airborne Corps. Rather than a plodding advance directly southeast, Ridgway saw an opportunity for two successive envelopments.



The first was to be launched on January 13th. The 106th Infantry Division would attack from the corner formed by the juncture of the Salm and Ambleve Rivers, while the 30th Infantry Division would move south from Malmedy. Two days later the 75th Infantry Division would attack east from Grand Halleux. Hopefully, a swift advance by the 75th and the 30th would form the jaws of a giant pincers, trapping the two German Divisions estimated to be in the area.

When conditions seemed right the second envelopment would begin. The 7th Armored Division would attack through ground to be seized by V Corps in the northeast, swinging southwest to meet the 30th at St Vith.

The 517th RCT had played an important part in creating the opportunity for the first envelopment by clearing much of the west bank of the Salm and seizing the Grand Halleux bridgehead. Now RCT elements were to take part both in the holding attack and the 7th Armored's drive for St Vith.

Colonel Graves received his orders at Arbrefontaine on January 11th. The RCT (less 2nd Battalion, attached to the 7th Armored Division) was attached to the 106th Infantry Division. With a few staff officers and subordinate commanders Colonel Graves reported to the Headquarters of the 106th at Francorchamps.

The 106th had been one of the two infantry divisions hit by the initial German attack on December 15/16th. Of its three infantry regiments only one (the 424th) had survived, but the Division command structure and its artillery, engineers, and logistical services were largely intact. To restore morale it had to be used in an attack that could not fail.

The immediate job was to relieve the 112th Infantry* at Stavelot and along the northern bank of the Ambleve. This was accomplished by the 1st Battalion during the night of January 11/12th. The 460th moved into firing positions north of Stavelot and the RCT CP opened in the town. On the 12th the 3rd Battalion, having been relieved by elements of the 75th Division at Grand Halleux, closed in an assembly area north of Stavelot.

* The 112th was part of the other Division caught in the initial German attack, the 28th. The 112th had been cut off from its parent unit, but now that First and Third Armies were about to meet it was being sent back to the 28th.

While the 3rd Battalion was closing in Colonel Graves studied the situation and the terrain. The 106th was to attack with the 424th and 517th abreast at 0800 on January 13th to seize a line running from Spineux, north of Grand Halleux, to Poteaux, eight miles south of Malmedy. On right the 424th was to seize Henumont, Coulee, and Logbierme. The 517th (less 2nd Battalion) on left was to cross the Ambleve and advance south to Poteaux, maintaining contact with the 424th on right and the 30th Infantry Division on left.

The terrain was similar to that over which the 517th had attacked ten days before at Trois Ponts. Once more the Germans held high ground with good observation on the far side of an open valley. This time, even worse than Trois Ponts, there was a river to be crossed. Again, an 0800 H-Hour would allow the Germans to go to work while the assault was just beginning.

Colonel Graves decided to ignore the 0800 H-Hour. This time he would get troops across the river during darkness and on the high ground before daylight.

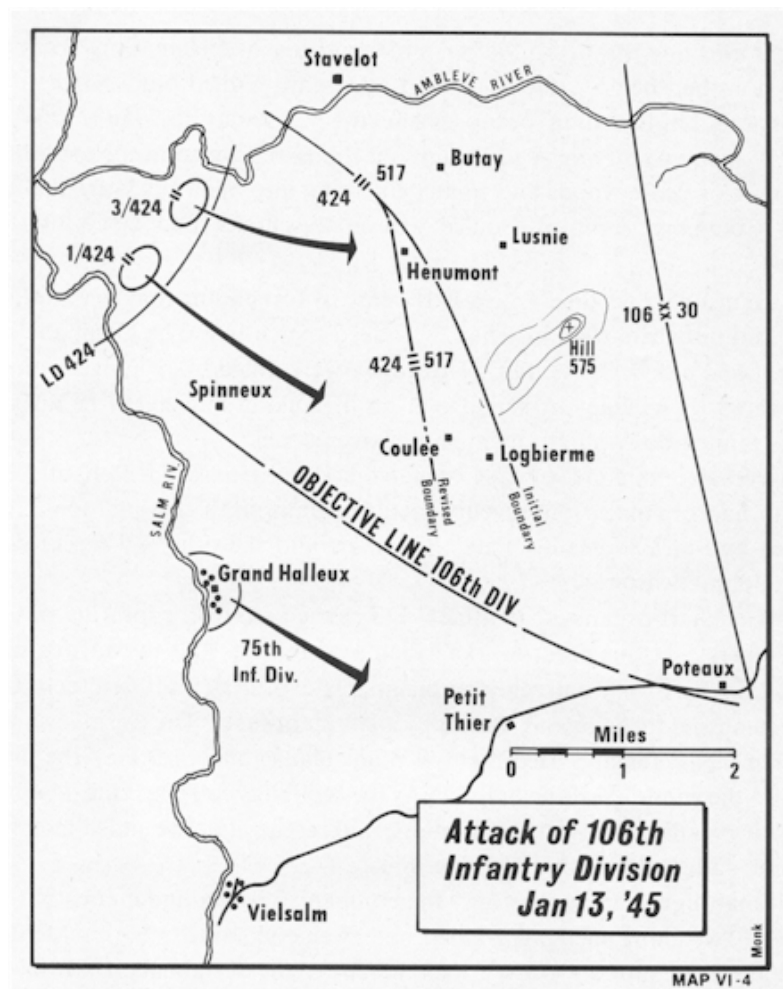
Soon after dark a n Company patrol crossed the Ambleve in a rubber boat. Finding no enemy on the far side, they radioed Battalion; the 596th Engineers threw a footbridge* across the river and a B Company platoon went over to link up with the patrol. The rest of B Company followed, moving through the southern part of Stavelot, outposting the far edge, and capturing an enemy patrol that stumbled into the town.

* Previously constructed by the 106th Divisional Engineers.

Long before daylight the 3rd Battalion filed across the footbridge and passed through B Company's outpost screen. By 0730 G Company had secured Butay, two miles south of Stavelot. H Company passed through G and headed for Lusnie, the next objective. At the scheduled H-Hour of 0800 the entire 3rd Battalion was well across the Ambleve and far south of Stavelot, and by 0900 the Engineers had thrown a treadway bridge for vehicular traffic across the river .

It was a smooth, swift, professional performance, one of the best in the Combat Team's history. The Germans were caught short and did not begin to react until mid-morning.

On right of the 517th the 424th attacked with two battalions abreast, 1/ 424th on right and 3/424 on left. Since the 30th Division had cleaned out the corner at the juncture of the Salm and Ambleve, the 424th did not have to contend with a river crossing. Lacking the bitter experience of 517, the 424th jumped off at 0800. The 1st Battalion was to drive for Coulee and the 3rd for Henumont. As 1/424 approached Coulee it was forced back by a counterattack on its right flank, and 3/424 was held up a thousand yards west of Henumont.



In the 517th zone H Company reached Lusnie at 1000 but came under heavy machine gun, mortar, and artillery fire. The battalion backed off and called for artillery. After several well-placed concentrations they resumed the advance and seized Lusnie without further difficulty. I Company then moved forward and seized the final objective for the day, a densely-wooded

575-meter high hill mass where "Croix Collin" is shown on the map. Before dark the 3rd Battalion was on all assigned objectives, far ahead of the 424th and in contact with the 30th Division on left.

During the night of January 13/14th General Perrin, commanding the 106th, shifted the boundary between 424 and 517 to the west, assigning Henumont, Coulee, and Logbierme to the 517th. With this added responsibility Graves had no choice but to commit the 1st Battalion, leaving him no reserve. Perrin promised a battalion of the 424th would be made available if needed.

Early next morning Major McMahon's men approached Henumont from the east. The enemy that had held up the 424th had apparently pulled out. After an artillery preparation the 1st Battalion occupied the town without resistance, taking three prisoners. Leaving Company A in Henumont the Battalion continued south, passing through a mile of dense woods and finally emerging into open fields gradually sloping uphill. B Company occupied Coulee without resistance and C continued on to Logbierme.

PFC Ed Johnson writes that "a sixth sense of foreboding told us that this was all wrong and our fears were justified." Indeed they were. The Company suddenly found that it had a bear by the tail. Three men were killed by rifle fire as the leading platoon entered the village. A squad sent on a flanking movement to flush out the snipers was pinned down in an open, snow-covered field.

After Bergeval command of C Company had passed to Lieutenant "Mickey" Marks, who had organized the seventy men remaining into two platoons. One was commanded by Staff Sergeant "Pete" Lockhart and the other by recently-assigned Lieutenant John Gleason.

Sergeant Lockhart organized an attack that carried a block, capturing three houses and 25 prisoners. At this point Marks called a temporary halt to wait for nightfall.

After dark Lockhart's platoon renewed the attack, capturing another block. Gleason's platoon then passed through and was hit by a counterattack. The Germans brought up two self-propelled guns and used them at point-blank range, sticking the muzzles of the guns into the windows of the houses. As the buildings collapsed the men fell back. Pete Lockhart* gallantly went forward alone and rescued two wounded men who were pinned under fallen rafters in a burning house.

* Later battlefield-commissioned.

Through that night and another day the company held on under constant shell fire and sniping. Two more men were killed and twelve wounded. Major McMahon arranged for tanks to support a new attack on the night of January 14/15th, but they were not needed. After dark the company launched an attack with both platoons abreast, yelling and "talking it up" like a football team. Before daylight Logbierme had been secured at a final cost of 17 casualties.

The Combat Team continued south against occasional light resistance. The 1st Battalion set up a road block a mile east of Petit Thier, on the east-west road from Vielsalm to St Vith, capturing a group of enemy which wandered into it. Further east, the 3rd Battalion set up a similar block at Poteaux. Enemy fire on the Poteaux block was reduced after a 3rd Battalion patrol followed an enemy wire line to an OP and destroyed it.

During the 3rd Battalion's advance Colonel Paxton passed a field in which a cow, wounded by artillery fire, was suffering badly. He put the animal out of its misery with his .45. Battalion units following helped themselves to fresh meat, and that night many men found steak a refreshing change from the despised K rations.*

* This is the official version.

The 460th displaced to Logbierme and the 596th attacked the problem of clearing mines and snow from the roads. The Engineers had managed to "liberate" an ancient civilian snowplow with a heavy blade. Although it was almost impervious to Teller, mines, the driver had some exciting moments.

The regiment had now reached the limits of the prescribed advance. Patrol and out-post activities continued while the troopers waited for the 75th Infantry Division to pass across their front.

The 75th Infantry Division was proving to be a hapless, hard-luck outfit. It had been formed late in the war when the United States was reaching the bottom of the manpower barrel. Its ranks were filled in large part with disgruntled ex-ASTP** students, former Aviation cadets, and others who had been in programs that became surplus to the Army's needs. They had arrived in Europe expecting occupation duty, but instead were thrown into the crucible of the Ardennes.

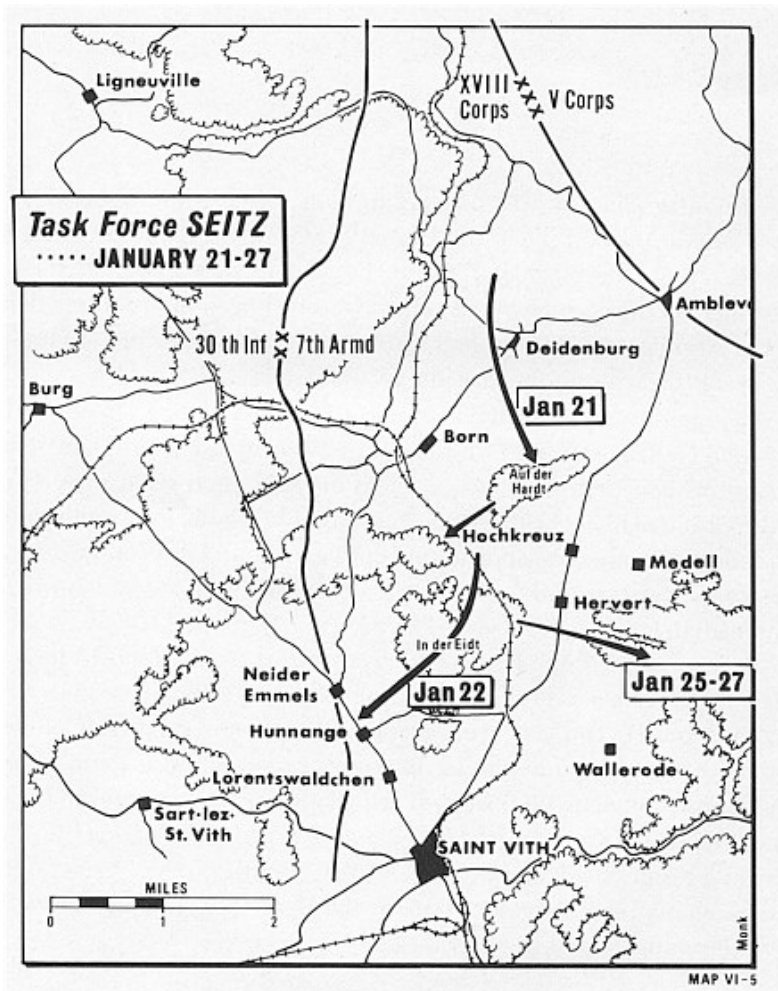
**** ASTP: Army Specialized Training Program, in which high-IQ types continued college training while in the Army.**

Although its regiments had seen action with the 3rd Armored Division, the attack east from Grand Halleux was the 75th's first commitment as a Division in offensive action. Great pains had been taken to get them off to a good start, including 3/517's seizure of the Grand Halleux bridgehead. The Division was magnificently equipped by airborne standards. Ample transportation kept bedrolls and hot food forward; the infantrymen wore overshoes and overcoats, and tanks and 155mm howitzers were available immediately if needed.

Despite these advantages the Division's advance east from Grand Halleux was slow and halting. It was January 17th before elements of the 75th appeared in front of the 517th, having required two days to gain a little over three miles. Colonel Graves watched some of the 75th go by the 1st Battalion's road block at Petit Thier. The infantrymen had lost contact with their own artillery, and Graves arranged for their sup- port through the 460th .

Primarily as a result of the slow advance of the 75th, the jaws of General Ridgway's trap closed on empty real estate. The bulk of the German XIII Corps of two divisions escaped to fight another day.

As the 75th Division passed across its front the 106th Division was "pinched out" and the 517th was attached in place to the 30th Infantry Division on left. No shifts in location were required. After a few days of patrolling and methodical advance for another thousand yards, the 517th in turn was pinched out. On January 21st the RCT was released from the 30th and moved to Stavelot for a period of badly-needed rest and rehabilitation.



While most of the RCT joined the 106th Division, the 2nd Battalion moved from Goronne to Neuville, 5 miles northwest of Malmedy. The 7th Armored Division was forming up for the final stage of the St Vith offensive. Colonel Seitz and his men were assigned to Combat Command A at Polleux.

In organization and method of operation the armored divisions differed considerably from the infantry and airborne divisions. "Combat Commands" rather than regiments directed the tactical action. The make-up of a Combat Command varied,

depending on the enemy and terrain. The Combat Commands were assigned infantry and armor units, from which battalion-sized "task-forces" were formed, designated by the names of their commanders. Thus 2/517, reinforced with Company B, 17th Tank Battalion and a platoon of Tank Destroyers, became "Task Force Seitz." For the St Vith attack the other components of CCA were Task Forces Wemple and Rhea.

For most of a week Colonel Seitz and his Task Force waited for the attack to jump off. The time was put to good advantage. The tankers and paratroopers became acquainted with each other and worked out tank-infantry communications procedures.

On January 15th the 1st Infantry Division attacked east to seize the approaches of the "Ondenval Defile." This was a stretch of open, gently rolling country which began at Ondenval, northwest of Ambleve, and extended southwest to form a natural corridor leading to St Vith. The 1st Division's attack was slowed by snow, cold, and stubborn enemy resistance. Although it had been hoped to gain sufficient ground to begin the attack at Ambleve in a wide envelopment, it was decided on January 19th to commit the 7th Armored on the left flank of the 30th Infantry Division.

The Division was to attack with CCA on left and CCB on right. Within CCA, Task Forces Wemple and Rhea were to seize Deidenberg and Born. Once they had been taken, Task Force Seitz was to pass through Deidenburg to capture the Auf der Hardt woods, a mile to the south.

Wemple and Rhea moved out on January 20th and Colonel Seitz' force closed in an assembly area in woods north of Am Kreuz. Deidenburg was taken without difficulty, but TF Rhea was held up by heavy resistance at Born. Colonel Seitz was given a choice of attacking by day or night, and chose darkness because of the open, coverless terrain.

At 0400 on January 21st 2/517 crossed the line of departure on foot. Company D was on right, E on left, and F in reserve; the tanks and TD's were to come up at daylight. Overcoats were left behind. It was bitterly cold and snowing. Loaded down with weapons and ammunition, each man had to break his own trail and plod a mile in darkness through the thigh-deep snow.

An enemy outpost screen at the edge of the woods was caught by surprise and eliminated at a cost of 6 killed and 30 wounded. 15 Germans were taken prisoner. At daylight the tanks and TD's crossed the field and joined the troopers. The Germans appeared to be disorganized but fought stubbornly. Company E engaged a group of about 80 around some log huts. Though surprised and surrounded, the Germans refused to surrender. After a sharp fire fight E Company cleaned out the locality. About 50 Germans were killed but the rest managed to escape.

By 1000 the Task Force had completed passage of the woods and formed defensive positions on the southern edge. On reaching its objective, D Company sent a patrol under Lieutenant Minard three-quarters of a mile southeast to the village of Hochkreuz. This turned out to be one of the most successful combat patrols in the entire history of the 517th RCT. The troopers surprised and captured two Mark V tanks intact. The crews were taken prisoner and the tanks set afire with white phosphorous grenades. Soon afterward an enemy armored column was spotted coming from Medell, a half-mile east. Minard's men set up an ambush, knocking out four SP guns with bazooka fire. While this was going on the captured German tankers suddenly turned on their guards in a move to escape. One American was killed and all the enemy tankers were shot down. A strong enemy force of infantry accompanied by a tank was then seen approaching from Hervert, a half-mile to the south. The patrol decided that its mission had been accomplished, and withdrew to its parent company. Artillery was placed on the approaching enemy group and no further threat arose in that direction.

Through the day Task Force Seitz held the Auf der Hardt woods under heavy mortar, artillery, and Nebelwerfer fire. Several groups of Germans who had been bypassed were discovered and rooted out. By the end of the day an estimated 150 enemy had been killed.

The village of Born, a mile northwest, still had not been taken. At 1500 F Company was detailed to join a tank company for an attack on Born, but by the time they were ready resistance ceased. CCA had acquired information that the group at Born had been part of Kampfgruppe Peiper, responsible for the Malmedy massacre. Special effort was to be made to prevent their escape. Colonel Seitz was informed that elements of the 508th Parachute Infantry* would take over the woods. On completion of the relief his force was to move southwest to block exit from Born. The 508th made the relief on schedule. Soon after midnight TF Seitz was in its new positions.

* Temporarily attached to 7th Armored.
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While the shift southwest was being made, Colonel Seitz was given his mission for the following day. His Task Force was to lead the CCA attack to the south, clear the In Der Eidt woods, and close in a forward assembly area prepared to continue the attack to the village of Hunnange, a mile northwest of St Vith. Company D would ride the tanks and eighteen half-tracks would be provided for Companies E and F.

Due to artillery fire the half-tracks were slow in assembling and the move began late. At 0930 company D, tank-borne, rolled out followed by the TD platoon and E and F Companies. The column met trouble crossing a stream just north of the In Der Eidt woods. The tanks and TD's crossed successfully, but the half-tracks bogged down. E and F companies dismounted and covered the remaining two miles on foot, under artillery and occasional sniper fire. By 1500 Task Force Seitz had led CCA through the woods and closed in attack position a mile northwest of Hunnange.

Hunnange was bisected by a northeast-southwest road. The plan was for TF Wemple, on left, to take the village south of the road and TF Seitz the portion to the north. TF Rhea would protect the CC left rear, and TF Beatty on right would seize Neider Emmels, just northwest of Hunnange.

Company D was to ride on the tanks, dismounting only if forced to by enemy fire. F Company was to follow on foot, and E Company would remain in reserve with one tank platoon.

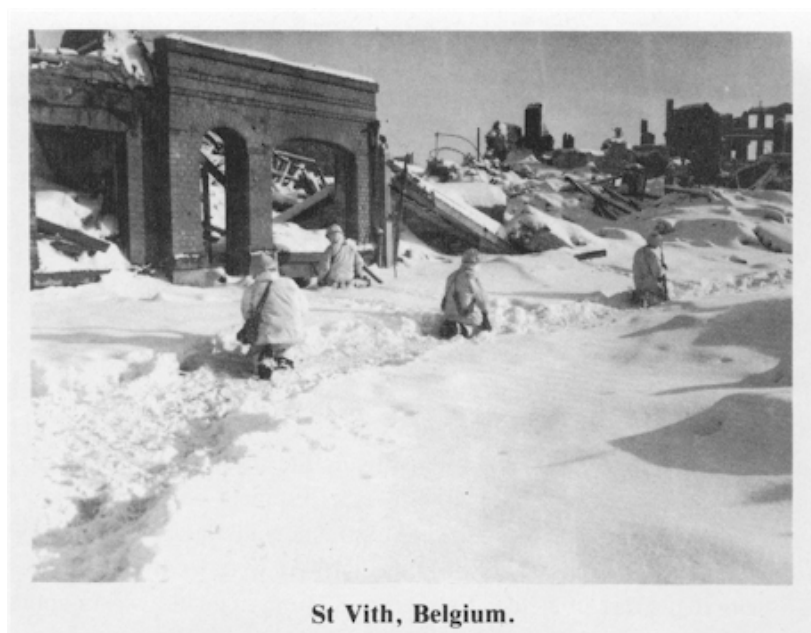
At 1700 TOT concentrations were fired on Hunnange and the attack moved out. Paratroopers and tanks make an unbeatable combination; for once Colonel Seitz' men had something more than rifles to work with. It was a wild ride. The tanks opened up on the move with cannon and machine guns, while the troopers fired the .50 calibers from the decks. Some enemy fire came from Neider Emmels, and several tanks turned in that direction. As the tanks closed in on Hunnange and Neider Emmels they came under scattered small arms and artillery fire; twelve men were wounded and one killed. By dark TF Seitz had overrun Neider Emmels and Hunnange and was in contact with TF Wemple on left. F Company arrived on foot, and joined D company in a house-by-house search, rooting small groups of terrified Germans out of cellars. Three enemy SP guns were destroyed and one was captured intact. 125 prisoners were taken, and an unknown number of Germans killed.

Colonel Seitz' men took up defensive positions facing south and southwest. A road block was set up at Lorentswaldchen, a half-mile southeast. During darkness reconnaissance patrols went into the outskirts of St Vith. Artillery and mortar fire continued through the night.

At daylight orders were received to reorganize and obtain as much rest as possible. Platoons were shifted and re-oriented to face south and east. No orders were necessary with respect to rest. The troops had been continually on the go for 54 hours and were approaching exhaustion. A supply road to Born was opened, prisoners and wounded evacuated, and food and ammunition brought forward. Artillery and mortar fire continued to come in, and three ME-109's made two strafing runs without causing any damage.

At 1400 on January 23rd CCB, with TF Rhea attached, passed through TF Seitz and completed the capture of St Vith.* It was exactly one month since the 7th Armored had been forced to give up the town after a gallant seven-day stand. The 10-day XVIII Airborne Corps offensive had now taken its final objective, closing out the only major route of withdrawal left to the German forces. Although the 7th Armored now held St Vith, its eastern flank was long and vulnerable because the road to Ambleve remained in enemy hands. On January 24th orders were given for an attack next day to clear the St Vith-Ambleve road.

<p>* CCA and TF Seitz could easily have gone on to capture St Vith, but that "honor" was reserved by 7th Armored Division Headquarters for CCB and Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke who had played a critical role in the defense of the town.</p>



St Vith, Belgium.

The attack was to be made by CCA and the newly-attached 424th RCT. The 424th on left would go for Medell at 0700, and at 1000 CCA would jump off with TF's Rhea, Griffin, and Seitz abreast. The attached armor was withdrawn from TF Seitz; 2/517 was on its own for this effort.

At 0600 January 25th the Battalion moved out for its attack position, two miles northeast at the edge of the In Der Eide woods. The edge of the woods was the line of departure. From there Colonel Sietz' men had to cross more than a mile of open ground to their objective, a wooded hill mass. Halfway to the objective the St Vith-Ambleve road ran across the Battalion front.

A smoke screen had been promised to cover the jump-off from the line of departure, but at the last moment it turned out to be unavailable. The Battalion 81mm Mortar platoon put down its own smoke barrage, and at 1000 Seitz' men moved out with F on left, D on right, and E in reserve.

The 424th had failed to take Medell and 2/517's left flank was open. Enemy artillery fire, light initially, increased as the attack progressed. As the troopers crossed the Ambleve road they began to meet small arms and mortar fire. On right TF Griffin was slow in taking Wallerode, and now both flanks were exposed. As the assault neared the woodline enemy fire grew heavy and D Company was held up. F pressed on and gained the woods, relieving the pressure. Both companies continued through. By 1400 the Battalion had secured its objective, capturing 40 prisoners and a 76mm antitank gun.

A platoon of tanks and one of TD's came forward and a perimeter was set up for the night. The situation remained basically unchanged through the following day. An F Company combat patrol silenced a machine gun near Medell, and a lone German wandered in to surrender to E Company.

On January 27th elements of the 106th Infantry Division arrived to relieve 2/517. At 1630 the bone-weary 2nd Battalion entrucked to rejoin the 517th RCT at Stavelot.

The Battle of the Bulge ended with the capture of St Vith. In terms of area, duration, and men engaged, it was the largest battle the United States Army has ever fought. American losses were 80,987 killed, wounded, and missing; estimated German losses vary from 81,834 to 103,900.

The 517th RCT had been in continuous action along the thirty-mile XVIII Corps front from the Ourthe to St Vith for 37 consecutive days. From December 22nd to January 27th not a day had passed in which part or all of the 517th was not in contact with the enemy. Major German attacks had been halted and pushed back at Soy-Hotton and Manhay; on the offensive, 517th units had driven over 20 cumulative miles, from Trois Ponts to Grand Halleux, from Stavelot to Poteaux, and from Diedenbourg to St Vith. Fighting under five Divisions, the RCT had lost well over seven hundred men -- six hundred of them in the rifle companies.



Stavelot, Belgium.

The Bulge was fought under conditions of incredible hardship. It was Valley Forge and the Meuse-Argonne combined. The German offensive capability had not been recognized, and the Army was unprepared for a winter war. The battle was won not by brilliant strategy or overwhelming material superiority, but by the courage and stamina of the American soldier.



460th in action.

Chapter VII

Nightmare and Dawn

For ten days* at Stavelot in 82nd Airborne Division reserve the 517th rested and enjoyed some of the amenities of life. With the help of local bakeries Service Company set up unit messes and served the troopers their first regular hot meals since Soissons.

*Four days for 2nd Battalion.

At an Engineer shower point the men luxuriated in hot water and were issued clean clothing. USO entertainers performed, and the propaganda movie "Germany" was shown -- increasing the determination of many to find a friendly fraulein at the earliest opportunity.

During the RCT's stay in Stavelot a frequent visitor was the Associated Press war correspondent Hal Boyle. The 517th had finally been removed from the "secret" list, and families and friends of the men found the first newspaper accounts of its members in Boyle's column. Here are some of the stories Boyle filed:

With the 517th Parachute Combat Team in Belgium, Jan. 25 (Delayed) (AP) -- In a regimental command post envious soldiers read a telegram:

"Corporal Blank holds a letter appointing him to the U.S.M.A. in 1945."

It was one of those things hundreds of soldiers dream about--an appointment of a frontline fighter to the United States Military Academy. The telegram continued:

"If found physically qualified. Will be returned to the United States to undergo training."

The chance of a lifetime! No more crawling through freezing snow under mortar fire, no more shivering at night in lonely foxholes--and no more "C" rations. The soldier was a parachute corporal who had fought through Italy, France and Belgium.

A runner took the telegram to a forward company with instructions to bring back the corporal immediately with full equipment--ready to start at once for home and West Point.

But no happy corporal came back. The runner returned with this brief message from company headquarters:

"Corporal Blank was killed in action at Trois Ponts, Belgium." The telegram had come five days too late.

* * *

Any good battlefield commander prizes the regard of his men above any recognition that higher headquarters can bestow. That is why Captain Earl E. Ehly, former Philadelphia physical education instructor, treasures a letter written by a wounded man in his company to the commander of the 517th parachute combat team.

"Dear Sir," the letter said. "I am in hospital now with a fractured skull. Being an enlisted man under your command I would like to bring to your attention the kind of officer you have under your command."

"The officer I am referring to is Captain Earl E. Ehly. Here were his actions while we were engaging the enemy at Soy, Luxembourg. We were advancing against a heavy concentration of small arms fire, mortar fire and 240-millimeter artillery fire. Captain Ehly was hit in the leg, and as I started to help him an artillery shell of the 240-millimeter kind fell between us wounding about six more men. Captain Ehly, neglecting his wounds and the mortar fire, crawled to me and gave me first aid treatment and words of encouragement. I wrote this letter of my own free will."

The letter was signed with an enlisted man's name.

The letter -- which means more to Ehly than the hero's ribbons he wears over his left pocket -- didn't add what the boys who patched up the wounded at the aid station remember. Captain Ehly wouldn't permit them to give him blood plasma until he was personally shown that the supply on hand was sufficient for all his wounded men.

* * *

With the 517th Parachute Combat Team (AP)--Every parachute trooper sweats out that 13th "Black Cat" jump,

Corporal Burton E. Meandor, Waco, Texas, made his without benefit of a parachute. He was dozing peacefully in his billet in a frozen sector of snowy Belgium one night when flames swept through his third floor room.

A fellow trooper accidentally had kicked over a can of gasoline and a stream of it ran by a hot stove and ignited.

There was only one sure exit -- a window -- and there was a three-floor drop to the ground. But Meandor didn't hesitate. He dived out the window, counting from force of habit as he fell, and plunged into a deep snowdrift -- unhurt.

"That was my 13th jump -- and I didn't even have time to worry about it," said Meandor.

* * *

A Nazi military decoration made a perfect target for Private Ellwood Dobbins, of Boston, Mass.

Moving forward on the flank of a company attack, Dobbins saw a German wearing an iron cross on his chest about 10 yards away.

Dobbins drew a bead on the medal and put a bullet directly through it -- and the enemy heart behind it.

* * *

In an attack to relieve a pinned down parachute company, Private First Class Donald 'Kitty' , Karr, of Barberton, Ohio, hit the dirt on the top of a small knoll when small arms fire splattered around him,

Suddenly he heard German voices directly under him -- and realized that he was lying on a Nazi dugout.

Karr, who speaks little German, called out in a stern voice: "Throw your rifles outside and surrender."

Out came the rifles followed by three Germans with their hands up. All Karr had for a weapon was an empty mortar tube -- about as dangerous as a three-foot rain pipe!

* * *

Returning from a sniper hunt to clean out some woods for his infantry company, Private Gerald G. Stokes, of Tampa, Fla., became separated from his group.

When he bumped into the men from the relieving infantry unit he walked up to the company commander and said:

"What's going on?"

The captain took one look at his "gott mit uns" belt, his iron cross and Nazi bayonet -- all souvenirs -- and immediately put him under arrest as a Nazi suspect.

"I am a paratrooper," yelled Stokes indignantly.

"You're too small to be a paratrooper ," replied the Captain.

Stokes was herded back to a prisoner of war pen, probably the most forlorn paratrooper in the history of airborne armies.

There someone recognized him and a few minutes later he was free and boiling mad. He gave the Captain a meaning look as he stalked away.

"It's funny," said the Captain, "I thought he was the first prisoner we had taken with a southern accent."

* * *

A new way to double a cigarette ration had been found by Private David G. Twight, of Hawthorn, Wis. -- but it is a little dangerous.

He was with a group building an "up front" bridge and the enemy was pounding away with 88s. During one "10 minute break" Dave reached into his jacket for a cigarette.

He found that a piece of shrapnel had ripped through the jacket, cutting his pack of cigarettes squarely in half.

"Here, fellows, have a quickie," he proffered. "I've got two packs of 'em."

On the military side, inspections were held and new equipment issued. Weapons were zeroed on a miniature range, and the 460th practiced gun drill. Replacements were assigned, but the rifle companies were still far under-strength, averaging 60 to 80 men.

Although the Battle of the Bulge had ended the war was far from over. Beginning on January 28th with the 82nd Airborne and 1st Infantry Divisions attacking abreast, XVIII Airborne Corps advanced 10 to 15 kilometers in heavy snow, crossed into Germany, and reached the West Wall. On February 1st the 517th RCT joined the 82nd near Honsfeld. Next day the 1st Battalion took up a blocking position to protect the northern flank of the 325th Glider Infantry while 3rd Battalion moved into position to support if required. The 325th took its objectives without needing assistance, and on February 3rd the RCT received orders attaching it to the 78th Infantry Division at Simmerath, 10 to 15 miles northeast. Lt Col Jack Norton, the brilliant 0-3 of the 82nd, told Graves that he had protested sending an RCT to V Corps, pointing out that they had a whole Division (the 9th) available. "But," he said, "they wanted paratroopers." Graves would soon find out why.

Colonel Graves gathered up his battalion commanders and a few staff officers and headed north. After a stopover at V Corps Headquarters at Eupen the party arrived in the 78th Division area and was briefed by the Division Commander, General Parker,

at his CP in Simmerath.

The 78th Infantry Division was to attack east on February 6th to seize Schmidt and the Schwammenauel Dam. The 517th RCT was to move north to the Kleinhau--Bergstein area, relieve elements of the 8th Infantry Division, and attack south from Bergstein during darkness on February 5th to seize the Schmidt--Nideggen ridge.

First Army and V Corps had assigned absolute top priority to the attack on Schmidt and the Schwammenauel. The 78th Division would be supported by all V Corps and divisional artillery in range, and backed up by a Combat command of the 7th Armored Division and the entire 9th Infantry Division if required.

The 517th convoys were heading for Simmerath. Colonel Graves hastily got word through to divert them around to the north at Kleinhau, and left for the 8th Division area.



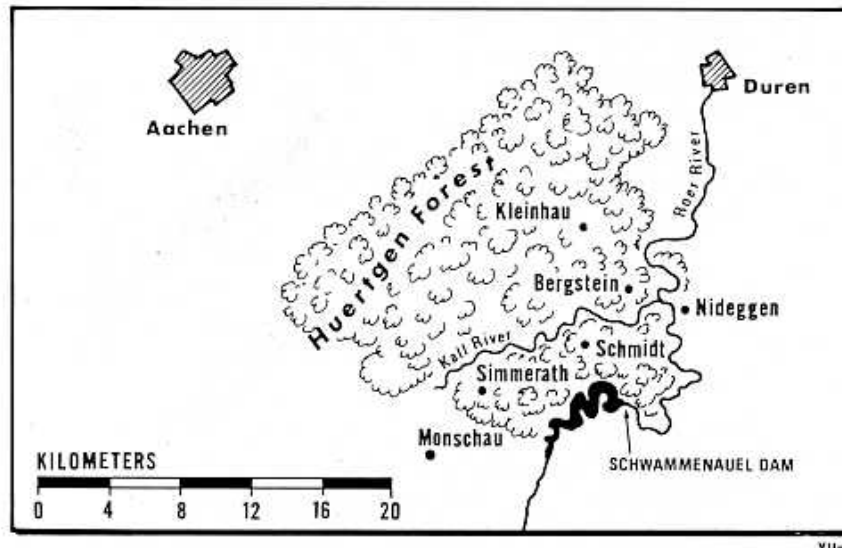
The Huertgen Forest, lying within the Aachen--Duren--Monschau triangle, had acquired a sinister reputation as a man-eating monster. Since September four Divisions -- the 9th, 28th, 4th, and 8th -- had suffered 21,900 casualties in the Huertgen.

The Forest is a vast expanse of tall, dense firs rising from rocky crags and ravines. It is bordered on the east by the Roer River, which follows a winding course to the north. A series of dams controlled the river's flow; opening them would flood the plain to the north, blocking passage east into the Ruhr. In the center of the forest the Kall River flows through deep gorges into the Roer. North of the Kall a ridge extends from Huertgen to Bergstein. On the south another ridge runs through Schmidt to Nideggen, east of the Roer .

The Germans had prepared the strongest defenses of the western front in the Huertgen. The entire area was honeycombed with a maze of minefields, wire, pillboxes, and bunkers. In the dark gloom of the forest the sky could rarely be seen, and the pine needles on the forest's floor provided ideal concealment for the minefields. The ridges in the area were high and devoid of cover, providing excellent observation into the sea of trees below.

The First Army had plunged into the Huertgen Forest in September. In November attacking south across the Kall, the Americans had captured Schmidt but had been forced back after a few days by fanatical German resistance. In December a second battle had been fought down the northern ridge from Huertgen to Bergstein. American efforts in the Huertgen had been suspended when the Germans launched their attack in the Ardennes.

The Huertgen Forest.



Behind the attack of the 78th against Schmidt and the Schwammenauel Dam lay the SHAEF decision to grant highest priority in the Spring of 1945 to Montgomery's 21st Army Group. In support of Montgomery, the Ninth US Army to the south was to launch an attack across the Roer -- Operation GRENADE -- on February 10th. If the Germans retained control of the Roer dams while the Ninth Army attacked, they would be able to almost literally drown the attackers in a sudden flood. First Army was to launch the third battle of the Huertgen Forest to gain control of the dams, and the 78th Division had just four days in which to do it.

Although from Honsfeld to Kleinbau is only about 15 to 20 miles straight-line distance, it was 30 to 40 over the roundabout route that had to be followed. It was dark and overcast, and over strange back roads the trip took all night. While the troopers shivered and froze in the back of the trucks the officers strained to find the way. 2nd Battalion executive Dave Armstrong hung to the running board outside the cab, his eyes "popping out like a bullfrog's." Jeep-borne 3rd Battalion 8-2 Howard Hensleigh would scout ahead for a few miles, wait for his convoy, then shoot out again, repeating the process all night. By 0600 on the morning of February 5th all units had closed at Kleinbau. The troopers scattered through the woods, took shelter in abandoned bunkers, and awaited further orders.

Regimental Headquarters set up at Brandenburg and the 1st Battalion took over foxholes, cellar holes, and basements from the battalion of the 13th Infantry Regiment. The area presented a scene of war at its absolute worst -- buildings reduced to rubble, desolated trees, shell craters, and mud emerging from the snow. The men of 517 had grown up in the shadow of the First World War. All had seen pictures and movies depicting the horrors of Flanders and the Meuse-Argonne. Now it lay before them in stark reality.

The German line ran from Zerkall west and south of Hill 400 to the Kall River. It then followed the Kall to a point north of Kommerscheidt, where it turned south across the ridge west of Schmidt and anchored its left on the Roer. Dense minefields -- invisible beneath the winter's accumulation of snow -- and barbed wire entanglements were covered by well-sited machine guns in concrete and log bunkers, supported by artillery of all calibers from positions east of the Roer.

The most sensitive part of the German line was the area south of Bergstein. American seizure of the Schmidt--Nideggen road would isolate German forces at Schmidt. To prevent this the enemy had put their 6th Parachute Regiment* into the Bergstein area.

* A veteran unit that had fought the American Airborne in Normandy and Holland.

The "Fallschirmjaegers" were the toughest of all German formations, far more so than the vaunted SS. At this stage of the war few were jumpers, but they were all young, strong, and ready to die for their Fuehrer. The men of the 517th RCT were up against their own mirror-image, fighting from prepared positions in defense of their homeland.

It was a situation demanding massive, concentrated power. Heavy artillery might have blasted out the minefields and wire. Tanks, though probably unable to negotiate the Kall, might have cleared a path to it. But all the available power was being used

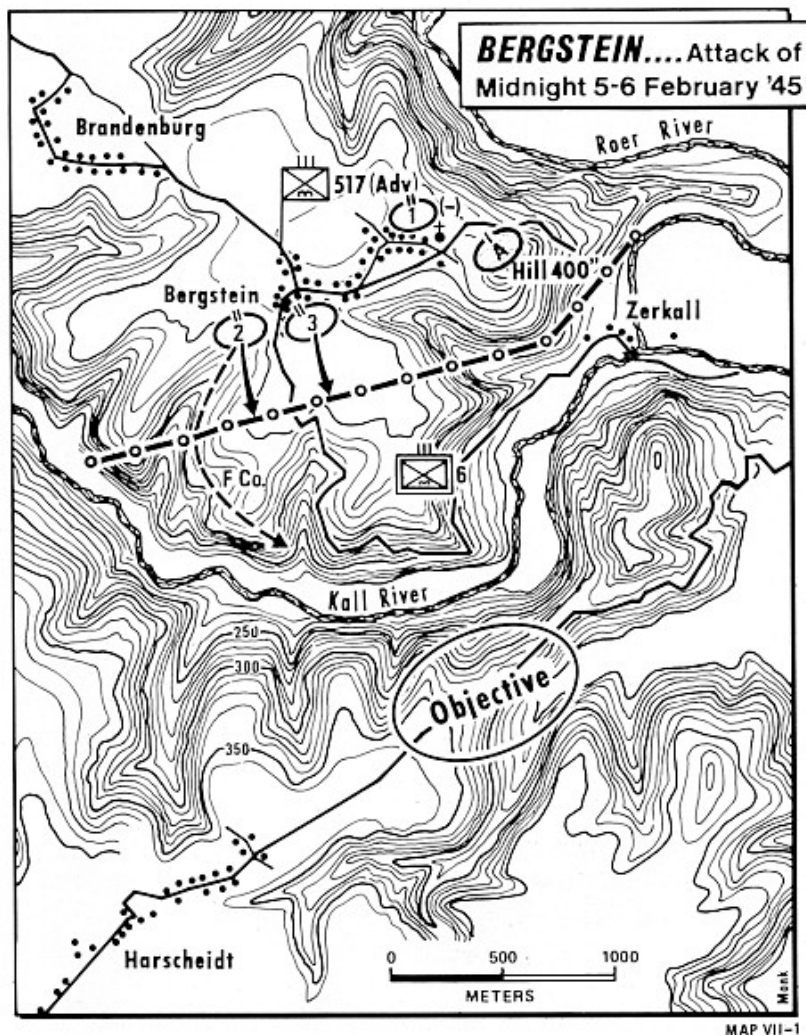
at the other end of the arena, in the attack upon Schmidt. The 517th was going to have to get by with small arms, mortars, 75mm pack howitzers, and courage.

The shattered village of Bergstein lay a mile west and slightly north of the junction of the Kall and Roer Rivers. The area was dominated by the abrupt peak of Hill 400 at the eastern edge of town, called the "Burgberg" by the Germans and "Castle Hill" by the Americans. Hill 400 had been captured by the 2nd Ranger Battalion in December in an assault which left 25 survivors from two companies.

The 8th Infantry Division had come into the area in November. Since the Ardennes attack in mid-December the Division had been content to hold its ground. As Colonel Graves entered Bergstein with his reconnaissance group, a battalion of the 13th Infantry was occupying the town and Hill 400. Enemy artillery was coming in, and the troops complained that Graves and his party were drawing fire. The Commanding General of the 8th Infantry Division added his protests. Not unreasonably, Colonel Graves asked how he could be expected to prepare for an attack without reconnaissance. This quieted the protests, but the General let Graves know that he was to consider himself under severe reprimand.

The Regimental forward CP was set up in Bergstein, and at 1330 the 517th Battalion commanders assembled for orders. The regiment was to attack that night south from Bergstein, cross the Kall River, and seize high ground along the Schmidt--Nideggen road. It was a mile and a half to the objective. The area through which the attack had to pass was sown with dense minefields and traversed by the steep Kall ravine. At the base of the ravine the Kall flowed, twenty feet wide and several feet deep.

The attack was to be made in column on each side of the trail leading south from Bergstein, 2nd Battalion on right, 3rd on left. Prior to the attack the 1st Battalion would occupy Hill 400 with a company, leaving the remainder of the 1st in Regimental reserve. An Engineer platoon with bridging material to span the Kall was attached to each assault battalion. The 460th would be in general support from positions near Kleinhau .



The Attack of Midnight, 5/6 February

After dark the 2nd and 3rd Battalions moved into attack positions. The troopers had been issued plastic fluorescent strips which were stuck to the back of their helmets; each man would follow the white blob on the helmet of the man in front. It was over- cast, moonless, and very dark. At midnight the columns moved out.

Five to six hundred yards below Bergstein both Battalions hit mine fields and concertina wire. German illuminating flares arced into the sky, and the enemy opened up with machine gun, mortar, and artillery fire.

F Company, leading 2nd Battalion backed off and called for artillery, E Company passed by on left of F and hit another minefield. The Battalion reserve -- D Company -- was committed, and ran into concealed bunkers delivering fixed machine gun fire down rows of concertina wire.

Captain Giuchici, commanding F Company, decided to get around the opposition to his front by circling to the right. F Company crawled off and disappeared. At 0230 the Battalion Headquarters lost contact with Giuchici.

On the east of the trail the 3rd Battalion, also caught in minefields and wire under heavy fire, brought down artillery without noticeable effect. A Company attempted to get forward by crawling and probing, with little success. Company H was committed, passing by on the right of G.

Allan Goodman, a squad leader of the 596th's Third Platoon, writes that:

"The 596th went in column with the 517th at the beginning of the attack, which started near Bergstein about midnight. We were advancing along a road in two long columns and were carrying timbers and planks to build some kind of crossing. The crossing never materialized and sometime during the night the timbers and planks were abandoned. The advance was supposed to be stealthy but we kept getting illuminated by enemy flares. There was nothing we could do but freeze in place and hope the German gunners did not see us ... it was the darkest night I have ever experienced ..."

Through the night the battlefield was raked with fire and lit by flares. All efforts to move forward proved futile. It was a hopeless, murderous fiasco. Men were blown up by Schu mines, Tellermines, and "Bouncing Bettys." Just before daylight the attack was called off. Leaving rifle company elements in contact, both Battalions pulled back into Bergstein.

What happened to F Company? BAR man Myrle Traver relates that:

". . . we moved out and started crawling ... machine guns and flares were keeping me scared to death. ..we finally got through the mine fields and were moving up and down mountain trails. Sometimes we would fall behind and then catch up ... after some time, I looked back and no one was following ... I ended up in a foxhole with Lieutenant Caufield. He told me to keep down ... two German officers walked up. Caufield raised up and shot both Germans from a three-foot range.

"Daylight was breaking, so we started to move again. A few hundred yards further we began to get shelled by our own artillery ... a couple of shells hit right among us. Captain Giuchici told Caufield to stay with the wounded and for me and George Flynn to follow him. We ran and ran, Giuchici with his drum-type submachinegun in one hand like a pistol and me dragging that BAR. Flynn had an '03 sniper rifle. We stumbled on to a young German soldier ... he appeared to be about 13 years old. He begged us not to kill him and Giuchici said to bring him along.

"Where we were supposed to meet E Company there was no one. We hid in a large shell hole and waited, hoping the infantry would attack and pick us up ... we didn't know the attack had been called off. . . ."

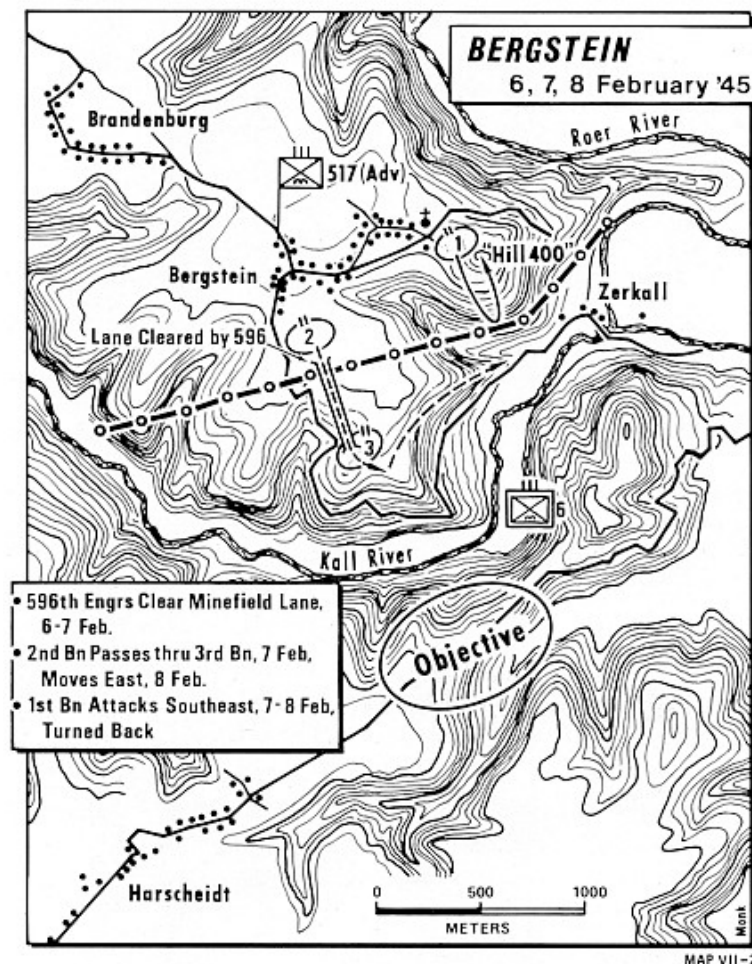
Giuchici, his two men, and their young German captive waited for an attack that never came. Fifteen to twenty other F Company men were strung throughout no-man's-land. Several were captured, but the majority made it back after wandering for a day or more through mine-infested, German-held territory.

Clearing the Minefields

In Bergstein the troopers had some protection from small-arms fire but little else. Mortar and artillery fire in calibers ranging from 75 through 88, 155, and 170mm was incessant, and a ten- or twelve-inch gun ranged in several times. Rockets with streamers which 'could be seen coming for two or three miles' landed in the village, converting the rubble to pulverized dust. Entire houses collapsed. Most of the artillery came from the southeast, across the Roer and far beyond range of the 460th's 75mm pack howitzers.

The Regimental and Battalion commanders met at 1000 on the 6th to work out a new strategy. The overriding problem was the minefields, beneath the snow; before the troopers could come to grips with the enemy they had to get through the mines. It was

decided that for the remainder of that day and all of the 7th the 596th Engineers, under the protection of 3rd Battalion infantrymen, would clear a lane through the minefields to the Kall Ravine. After dark on February 7th the attack would be renewed. The 2nd Battalion would move down the cleared lane, pass through the 3rd, and cross the Kall. Concurrently the 1st Battalion would attack toward Zerkall, and Company D would create a diversion in the area in which the 2nd Battalion had been the night before. S-4 Major Bill Hickman was directed to procure shaped charges and flamethrowers for use against the enemy bunkers.



In mid-morning the 596th Engineers began working in relays to clear a lane through 'the largest minefield encountered by the Allies in World War II' * under direct enemy observation and fire. As Allan Goodman reports,

* Reported in "STARS AND STRIPES"

"... we went out next morning, crossed a ravine, went to the front of a column of the 517th Infantry, and started laying a guide tape down the center of the path as we cleared our way through the personnel mine field. It was slow work on a 30 to 45 degree slope on the side of a ravine. We were relieved after a couple of hours by another squad from the 596th, since the only thing that worked was probing or visual sighting, then deactivating and throwing away the mines. We traded back and forth this way throughout the day and night. The ravine was wooded and there wasn't much visibility, but I did get far enough to spot the road we were trying to get to* and to come under machine gun fire. The whole column was under mortar fire most of the time, but the steep banks of the ravine gave us some protection. ..one platoon of the 517th had broken through the first night and were isolated, so there was urgency to get a path cleared to attack along and relieve them ..."

* The Schmidt-Nideggen Road.

For over 36 hours the Engineers continued this genuinely heroic effort through daylight and darkness. While they worked, active patrolling continued and preparations were made to renew the attack after dark on the 7th.

In the 1st Battalion area Captain "Chopper" Kienlen of A Company led a combat patrol from Hill 400 to Zerkall, met minefields, mortar and machine gun fire, and returned.

As the cleared lane through the minefield grew longer, more men were needed to protect it against German patrols, who were attempting to rearm and replace mines that had already been deactivated.

In the late afternoon of February 6th Company I was sent to move to the left of Company H, which had been in position since the initial attack; I Company was also to push across the Kall if possible. Platoon leader Ludlow Gibbons writes that:

"... there were about 15 men left in the platoon. With two scouts leading we moved along the upper side of a hill for about 600 yards ... the scouts encountered automatic fire from 50 yards away, to our right front. I gave the artillery the location of the guns, and ordered a sergeant to take a couple of men ... to charge and knock out the guns as soon as the artillery lifted. The artillery came in on target. When it lifted the sergeant and his men charged ... the guns began firing again. The sergeant and his men returned.

"I asked (a sergeant of the 596th Engineers attached to the platoon) whether if we moved under cover of darkness around to the left, away from the machine guns, he could remove or deactivate the mines. ..he said that he could.

"While we were waiting for darkness Captain Birder arrived with the rest of I Company ... Jim was one of the men that made the 517th go ..."

After dark under command of Captain Birder I Company passed through the minefield around the enemy guns, following compass bearings and laying tape as they progressed. Small arms fire came in from the right, but the Germans were firing blindly and no casualties were inflicted. The column stopped at a clearing and Gibbons went forward with a scout.

"We walked 20 to 30 yards into the open field in bright moonlight. The scout and I were facing each other, squatting on our haunches discussing whether to go right or left to skirt the clearing ... I glanced up, and directly behind the scout a man's figure appeared ... he let out a yell while hitting the scout, who went down. The German ran off to the right as I fired several rounds ... I moved back to the head of the column. Moments later the scout showed up. ..."

Company I moved into the clearing only to come under heavy fire from front and flank, and fell back into the slight concealment provided by underbrush. At daylight the enemy opened up with machine gun fire from two directions. The Company was well within the enemy position and losing men fast; Captain Birder decided the situation was hopeless and directed a pullback, leaving Gibbon's platoon to cover. H Company, on right, sent a platoon to help extricate I. While reconnoitering for a route of withdrawal the gallant Jim Birder was severely wounded by a Tellermine, and died soon thereafter. The remnants of I and H Companies hung on under heavy fire north of the Kall ravine for the rest of the day.

In the early afternoon of February 7th Colonel Graves was called to report to General Ira Swift, Assistant Division Commander of the 82nd Airborne, at the 8th Infantry Division Command Post. The news was that the 517th was released from the 78th Division and attached to the 82nd Airborne in place. Under General Swift, Task Force "A" had been formed, consisting of the 517th and the 505th Parachute Infantry. The 505th was enroute to the area and would take position next day at Vossenack,



Schmidt, Germany.

on the far right of the 517th. The 517th was to continue its planned attack. In the west, the 78th Infantry Division was making slow but steady progress. Kommerscheidt had been taken and elements of the 78th were on the outskirts of Schmidt

The Attack of February 7th

At darkness the 2nd and 1st Battalions prepared to go into the attack. H-Hour was set for 2100, then pushed back to 2130; the 1st Battalion was to jump off the Hill 400 at H-Hour plus 45.

Major Hickman had succeeded in obtaining 25 concrete-piercing shaped charges and four flamethrowers. These were turned over to the Regimental Demolition Platoon, which joined 2nd Battalion.

Morale was low. Men were disheartened but determined to see it through. Over a hundred had been killed, wounded, or were missing, including George Giuchici and Jim Birder; Captain Woodhull of the 460th had been killed while directing his Battalion's fire. Some men and officers had simply reached the end of their ropes and had to be evacuated. In at least one instance an officer refused to lead his men back into what he considered certain death.

Nevertheless the battalions their rifle strengths now reduced to company size -- gamely formed up and moved out on schedule. At 2145 the 2nd Battalion moved silently down the lane through the minefields. The passage of lines went smoothly. As Colonel Seitz' men arrived, Companies H and I fell back to Bergstein. By 0100 Company E and the remains of Company F were at the edge of the Kall Ravine. Company D which had remained in position since the initial attack -- moved northeast into 2nd Battalion reserve below Bergstein. At 0145 the 1st Battalion was 400 yards southeast of Hill 400.

At daybreak the situation disintegrated once more. The Fallschirmjaegers had watched their American counterparts clear the lane through the minefields. Any new attack had to come that way. The Germans waited, and were ready when it came. North of the Kall, the 2nd Battalion troopers came under savage machine gun and mortar fire. Trying to avoid this fire and hoping to find an unsecured crossing, E Company moved east. It found itself south of the 1st Battalion, and at 0930 was hit by a strong counterattack. The 1st Battalion was forced back to Hill 400. At 1100 E Company reported that it was at one-third of starting strength. F Company had "three radio operators and one machine gun team" left.

In response to a query from Headquarters 82nd Airborne Division, the 517th reported that its intentions were "to hold such ground southeast of the town as we are capable of holding."

At noon a 3rd Battalion patrol was sent west to contact the 505th at a predesignated point on the Kall. Three efforts to reach the point were turned back by machine gun fire.

In mid-afternoon it was announced that the 517th would be relieved by the 508th Parachute Infantry that night. Just before dark 3rd Battalion troopers, looking southward, saw American tanks advancing east along 'the Schmidt--Nideggen road -- on, or close to, what had been the 517th objective.

After dark all units were pulled back to Bergstein except A Company on Hill 400. An hour before midnight elements of the 508th began to arrive, and by 0300 next morning the relief was complete.

For two days and nights Captain Giuchici, with his two men and their prisoner, waited in the shell crater near the Kall ravine for the 517th attack to arrive. On the first night two German officers stood talking and smoking at the crater's edge; Giuchici reached up and touched one German's boot "just to see if he could do it."

In Myrle Traver's words:

"... we talked about trying to get back but knew what our chances would be in that minefield ... we could hear troops fighting, the sounds getting closer, even heard American troopers cussing and yelling but they fell back.

"Late on the second night Giuchici woke me up and said that the kid (the young German prisoner) was gone. We waited awhile, thinking that he had gone to relieve himself ...

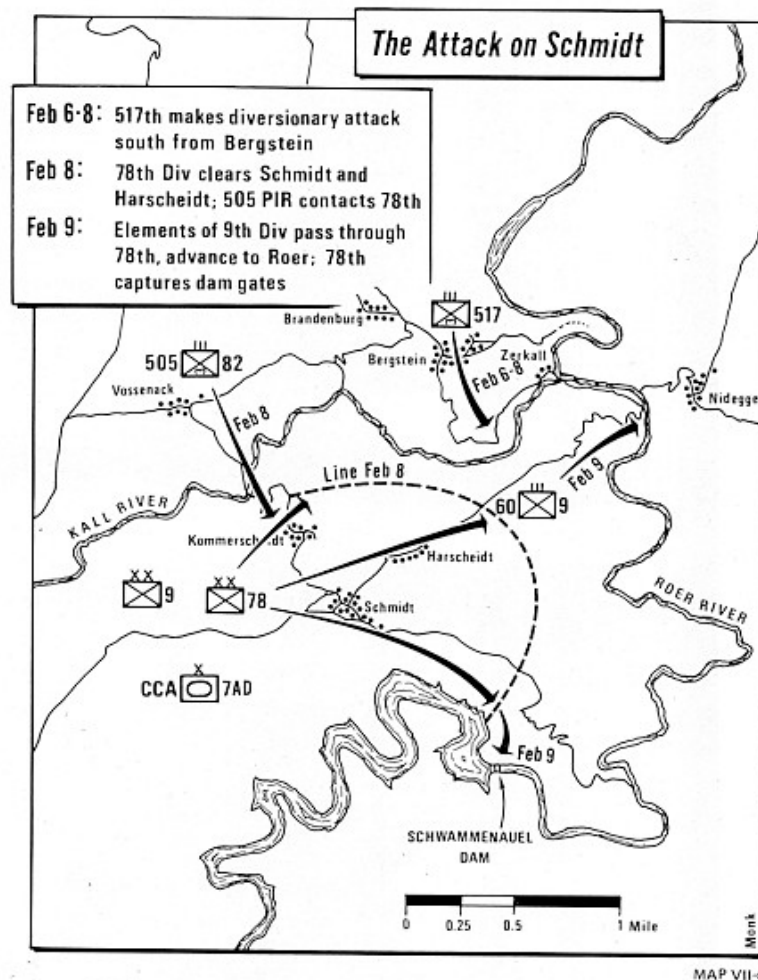
"(An hour after daybreak) we could see troops coming our way. The helmets looked like ours ... these were paratrooper helmets, without the drop side like the regular German helmet. The brush was thick and it was hard to tell, but we sure thought they were ours ...

"Six heads and six guns came over the rim of the crater and then we knew. I asked Giuchici "What now?" He said "To hell with it."

"They wanted to shoot Giuchici because they were afraid of his size, but the kid was one of them ... I told the kid that we didn't kill him. He was able to talk them out of shooting Giuchici ..."

On February 8th, while Captain Giuchici and his men were being hauled off into captivity * and the 517th was hanging on southeast of Bergstein, the 78th Division took Schmidt. As a regiment of the 9th Division passed through next day the 78th captured the gates to the Schwammenauel Dam. It was too late. The Germans had destroyed the water-control mechanism, allowing the water to drain gradually and flood the Roer plain. The Ninth Army's attack was delayed for two weeks.

* After being interrogated by a genial German paratroop major (who said that he had spent twelve years in New York) the three were separated and sent to the rear. Captain Giuchici escaped twice and was recaptured each time. All three were liberated late in the war by the advancing Allies.



With the loss of Schmidt the Germans abandoned the area. The 505th Parachute Infantry crossed the Kall south of Vossenack without difficulty, finding Kommerscheidt already occupied by the 78th Division. On February 10th the 9th Infantry Division passed through the 78th, and with the 505th and 508th on left, advanced to the west bank of the Roer against only token resistance.

To see other units clear the area with ease after they had been almost bled to death was hard for the 517th to swallow. The surviving troopers left the Bergstein area bitter and frustrated. These feelings were natural but unwarranted. The real mission had been to draw German forces away from the main effort being made at Schmidt, and in this it had succeeded all too well. It had never been expected that the 517th, lacking adequate support, would gain the Schmidt--Nideggen road. The RCT had been committed so that the Germans, finding themselves up against paratroopers, would believe that the main effort was being made from Bergstein. It had been a callous exploitation of the trooper's courage. Any "credit" for the capture of Schmidt and the Schwammenauel Dam belongs to the 517th as well as to the 78th Division. *

* "On to Berlin" states that the 82nd took Schmidt. This is incorrect. See MacDonald, "The Last Offensive;" also Weigley, "Eisenhower's Lieutenants."

In three days the 517th RCT had lost over two hundred men, about a quarter of its rifle strength. The German 6th Parachute Regiment had fought literally to the death. In the entire operation only one German prisoner had been taken, and he had been knocked unconscious by a concussion grenade.



Bergstein, Germany.

On February 9th the tired and depressed troopers of the 517th marched back to Kleinhau and boarded trucks to move to the railhead at Aachen. Transportation was short and the trucks were overcrowded, but there were no complaints. They would gladly have traveled by whatever means were required to get out of the Dante's Inferno of Bergstein. At Aachen they climbed aboard the now-familiar 40-and-8's. Exhausted physically and emotionally, many slept for most of the two days required to reach Laon in France.

The Caserne Foch at Laon became home for the next week. The Caserne was still in the shabby state of disrepair in which the Germans had left it, but it was paradise after Belgian snows and German mud. Engineer details got the showers working. With rest, hot water, and regular meals the troopers began to recover their youthful vitality.

On February 15th Colonel Graves was notified by Headquarters XVIII Airborne Corps that the RCT was assigned to the newly-arrived 13th Airborne Division, and was to proceed to Joigny , 70 miles southeast of Paris .

The 13th Airborne, commanded by Major General Eldredge G. Chapman, had been activated in August 1943. It consisted of the 515th Parachute Infantry Regiment, two glider Infantry regiments, and the normal complement of artillery, engineers, and supporting services. The Division had arrived in France in early February and was occupying Sens, Auxerre, and a few other small towns in the locality.

As the 517th closed in at Joigny on February 21st the Regimental Combat Team was dissolved. The 460th became a part of 13th Airborne Division Artillery, and the 596th Engineers were merged with Company B, 129th Airborne Engineer Battalion. The comradeship that had developed in Italy, France, Belgium, and Germany remained, but the artillery and engineers were no longer under Colonel Graves' direct command. All were directly responsible to General Chapman and Division Headquarters.

The area towns were pleasant and had been untouched by either of the two World Wars. At Joigny the troops moved into the local caserne and the officers were billeted in a small hotel. Training resumed slowly. New clothing and equipment was issued; old-timers returned from hospitals and replacements were assigned. Within three or four weeks after arrival in Joigny the 517th while far from eager was ready to go again if required.

On March 12th the 13th Airborne was assigned by First Allied Airborne Army to take part in Operation VARSITY -- Montgomery's crossing of the Rhine. Orders were passed down the chain of command and preparations for movement to departure airfields began.

C Company had been planning a Company party for several weeks, long before receiving the VARSITY alert. The day after the planned party all companies were to begin loading boxcars. The question of whether or not to go ahead with the party was

put up to the NCO's and troops.

The answer was a resounding yes, so the Company loaded up in Service Company trucks and rolled into Montargis. It turned out to be a dull affair. The advance man had overlooked inviting the local mademoiselles. However, wine and cognac flowed liberally and later that night a group took over the local "maison de joie". At mid- night the whistle was blown and the outfit returned to Joigny. Most men barely got in- to their bunks when they were rousted out to load boxcars. The hungover Company labored through the day, only to be told when almost finished that they could start unloading. The 13th's participation in VARSITY had been called off. It was the first of several more aborted missions.

The 13th Airborne Division staff demanded administrative perfection. This was bad news for the 517th. Its administration and record keeping had never been much to begin with, and had gone steadily downhill since Italy. The 13th could not understand how property could be written off as "expended in combat" without supporting paperwork. It was no use trying to explain that some things had simply disappeared into the night sky over France, or that machine guns had been left leaning against a tree in Belgium because there was no longer anyone to carry them.

The 13th was startled to find that 517th Battalion S-3 Journals were non-existent. The 517th was equally startled to find that anyone could think that keeping Journals at Battalion level was even conceivable under the conditions in which it had fought. Captain John Dugan and others scurried around for weeks inventing "records".*

* Fortunately, these "records" did not survive. At least they cannot be found in the National Archives.

There were other areas of conflict. All recommendations for awards had to be submitted to a 13th Airborne Division Awards Board. Most 517th decorations were hard- earned. When entire units had performed with fortitude and gallantry it was difficult to single out any particular men. The recommendations that did go forward were, for the most part, genuine. The Awards Board used some unusual criteria, and routinely knocked recommendations down a notch or two. Thus, an officer who had been physically ahead of his riflemen in an attack was "only doing his job"; others who performed such valorous acts as supervising procurement of ammunition were awarded Silver Stars.

For all these and other reasons there was little love lost between the 517th and the 13th Airborne.

The 13th was assigned to Operation CHOKER, a Rhine crossing in support of Seventh Army. As usual preparations were made and briefings held to Battalion level, but CHOKER was called off when General Patton's Third Army slipped across the Rhine almost unnoticed.

By early April the European war was rapidly drawing to a close. The Western Allies were well across the Rhine. Offensive action was largely a race to see which units could cover ground most rapidly. The Russians were at the gates of Berlin, and the Wehrmacht fought to hold off the enemy in the east while surrendering in droves in the west.

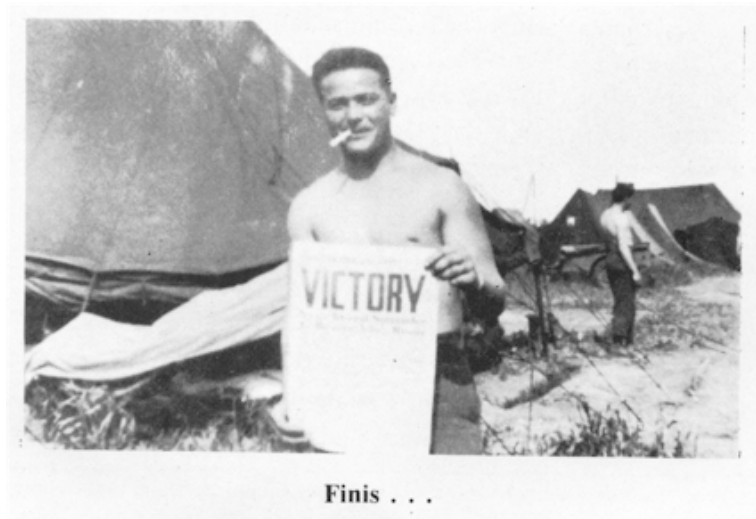
On April 4th the 13th Airborne Division moved to departure airfields in north- eastern France. The 517th went to the Airfield B-54 at Achiet, in the Arras--Bapaume region that had seen bitter fighting in the First World War.

Intelligence believed that diehard Nazis and SS formations were going to try to move south to carry on the war from the Bavarian Alps. The new mission -- EFFECTIVE -- was to be an airborne landing south of Stuttgart to block such a movement. Once more plans and preparations were made and once more they were cancelled.

More plans followed in quick succession. Jumps into Norway, Denmark, and to liberate prisoners "of war and/or concentration camp inmates -- all were overtaken by events.

Passes were liberal and the troopers made excursions to Lille, Paris, and local towns. No one paid much attention when told that a new mission was in the planning mill. Each day the troops forming for breakfast watched huge formations of C-46's and C-47's passing overhead carrying supplies for the rampaging ground armies.

In April and early May three momentous events occurred in rapid succession. President Roosevelt died, Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker, and the German Armed Forces surrendered unconditionally at Rheims. Suddenly and unbelievably, it was over.



Epilogue

Journey's End

On May 12th the 517th returned to Joigny .As the European war ended, the Army proceeded to dismantle the machine that had won it. Each man was credited with "points" * toward discharge, and it was announced that no one who had served in both the Mediterranean and Europe would have to go to the Pacific. Every 517th long-term survivor became eligible either for discharge or occupation duty.

* "Points" were awarded for length of service, time overseas, awards, wounds, number of dependents, and other factors.

It was a time of great personnel turbulence. As 517th men were sent home for discharge or to the 82nd Airborne in Berlin, equal numbers of "low pointers" were assigned from other outfits. The 13th Airborne was scheduled for shipment to the Pacific.** Fortunately, a small group of officers and NCO's had decided to stick it out to the bitter end, and managed to hold things together. To occupy the men while awaiting shipment the Troop Information Program came into its own. Instructional literature was distributed, and high school and college-level classes were held in every subject for which a qualified instructor could be found.

** The 13th was scheduled for Operation CORONET -- a jump into the Japanese home islands, with take-off from the Aleutians.

Almost everyone found his stay in Joigny highly enjoyable. Trains to Paris ran through several times daily and the 517ers took full advantage of them. A few visited the Louvre and other points of cultural interest. Sad to relate, many more found their way to Montmartre and Pigalle.

Shipment plans were firmed up in July. In early August the 517th staged through the "cigarette camps" -- Lucky Strike, Phillip Morris -- and boarded the **Oneida Victory** and **Madawaska Victory**. Halfway across the Atlantic the Japanese surrender was announced. The 517th arrived in New York to receive a grand welcome: "WELCOME HOME, WELL DONE" had been laid out on huge whitewashed boulders on shore. Whistles blew and foghorns blared as every ship and boat in the harbor paid tribute to the returning troopers. The odyssey of the 517th had ended. The "adventurous kids" were no longer kids, and most had had all the adventure they ever wanted.

Soon after the return of the RCT the New York HERALD TRIBUNE published this editorial: *

The Air-Borne Army

"New Yorkers have of late been seeing an unusually large number of paratroopers back from overseas, and in town now from Camp Kilmer, Camp Shanks and Fort Dix. Being a paratrooper does something to a soldier. Superb physical condition and carriage are part of it. All of them are volunteers from other arms of the service and physical requirements for acceptance are the highest. Training has been Spartan. But the main part of the paratrooper's something is in his spirit.

"The fighting part of this spirit has been manifested in hot spots of the war from North Africa to the Philippines. In Algeria, Sicily, Italy, Normandy, southern France, Holland and at the crossing of the Rhine, they lived up to and died for the Parachute School motto: 'De Caelum Ducimus,' which may be indifferent Latin but which means 'From the sky we lead' in any soldier's language -- a meaning about which they have never left any doubt. The usual mission of the paratroopers is to take and hold, but in Italy and the Ardennes they went in as shock troops in trucks, on tanks or on foot, and they went ahead.

"Among the men passing through or on leave in New York have been members of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment and 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, which fought north of Rome, jumped into the enemy lines in southern France and also fought in the Bulge.

"American parachute troops first went into action in November, 1942, when they led the North African invasion. It is, therefore, in less than three years that the air-borne divisions, with pack artillery, carbines, machine guns, bazookas, knives and with their bare hands, have built a reputation second to that of no other arm or group of fighting men anywhere, any time."

* Non-pertinent portions omitted

On February 25th, 1946, the 517th, 460th, and B/129th passed into history at a deactivation ceremony at Fort Bragg. In its three-year career the 517th traveled six thousand miles and fought in four countries. It is credited with the Rome-Arno, Southern France, Rhineland, Ardennes, and Central European campaigns. These titles are abstractions. To the men who were there, names like Grosseto, Les Arcs, Col de Braus, Manhay, and Bergeval are more meaningful.

Although organized and equipped only for airborne operations of short duration, the 517th RCT spent more time in prolonged ground combat than several parachute and many infantry units. Without tanks, heavy artillery, and transportation, it fought uncomplainingly and successfully where heavier-armed and better-equipped units failed. Always attached to a larger formation and lacking a high-powered public information staff, it seldom received credit for its achievements.

The RCT paid for its five campaign stars with approximately 1,500 casualties, killed, wounded, missing, and frozen. Fourteen hundred of these were in the 517th Regiment -- 70% of its original authorized strength.

As noted by the HERALD TRIBUNE editorial writer, the most extraordinary quality of the 517th RCT was its spirit. In many outfits men had to be pulled, pushed, or driven forward; 517th RCT troopers genuinely wanted to fight. Men hospitalized for wounds, injuries, and exposure felt guilty over "letting the outfit down" and frequently went AWOL to rejoin their units. The 517th never had a single jump refusal. Few parachute units can make this claim.

After the guns fell silent this spirit remained. Some men stayed in service, and a few reached high rank. Most returned to civilian life. Many achieved distinction, but the majority followed a middle course. Whatever their destinies, they were met by the men of the 517th RCT with the same unflinching courage with which they jumped into France and halted the Panzers in the Ardennes.

Sources

The basic sources for the narrative have been official records of the units below in the National Archives at Washington, D.C.

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 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion
 596th Airborne Engineer Company
 36th Infantry Division
 First Airborne Task Force
 First Special Service Force
 3rd Armored Division XVIII Airborne Corps
 82nd Airborne Division
 13th Airborne Division

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Glossary

Abatis	Fallen Trees
Burp Gun	The German MP 40, a submachine gun
Cheveaux de Frise	A barrier with projecting spikes
CP	Command Post
D-Day	The day on which an operation will begin
DZ (Drop Zone)	An area for landing parachute troops or supplies
Fallschirmjaeger	Paratrooper
FDC	Fire Direction Center
H-Hour	The time at which an operation will begin
IP	Point from which aircraft serials set their final course
Kampfgruppe	Battle Group
LD	Line of Departure. Final coordinating line in an attack
LST	Landing ship, tank
LZ (Landing Zone)	An area for glider landings
Maquisard	A member of the French Maquis
MG 42	The German Model 1942 Machine gun.
MLR	Main Line of Resistance. MSR Main Supply Route.
Nebelwerfer	A multi-barreled rocket launcher.
OP	Observation Post.
PAK	Antitank.
Panzer	Armor, armored.
Panzer Grenadier	Armored Infantry.

Panzerfaust	A one-shot antitank weapon, which launched a shaped-charge projectile from a stick-like launcher.
POW	Prisoner of War.
RCT	Regimental Combat Team.
SP	Self-propelled.
Serial	A formation of several flights of aircraft, separated from other formations by a time interval. ("Flight" - two or more elements; "elements" - two, or three aircraft).
SS	Schultz Staffel. Initially, Hitler's personal body- guard. The SS expanded into a vast organization responsible for police, security, and other functions including the death camps. The "Waffen" (field) SS provided military formations fighting alongside the regular German Army.
Tellermine	The standard German antitank mine.
TOT.	An artillery technique in which all shells arrive on target at the same time, regardless of gun-target distance.

Memorial Section

Edited by: **Ralph Cink**

Table I

517th Parachute Combat Team

Killed in Action by Unit

	Officers	Enlisted	Total
517th Parachute Infantry Regiment	15	202	217
460th Parachute Artillery Battalion	3	9	12
596th Parachute Engineer Company	1	14	15
Total Combat Team	19	225	244

Killed in Action by Country

	Officers	Enlisted	Total
Italy	1	16	17
France	9	93	102
Belgium	6	69	75
Germany	3	47	50
Total Combat Team	19	225	244

Many of our fellow Troopers will not cast their eyes upon the pages of this volume. They are present, however, in our hearts and minds. We shall not forget ...

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old.
Age shall not wither them nor the years condemn,
But at the rising of the sun and at the going down of the same,

We shall remember them.

Charles Lynn Brown

Chaplain, Major



We sorrowfully left on bloody battlefields hundreds of our friends.

They bravely and generously offered, though with understandable human fear, the heroic sacrifice of life so that others could live in peace and security.

Their invaluable sacrifice will never be forgotten. We know their precious blood was not shed in vain.

Our gratitude toward them is immense. God, in His Infinite Mercy, has surely bestowed upon them a well-earned Eternal Reward ...

Fr. Alfred J. Guenette, A.A.

Chaplain, Captain

Killed in Action

517th Parachute Infantry Regiment

Regimental Headquarters Company	B Company	
Henry A. Ciner (PFC) Elmer J. Anderson (Pvt) Richard B. Bednarz (Pvt) Julius J. Richmond (Pvt)	Andrew Murphy, Jr. (Sgt) David A. Rivers (Sgt) Frank W. Hayes (Cpl) William F. Baldwin (T /5) Ferdinand E. Gauer (PFC) Michael Hreben (PFC) John Mitchell (PFC) James S. Slaten (PFC) Francis A. Bloom (Pvt) Clarence Dougherty (Pvt) James L. Ellis (Pvt) Leonard M. Fancher (Pvt)	Ray L. Boyce (Cpl) Archie E. Brown (Cpl) Don N. Burnside (PFC) Holger E. Johnson (PFC) Harold J. Lewis (PFC) Thomas a. Rose (PFC) Al D. Baggett (Pvt) Joe E. York (Pvt) John W. Clark (Pvt) Robert A. Harp (Pvt) James T. Perdue (Pvt) James L. Walton (Pvt)
Medical Detachment		
Harold C. Daniels (Cpl) Spros Gogos (T/5) David B. Haight (PFC) Lloyd L. Pennington (PFC) William E. Bosley (Pvt)		

Thomas A. Naylor (Pvt)
Harold D. Seegar (Pvt)

1st Battalion

Headquarters Company

Daniel A. Fisher (Cpl)
Eugene L. Taylor (Cpl)
Frank L. Timinski (Cpl)
Dervyn F. Muth (PFC)
Lincoln W. Ackerman (Pvt)
Lynwood W. Cross (Pvt)
Bobby Fidler (Pvt)
George A. Meyer (Pvt)

A Company

Charles J. Sadlo (2nd Lt)
Ralph a. Bickford (Sgt)
Charles A. Critchlow (Sgt)
Albert R. Wise (Sgt)
Kenneth B. Anderson (Cpl)
Jack W. Dallas (Cpl)
Albert A. Delgado (Cpl)
Richard A. Jamme (Cpl)
Joseph M. Stewart (Cpl)
James L. Baney (PFC)
Melvin W. McLey (PFC)
Marvin R. Oliver (PFC)
Elmer R. Clow (Pvt)
Melvin E. Cole (Pvt)
Albert J. Ernst (Pvt)
Glen E. Mizner (Pvt)
George J. Seccina (Pvt)

Doyle E. Gray (Pvt)
Robert R. Hawthorne (Pvt)
Milton W. Johnson (Pvt)
Wallace A. Montgomery (Pvt)
Ledlie R. Pace (Pvt)
Joseph F. Van Ness (Pvt)

C Company

Harry D. Allingham (1st Lt)
Roland A. Beaudoin (2nd Lt) Anthony J.
Jacovini (S/Sgt)
Stanley S. Brown (Sgt)
William H. Delaney (Sgt)
William S. Spears (Sgt)
Albert J. Caraciola (Cpl)
Edward J. Lang (Cpl)
John D. Wilkins (T/5)
Edward M. Diss (PFC)
Hubert B. Ford (PFC)
Lowell Henderson (PFC)
Tildon W. Shaddox (PFC)
Bruno P. Baraglia (Pvt)
Carl L. Barrett (Pvt)
John H. Hosback (Pvt)
Walter E. Jacobsen (Pvt)
Alvie F. Ren (Pvt)
Carl G. Salmon (Pvt)

2nd Battalion

Headquarters Company

Thomas L. Rea (1st Lt)
Maurice J. Miley (2nd Lt)
Albert M. Robinson (2nd Lt)

D Company

William E. Burwell (1st Lt)
Edgar R. Attebery (Sgt)
Angel V. Chavez (Sgt)
Gerald C. Goodrid (Sgt)
Charles B. McDade (Sgt)
Homer C. Beaver (T/4)
James E. Flagle (Cpl)
Anthony A. Fabrick (PFC)
Raymond W. Hanish (PFC)
Travis V. McDonald (PFC)
Daniel L. Ogniewski (PFC)
Alton L. Allen (Pvt)
Andrew Dadik (Pvt)
John Pouts (Pvt)
Durward E. Howell (Pvt)
Joseph E. James (Pvt)
Frederick M. John (Pvt)
LaVerne LaBar, Jr. (Pvt)
Daniel T. Lopez (Pvt)
William F. Thorng (Pvt)
Walter Vanderpool (Pvt)

E Company

Charles v. Whitley (1st Lt)
Paul E. Craig (2nd Lt)
Roger J. Bender (S/Sgt)
James A. Dipko (S/Sgt)
Robert W. Farmer (Sgt)
David T. Hines (Sgt)
Robert R. Mourek (Cpl)
Robert E. Ecklund (PFC)
Clarence B. Jones (PFC)
Louis J. Barbera (Pvt)

Alexander Derese (Pvt)
Betil Q. Gustafson (Pvt)
Wilburn M. Kersey (Pvt)
Charles C. Lemen (Pvt)
Anthony P. Manley (Pvt)
John J. Polinsky (Pvt)
Joseph J. Reginato (Pvt)
Howard L. Richmond (Pvt)

F Company

John C. Casselman (1st Lt)
Arnold C. Ridout (S/Sgt)
Joe P. Samoska (S/Sgt)
Alton L. Shaneyfelt (T/4)
James M. Arredonds (Cpl)
Howard R. Kinder (Cpl)
Edward V. McAndrew (Cpl)
Arthur E. Sherman (Cpl)
Robert B. Armbruster (PFC)
James J. Pacey (PFC)
Edward J. Henry (Pvt)
John J. Jarozy (Pvt)

Leonard D. Stevens (PFC)
James H. Sutton (PFC)
Emer J. Carlson (Pvt)
Elihue Green (Pvt)
Walter M. Hofsommer (Pvt)
John A. Staat (Pvt)
Donald B. Tuberson (Pvt)

H Company

Harold M. Freeman (2nd Lt)
Hillard B. Thomas (2nd Lt)
John E. Gaunce (1st Sgt)
William M. Frucht (S/Sgt)
John E. Comer (Sgt)
George W. Arneson (PFC)
Corwin C. Clark (PFC)
Walter R. Friebel (PFC)
Mertz W. Lampella (PFC)
William Richards (PFC)
Gerald Uchytal (PFC)
Harvey J. Usery (PFC)
Clyde C. Whittington (PFC)

Merle A. Kaminsky (Pvt)
John S. Penn (Pvt)
Stanley E. Radon (Pvt)
Richard Sailor (Pvt)
Frank O. Scott (Pvt)
Albert J. Vasquez (Pvt)
Edward W. Weimer (Pvt)
Robert L. Williams (Pvt)
Willis A. Woodcock (Pvt)

460th Parachute Artillery Battalion

HQ Battery

Robert P. Woodhull (Capt)

A Battery

Robert W. Brown (PFC)

B Battery

Duane L. Smith (2nd Lt)
Richard R. Daley (PFC)

Lloyd R. Johansen (Pvt)
 Jack J. Milojevich (Pvt)
 Joseph E. O'Brien (Pvt)
 John G. Oblick (Pvt)
 O. L. Partridge (Pvt)

3rd Battalion

Headquarters Company

Joseph T. McGeever (Capt)
 Thomas F. Paturzo (Cpl)
 Robert H. Barnes (T /S)
 John W. Bonk (PFC)
 Joe Castanon (PFC)
 Guy Riddle (PFC)
 Jack Whitfield (PFC)
 Glenn R. Lambert (Pvt)
 Casimer W. Szczech (Pvt)

G Company

Arthur W. Ridler (1st Lt)
 George Mills (Sgt)
 Victor Thomason (T /S)
 Marvin C. Bell (PFC)
 William Buk (PFC)
 Hector H. Colo (PFC)
 Jesse O. Goswick (PFC)
 J. B. Hampton (PFC)
 Charles F. Stanford (PFC)

Felix J. Zeroski (PFC)
 John J. Campbell (Pvt)
 Joseph P. Collins (Pvt)
 Vernon D. Dirkson (Pvt)
 Paul R. Dominguez (Pvt)
 Jack L. Hitchcock (Pvt)
 Richard L. Lynam (Pvt)
 Lay ton W. Pippin (Pvt)
 Everett J. Rice (Pvt)
 Arthur W. Sessum (Pvt)
 Raymond F. Thompson (Pvt)
 Henry A. Woehrer (Pvt)

I Company

James P. Birder (Capt)
 Floyd A. Stott (1st Lt)
 Kenneth R. Mattice (Sgt)
 Robert J. Miller (Sgt)
 Wendell J. Tinger (Sgt)
 Courville B. Tarpley (Cpl)
 Anthony S. Celli (PFC)
 William J. Eckart, Jr. (PFC)
 Fred H. Iserman (PFC)
 Pedro P. Licano (PFC)
 Paul A. Rzonca (PFC)
 Harold I. Shumaker (PFC)
 Shannon F. Smith (PFC)
 William R. Walker (PFC)
 Edward G. Walsh (PFC)
 Arleton E. Bearden (Pvt)

Richard E. Donnelly (Pvt)

C Battery

Harry F. Moore (2nd Lt)
 Philip M. Kennamer (PFC)
 Billie E. Lewis (PFC)
 Marion L. Adams (Pvt)
 Moffet C. Cook (Pvt)
 Charles H. Tatro (Pvt)

D Battery

Melvin R. Palmer (Pvt)

596th Parachute Engineer Company

George E. Flannery (1st Lt)
 Wallace P. Englert (Sgt)
 Howard D. Jaynes (Sgt)
 George H. Jones (Cpl)
 William F. Boggan (PFC)
 Ernest R. Coffelt (PFC)
 Herbert B. McLamb (PFC)
 Francis T. Ropyak (PFC)
 Alois J. Siewierski (PFC)
 Vestal A. Lucas (Pvt)
 Leonard Mathis (Pvt)
 Patrick L. Michaels (Pvt)
 Harold H. Miller (Pvt)
 Harry L. Springer (Pvt)
 Henry Wilkins (Pvt)

A Man Among Men



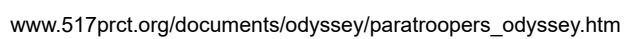
**GENERAL
MELVIN ZAIS**

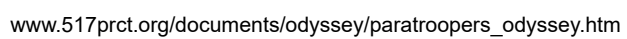
The Enduring Memory . . .

Photo Essay

Edited by John Alicki

[not yet complete]









What Troopers Say

R.E. Jones ("E" Co.) described some of the frustration: "Walk, walk, walk. Spread out and dig in. Artillery "comin-in". Move out to a new position. Dig in, Cold, Cold, Cold, Cold with hungries in between. Tanks "creaking" by -- Theirs or ours? I hope they keep moving. They attract artillery fire. Fear, cold, hunger, staggering along. I open a C ration can of hash, bit out a chunk, put it into my mouth to let it thaw. This was breakfast. I didn't like hash then and have thoroughly enjoyed avoiding it since then."

A four-man patrol of "C" Company -- **Sergeant Jack Burns, Cpl. Wayne S. Jackson, PFC Bernard Coyne and PFC E.P. Johnson** -- went on four missions in one night. On one, they lay just 50 yards from four Tiger Tanks and a company of infantry. The following day, which was Christmas, they conducted seven patrols. Finally, they found a narrow trail over which the remains of their Company made its way to safety.

T/5 Donald Barry ("G" Co.) fell asleep enroute to France and woke suddenly to find red lights flashing and everyone busy getting ready to jump. He got his leg and chest straps on, most of his equipment, and went out with the green light. He had forgotten to hook his static line. Thank goodness for the reserve chute.

Lt. Ervin Pinkston ("G" Co.) and his platoon were assigned the task of guarding 18 German prisoners overnight. They laid the Germans down in a row and spent what they considered to be an alert night on guard duty. When they woke, they found 20 prisoners, all laying out perfectly in a row. Two men had infiltrated in the night and joined the others.

Emil Kosan (596th) was recruited by the Navy to help remove an unexploded human torpedo unit floating near shore. He doesn't remember much about the job, which was routine, but he does recall being invited aboard a Navy ship for dinner, his first hot food in days.

R.E. Jones ("E" Co.) recalls the agony of having to turn in his rifle at the conclusion of the fighting in Southern France. "Our weapons were a personal thing. We cleaned them, carried them, slept with them, and we knew where they were every minute. We cussed 'em, zeroed them in and learned to live with their little idiosyncrasies. But we still had to give them up."

Allan R. Goodman (596th) says he and a group of others were taken from the line near Sospel and sent back to the coast to help destroy and remove fortifications and other material littering the coastline. The group loaded some removed mines into trucks, used others to demolish fortifications, and still others were tossed into the ocean to explode. The group had fun retrieving the fish floating to the surface.

Does anyone still remember the German reconnaissance plane, dubbed Washing Machine Charlie, that used to make sorties over the lines every night, too high to fire at with small arms, but noisy enough to wake you up?

When conditions allowed and shelter was available, the Regimental S-2 Section invariably got into a poker game. **Eino Aho, Ed Frantl, John Davis, Tom McAvoy, Joe Allen** and others were always in the games. The group's normal weapons were submachine guns. So each would remove shells from his clip to use as chips. One night the Germans pulled a surprise raid and the S-2 men were observed, frantically trying to jam shells back into clips while laying close to the floor .

How is your memory after 40 years? In what village or town was the railroad water tank located that used to double as a very, very cold shower for the guys in the area?

STARS AND STRIPES, in writing about the war along the Riviera, quoted **Major Forest Paxton** as saying that attacking is much better than static action. "I would rather attack," Paxton said. "Because, strangely enough, I suffer fewer casualties when on the offensive. The boys are alert, careful. They take good care of themselves. When we are just sitting around, they get careless."

Captain Robert Newberry, "E" Company Commander, remembers Lt. Murray a. Jones returning with a patrol and saying- "We were moving along this road very nicely, when two ME-109's passed over very low and didn't fire a shot. But, by God, in about 10 seconds, here comes two American P-47s and they strafed the hell out of us."

James M. Moser (596th) recalls being sent with **Vincent Podrasky, Peter Zubricky, George Mitchell, James Botts, Eugene Markle, Lloyd Spencer, and Albert Schornberg** to aid a tank company. The tank company commander ordered the group to remove Teller mines which prevented his advancing. The 596th men picked up the mines and piled them off the road, only to be told to deactivate them. They started lifting the firing tops off as the tank commander observed and asked, "What happens if one of those is booby trapped?" Moses replied, "You and me will have two rich widows." The 596th Engineers were allowed to finish unassisted.

Despite the weather, wounds and action, troopers of the 517th RCT maintained their sense of humor. **David G. Twight** (596th) was building a bridge across a stream when he took a break for a smoke. He found a piece of shrapnel had ripped through his jacket, cutting his cigarettes in half. "Here fellows, have a quickie," he told his buddies. "I've got two packs now."

Lt. Howard Hensleigh (Hq. 3rd) recalls many cold, cold nights, marches and bedding down in the snow with scant cover and clothing. "One night" he says, "we were trying to sleep between bouts of shivering when one of the guys spotted a miserable little shack and noted-there indeed must dwell the happiest man on earth."

Mel Trenary ("A" Co.) was a victim of frostbite. "I tried to put my boots on and my feet were too swollen. I walked to the medic station in my stocking feet. He immediately put a tag on me to start me to a field hospital. It wasn't long until my feet started turning black", Mel recalled.

Lt. John Neiler (Reg. Hdqs.) and another man moved out front one day to blow a bridge, taking a small supply of explosives. The two spotted a group of men who looked very much like Germans. They were. Both sides backed off after urging the other to surrender. Nothing doing. Shots were exchanged and one grazed Neiler's head, parting his hair. Both groups escaped.

Pvt. Jose S. Higuera ("C" Co.) was pulling duty alone in an outpost. The Germans decided they wanted the post. Four Jerries gave up their lives trying. Higuera survived.

Ellsworth Harger ("G" Co.) says that General Ridgway came out of his headquarters to talk with his guard detail, saying: "Men, your job is to defend this headquarters where it is. I'm not moving it." He didn't have to, Harger recalls.

Sergeant James M. Moses (596th) recalls the criteria for approaching these towns. "If people were out in the streets, it was OK. If not, look out. We entered these towns very carefully.

E.P. Johnson ("C" Co.) says that wandering around behind the lines near Fayence, **Cpl. Jack Gonyer and PFC John D. Wilkens** found a deserted Jerry convoy. One truck and one car were in running condition. The truck went to the Battalion Motor Pool. The car became "C" Company's private motor pool -- Cpl. Gonyer driving.

R.E. Jones ("E" Co.) remarked on the bath and new O.D.s: "After living in the same clothes for 13 days, the shower seemed like a good idea. We stripped, bathed for an allocated two minutes, emerged and donned new O.D. uniforms. This was a poor trade because the jump suits we gave up had a very sentimental value and a hell of a lot more pockets.

R.E. Jones ("E" Co.) remembers stumbling along until they reached a rocky, gravelly riverbed. "Have you ever tried to walk quietly, on gravel in pitch darkness, knowing that if anyone hears you, all is lost?" Lauding the constantly superior performance of gun crews of the 460th, **Col. Graves** wrote: "**Lt. Col. Raymond Cato** had only a few trucks to haul his artillery, ammunitions and rations. He worked out a plan where he could rush guns forward with skeleton crews and start the rest of the Battalion marching up to the new gun position. Actually, I believe that if Cato didn't have any transportation, he would have figured some way of keeping his guns in close support of the infantry. Our infantry units always attacked with

absolute confidence that the artillery fire would be where they wanted it and not in their own lap. I heard our men talk of the best artillery in the U.S. Army -- the 460th.

During this time, **Captain Norman C. "Slick" Siebert** took the lead in setting up and staffing the "Idle Hour Athletic Club" in Soissons. Word went to higher headquarters that it would be for physical training, such as boxing, weight lifting and other gymnastic activities. Paratroopers knew it as a place to pass a few hours without cares. (Refer to **Chaplain Brown** for disposition of this scheme.)

Troopers of the 517th who witnessed the attack of the 551st into intensive machine gun, mortar and rifle fire, remember it as one of the bravest attacks ever seen -- "a real gutty affair."

Clifton E. Land ("F" Co.) had been appointed a grenadier, complete with an ammo bag over his shoulder. He followed a path through a gate into a cemetery. He then found his way blocked by a fence. He tried to vault it. His ammo sack became lodged on the top of the fence and there he hung in mid-air and in plain view of the enemy. A mortar round came in, exploded against a head stone and a sliver of shrapnel flew up, cut the webbing of his ammo sack and stopped against his chest. He suffered only a bad bruise.

R.E. Jones ("E" Co.) remembers a patrol through a small village, being fired upon, and firing back. Suddenly, he was pinned down. Every time he lifted his hand, shots rang out and bullets buzzed by his head. "Then comes the realization that this war has become a personal thing -- they were trying to kill me personally."

Clifton E. Land ("F" Co.) remembers that at one stop someone discovered a huge cask of wine on a freight car. Someone popped the bung and a steady stream of men left the train to fill canteens, mess cups and even steel helmets. **M.C. Trenary** ("A" Co.) recalls the constant poker games and drawing four kings to win a pot of \$35.00.

J.M. Moses (596th) recalls the 1st Battalion was scheduled to bivouac in the Hippodrome in Antibes enroute to LaColle. **Sgt. Jack Boyer** was sent with two squads to search for and remove any mines or booby traps. When the rest of the platoon stopped to pick them up, they were playing touch football. After walking and running allover the place, the squads figured the area was clean.

Colonel Graves likes to retell the story of **Captain Charles LaChaussee's** "C" Company. From experience, "C" Company found the Germans laid in an artillery concentration at certain times each day. When visitors came to the CP, LaChaussee would pretend to telephone for a concentration just before the enemy was to fire. The gullible were often duped and amazed at the firepower demonstration.

Earl H. Dillard (596th) led the group removing the mines. After clearing the river bed and marking the ford, he and three others drove jauntily into Nice. He figures his jeep was one of the first Army vehicles in Nice.

Hal Boyle, the noted War Correspondent, wrote at length about this hill and the exploits of the men who attempted to take it. He quoted **Dick Spencer** as saying: "I still feel funny about that hill. We never lost a hill before -- and we have not lost one since. We had been taught how to win, but nobody taught us how to lose. We did not know how because we never expected to - in the paratroopers."

Colonel Paxton, in discussing the phase of the campaign, often referred to the captured hill as "Rim Rock." The name stuck and he became known as "Rim Rock" Paxton.

While motorized vehicles moved most supplies, pack mule trains were used occasionally. **Clifton E. Land** ("F" Co.) remembers helping move a train of supply-laden mules along a narrow trail. One mule balked and halted the whole train. Land climbed between the legs of a few mules to reach the balky animal. No amount of persuasion worked, so Land transferred its load to other mules, untied it from the train and shoved it over the side of the mountain.

It would be near-impossible to write enough about the skill and dedication of the 517th 's RCT's Aid Men and staff in this campaign. They were everywhere, working to help the wounded, often under fire. This group learned to use poles and ropes to rig up litter carriers for their jeeps which became a sort of , ambulance from the front to better facilities located in the rear.

It was a time for decision among many enlisted men. Not privy to all the information, they were told i they could go home with the 517th, then on to the Pacific or to Berlin. Many long-lasting friendships were broken up due to individual decisions. Ironically, those who went to Berlin remained in the service several months more than those who returned with the 517th, due to the lack of replacements -- especially, non-coms.

While groups were being re-arranged and plans made for trips home or to Berlin, a count was made by members of the 596th Engineers as to their action in the Ardennes and Belgium. They found .they had removed and deactivated more than 2,300 mines and booby traps of all types. The cost was eight men killed and seven wounded.

Allan R. Goodman (596th) sums up the role of the 596th Engineers in Italy as: "Our support was to handle any engineering or vehicle and personnel mine problems encountered. Squads, on occasion, (but rarely) were used in firing positions (but were often fired upon). We bivouacked under large bore British artillery at Civittavecchia. On our first combat patrol, I stood up to pass hand signals and drew sniper fire. I learned better communication techniques quickly. And I remember we had about 50 gallons of gasoline to run a little one-horse motor we had. Most of the gas, however, we traded with Italians for wine."

Has anyone ever forgotten the first time he heard a German burp gun fired in combat? It was like no other sound in the world.

At one point in the Italian campaign, Company C was in position below one of those picturesque hilltop villages. Every so often a church bell would ring. This was followed by rounds of mortar and artillery shells falling in the company's area. Each time the rounds fell, C Company troopers dug their fox holes a little deeper. They did notice the church bell peeling every 15 minutes or so, then artillery or aerial bursts would rain down. A jeep patrol into the village flushed out a forward observer who was using the bell as a signal to fire.

Early in the Southern France invasion activities, recalls **Earl Dillard** (596th), the 596th Engineers "liberated" a big D7 bulldozer. They used it everywhere until the day **Lt. Norwood** and the driver were clearing debris from a bridge site and dropped the blade on a hidden AT mine. The explosion, he says, rolled the blade up like a piece of cardboard. The two men were shaken up, but unhurt.

Ellsworth Harger ("G" Co.) returned to Southern France with the Second Champagne Campaign tour and found the exact spot where he landed on D-Day. Talking with a group of people in a nearby farm-house, he found one woman who had been 17 at the time of the invasion and recalls all the people bringing in discarded parachutes for use in making clothing. She even produced an unopen reserve chute complete with the packing record which she gave to Harger.

A team comprised of **Bill Frieze**, **Barney Gossen** and **Ray "Pop" Boyce**, all of Headquarters Second Battalion, earned a reputation as "jeep liberators first class." They often went to Rome via provided truck, but seldom came home without another jeep. On one such excursion they were pursued by an MP jeep. Frieze, riding in back, recalls the MPs got nasty and started shooting at their vehicle. He noticed a knapsack filled with smoke grenades, promptly began to toss them out at intervals, and elude the "posse."

Gaylord Bucher (460th) recalls that shortly after landing in France, he stumbled across a trooper with two broken ankles. He helped him get comfortable in a nearby barn, gave him all his rations and wished him luck before departing. Bucher says, "To this day I often wonder what happened to him -- Did our people find him or did the Germans?" Anyone know the answer to Bucher's riddle?

Wilbur H. "Bill" Terrell ("I" Co.) was serving as a medic in that first big push up the hill to Col De Braus. He was just behind the point group comprised of **Captain Joseph T. McGeever**, **Lt. Reed Terrell** (Bill's second or third cousin), **Sgt. Dan G. Brogdon** and **Pvt. Willis A. Woodcock** when the group ran into intensive fire. Bill Terrell made his way forward to find McGeever dead, Woodcock unconscious, Reed Terrell hit and in immense pain and six Germans surrounding Brogdon.

Identifying himself as a medic, Bill treated the men best he could, had a scalpel and scissors removed by the Germans and asked for permission to go for help. He was provided an escort who was shot as the two approached Company I lines. Despite the withdrawal of his parent group, Bill Terrell made his way back up the hill and brought Reed Terrell down. Later, he received a V Mail letter, which he has today, from Reed Terrell acknowledging his heroic action and saying he had saved "one trooper's life."

Early in the Ardennes action, **Allan Goodman** and a group of other 596th men were clearing mines off a snow-covered road. The snow got into the pin holes of the mines and was often frozen, making it hard to install a safety pin. He looked around to see how others were handling the problem and spotted **Gus Madison** who was gently removing the mines, holding the top in his mouth to melt the snow, then replacing the safety pins.

Captain Ben Sullivan, 1st Battalion Surgeon, was a philosopher as well as a damned good man to have around when the going got tough and injuries occurred. He says the Medical Section concentrated on the company aid men to encourage them and let them know the Section was backing them. "Most soldiers," he said, "were not afraid of death. Their fear was of being wounded and left in pain, lost." Our philosophy worked so well that any platoon set for patrol duty would protest loudly, if no aid man was available, Sullivan says.

Does anyone remember the sound of the first jet fighter aircraft they ever heard? The German ME-109 buzzed 517th positions from time to time, but did little damage. They did, however, make one heck of an unforgettable racket.

In those early days of trying to get located in Belgium, riding in jeeps with the tops and windshields down in the bitter cold and amongst unknown roads and people, was not the most desirable mode of transportation. **Captain Albin Dearing**, the Regimental S-2, was enroute to some objective with **Eino Aho** driving, **Henry Hauer** and **Bill Weickersheimer** riding as fire support. He was using an almost useless map for navigation. The quartet passed through one small village twice and returned for the third time. Hauer, always the joker, asked: "Captain Dearing is it alright if I get off here and wait until you come around again, my feet are frozen." Dearing chuckled about it later, but had a few choice words for Hauer at the time.

M.C. Trenary ("A" Co.) recalls his Christmas "dinner" eaten late December 24th -- crackers, butter and jelly. It was, he said, one of the best meals he had ever eaten and one of the few in the days just past.

Clifton E. Land ("F" Co.) was out front of his platoon's dug-in positions, when he remembered he had turned 19 that very day. A friend, **Koehler**, crawled out to his foxhole and presented him a Christmas/birthday present -- a half-full can of frozen creamed corn. No greater love has man than to share with his buddy.

PFC Bernard Coyne ("C" Co.) had a spine-chilling experience in the snow when a bullet passed completely through his helmet, rolling him stunned, but unscathed, into a nearby mud puddle.

Men of the 596th Engineers often worked out front of front-line troops in removing mines and booby traps. **Allan Goodman** recalls an incident when his group was working in heavy snow and exposed enough to draw constant sniper fire. He talked an officer into letting him "use" some German prisoners. He drew the prisoners into a tight ring around the men removing mines and eliminated the sniper fire for a time.

R.E. Jones ("E" Co.) says he knows little about trajectory and fire patterns, but the "belt-fed artillery of the 460th" sure shut down the incoming 88s, when the help was needed. As companies filled and got down to the basics of training, certain recognitions came to light. For example, there were guidon bearers for each company. It was an honor to be assigned this duty. Also, in double time situations, and there were a lot of these, the guidon bearer sort of set the pace without worrying about stepping on the heels of those running in front of him. Carrying the regimental colors, plus Old Glory, was an honor. **Robert Morgan**, an ex USMA student, was the Color Sergeant. **Bill Weickersheimer** generally carried the 517th banner. Guards included **Joe Allen**, **Jack Dunaway**, **Norman Allen**, **Don Eugene** and others from time to time.

From the time the first troops arrived at Camp Toccoa, little squabbles were evident. Being alone on the post, the fights tended to be man-to-man. Then came Fort Benning and everything changed. The troops of 517th closed ranks to fight with a new

adversary -- the armored divisions who were upholding a sort of tradition all their own, too.

At Camp Mackall, when nightly and weekend passes came more frequently, men scattered out in many directions. A few joined together to hire what taxi cabs they could. Others just bore the indignity of riding in those "cattle car" like buses where most people had to stand. Only later, in France, did we get worse transportation in the 40 and 8's.

Jack Dunaway, Bob Morgan and Bill Weickersheimer, all of Regimental S-2, drew a three-day pass, caught the Seaboard Airline Railway to New York and, using Morgan's connections established as a USMA cadet, found rooms in a local hotel. All went their merry way. Bill wandered into a USO Canteen, was spotted alone, and given a ticket to the President's Birthday Ball at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. His buddies did not believe his stories until the next day when a newspaper photo identified some GIs who attended, including the 517er .

M.B. "Monk" Johnson (596th) had this to say about the rough training, at Toccoa, Benning and Mackall: "I had to promise myself I would make it through the day, but I would quit tomorrow. Never did manage to quit, because I kept recalling **Sergeant Morgan's** words to us as we organized. He said: "Forget two phrases -- I can't do it and I am at a disadvantage."

M.C. Trenary (" A " Co.) says that the flight for his first parachute jump was also his first time in an airplane, as it was for a lot of 517ers. "I was fascinated watching and feeling the plane leave the ground and climb. Later, I told people the first airplane I was ever in, I had to jump out of," he says.

The 517 PRCT took the U .S. Army Physical Proficiency Tests in stride. Three times in one day standing Army records were broken. Company D, Company B and Headquarters Third finished very close to one another, each establishing a new all-Army record.

Parachute Pete Mayer (Hdqs. 1st) wrote that the 517 reached the climax of its training and, so far as anyone could tell, no one was sad about the fact we didn't have to freeze in the sand hills of North Carolina anymore. For a while we would freeze in the rock hills of Tennessee.

Upon arrival at Camp Mackall and the subsequent issuing of new vehicles, supplies, etc. **Service Company** was a very, very busy organization, lending support to the entire Combat Team. At one retreat ceremony, Service Company turned out the Company Commander, First Sergeant and three men. The remainder of the Company was pulling overtime duties.

Cpl. Bill Frieze (Hq. 2nd) says that his first few days at Camp Toccoa were both terrifying and satisfying. He remembers of the orientation speech by **Major Dick Seitz** as superior and inspiring, a real encouragement to work hard and train well.

Clifton E. Land ("F" Co.) was forward with his unit in this action. He was knocked unconscious when a mortar shell fell near his fox hole. He woke to find the remainder of his platoon had pulled back and he started wandering. He went the wrong way, through a mine field. He was behind German lines for three days, hiding and staying alive by digging up raw turnips from fields to eat. He finally made his way back to the American lines, but was mistaken for a German. He was held with other German prisoners for two days before he was released.

Allan Goodman, Lyle Madison and George Ayling were lying under cover on one level of a terraced field trying to make as small a target as possible for artillery and small arms fire. **Jack Holbrook** was one level down. The 596th men had been at the front of a unit when mortar shells started falling like rain. One of the men on the top level lost his steel helmet and it rolled down and struck a cringing John Holbrook. He thought he was hit bad and started feeling everywhere for the tell-tale blood. The trio above saw the whole thing and despite the gravity of the situation, started to laugh. Holbrook realized what happened and started tossing rocks at his tormentors.

Clarence McCollum ("F" Co.) had a rough time on the trip north. He had recently been released from the hospital following an operation to remove hemorrhoids. On the train ride he jumped down to try to close a stuck boxcar door. The train started

with a lurch, jamming the door against his hands. As the train gathered speed, his buddies were working to get him inside. Finally, he made it. And he was not sure which hurt the worse, his hand or the hemorrhoids.

Earl Dillard (596) said that the 596th Engineers were not too happy in being integrated into the 13th as Company C of the 129th AB Engineers. "We had a sad full-dress ceremony in Chablis when the 596th guidon was lowered. We were not too eager to make the change. We were leaving a damned good outfit for one that was not combat seasoned," Dillard said.

While at B-54, **Clarence McCollum** ("F Co.) was offered an opportunity to take an orientation flight aboard the "new" C-46 aircraft. He enjoyed the ride to and over Paris and remembers marveling at the price of the C-46, which was quoted to him as \$225,000.

The **Regimental S-2 Section** had planned a party in a nearby town. Arrangements had been made for girls to be invited. Spam, bread, cheese, peanut butter and jelly was acquired for food and booze was ordered in quantity. Several of the troopers stopped in at a local barber shop to get ready for the party when the word went round of the armistice. Instant bedlam broke out. The party was started at once, people flocked to the sound of gaiety and everyone had a great time. All food was eaten, except the peanut butter. So much for American tastes.

John (Buck) Miller (Co. C) remembers the time in Camp Mackall when some crafty troopers managed to steal several pies from the Mess Hall. As word got to the Company Commander, they had to fall out in company formation. No one admitted to it, but the pies were safely hidden in nearby coal boxes in front of the barracks. Buck also remembers getting hit on D-Day. "Back at the Aid Station, which was a farm house, they put me on a table. One Doctor looked at the other and questioned whether or not they should remove the damaged arm. I was evacuated via hospital ship to Naples. The infection was so bad that maggots were developing under the cast. Later, I was flown to Algiers and ultimately to Miami. 14 operations followed."

Ralph Clink (Hq. 1) remembers D-Day: "My parachute opened immediately and my first concern was the fog. Were we over water? Should I free myself of equipment in anticipation of a water landing? These concerns vanished as I felt something sharp graze my face from the middle of my right cheek to the corner of my right eye. My first thought was that I had lost an eye. Thank God, I had not."

Many of us First Bn. men owe our lives to our great Bn. Commander **Colonel William Boyle**. I am sure the other men from the 2nd, 3rd, 406th, and 596th felt the same about their leaders, but we would have followed him anywhere he led. One evening, I think in October, we, 1st Bn, were to go to Sospel, which was held by the Germans. Since the road down the mountain to Sospel was well covered, we were to go down the ski trail. Our scouts found a mine field so we had to go around which meant climbing up the side of the mountain over the mine field. The Germans must have been watching us, as when our Bn. was halfway round the mine field they opened fire hitting two of our men. After a small fire fight the Germans withdrew. Colonel Boyle, who was always up front, reasoned that such a small group with light arms and no vehicles could not take the fort and would be cut off without supplies so he had us move back down the trail 'til morning at which time we were given another assignment. It was right after this that I voted for the first time. It was a big thrill as I received my absentee ballot and could write home that I voted.

War Correspondent **Hal Doyle** reported a **Cpl. Burton E. Meandor** made his 13th "Black Cat" jump in this area. Meandor was asleep when a buddy ignited a can of gasoline. He awoke, took one look at the flames, and bailed out the window, landing three floors in a snow bank. He was unhurt.

The 596th also improvised a routine, for disabling tanks, reports **Lt. Ray Held**. "We disabled tanks, captured American ones as well as damaged Germans, by tossing phosphorous grenades down the gun barrels. This prevented their re-use."

Don Fraser was moving across open ground toward Hotton when he spotted a man working his way out of the nearby wooded area. The image cleared and it proved to be **Bill Boyle**. Don asked him what he was doing as Lead Scout. Bill retorted, "What the Hell are *you* doing as Lead Scout."

Floyd Polk (Co. D) "While I was in France for our 40th Anniversary, I went back to Hill 1098 to recover a few pieces of shrapnel. While there, I managed to locate the slit-trench in which I had taken cover from German 88 fire. Not over 30 feet from the trench was a newly wallowed place in the grass about the size of a blanket. I mused, 'in 1985 Hill 1098 is being used to make love and not to make war'."

Edmund (Dog) Jordon (Co. B) "Shortly after jumping into Southern France, a Machine Gun Section Sergeant from Battalion Headquarters was shot through the calf of the leg. The bullet had missed the bone and passed through the flesh. A Scotch medic, who had jumped with the British, rendered aid and had him evacuated to a field hospital. Next day, the Sergeant was observed limping back to his company. When questioned about his returning so soon, he responded, 'Hell, they have the same chow in the hospital, so I am better off here.'"

Eldon Bolin (Co. C) approached a bullet scarred convertible on Highway N7 near the D-Day objective of the 1st Battalion. Earlier in the day, this had been the site of the Company B road-block. The bodies of 6 Germans in the area were evidence of a determined fire-fight. Company B road-blocks along Highway N7 were not elaborate. Sergeant **Clark Archer, Joe Kellogg, Forrest Sutton** and **Steve Weirzba** took hidden positions in a drainage ditch near the roadway. As a German vehicle approached the troopers responded to a signal from an observer to their rear and commenced firing. In the case of this convertible, Weirzba's AT Grenade did not detonate; however, it did hit the German driver in the head. The convertible was later turned over to **Colonel Graves** as a Command Car .

Bill Baker (460) reports that a group of 460 Survey and Fire Direction participants developed a new slide rule which was later adopted by the United States Army. This newly developed slide rule incorporated the Site Factor for the first time. It is our understanding that Sergeant **Quentin Short** received an award for his effort. "One cannot help but believe that the greatest quality of the men was their ability to learn quickly from mistakes and rise to the occasion."

Layton Mabrey (460) has generated a true-to-life novel entitled 'Of Chutes and Men' , in which he attempts to recapitulate his many interesting military experiences. The art work is most impressive.

Hal Roberts (596) landed in a vineyard near a German command post. The next few hours were spent crawling a circular route in an attempt to find an escape route. Ultimately, he and Sgt. Hoffman joined up with some British paratroopers and launched a successful attack on the German positions.

Bill Boyle, according to **Don Fraser**, was quite vocal while expressing his displeasure with **Chopper Kienlen's** "dress" as a substitute for his still drying OD's. However, a pair of scissors was a quick remedy.

Leroy (Uncle Bore) Johnson (Svc. Co.) remembers that 18 Riggers volunteered to make the jump in Southern France. They were grouped together in the tail plane and much to their amazement landed with the 3rd Battalion near Callian, some 40 kilometers from the Drop Zone.

Ken Lodecke has many memories of his experiences with the 517. Needless to say, the most unforgettable concerns his wedding day in Nice, France, on 4 December 1944.

Paul Charette (Co. D) waited 40 years to explain to **Dick Seitz** how he took it upon himself and donated 3 reserve chutes to the ladies of Saint Jean and Saint Andre parishes in Joigny. The chutes were used to fashion First Communion dresses for parish girls. Paul's uneasiness is understandable, Dick was a close acquaintance of Parish Priest, Father Vulliez.

Jim Mackenzie (Hq. 2) reports the following story: During operations above Col de Braus, **Pvt. Bruce Morley** of the Mortar Platoon was seriously wounded in both legs. After moving him down below the cliff his wounds were treated with sulfa and bandaged. Bruce asked Jim to keep his wallet until he returned. It was obvious that he would not return due to the severity of the wounds. However, Jim told him that he would comply with the request. Jim put the money into Bruce's pocket and retained the wallet. Shortly thereafter, Bruce was sent to the US. 25 years later and with the assistance of a Utah sheriff, Jim was able to locate Bruce to return the wallet.

Bill Webb (Hq. 3) had an incoming interview with **Mel Zais**. During the course of the interview it was revealed that Bill had played football for Riverside Academy in a game against Tennessee Military Institute. Small World Department: **Mel Zais** was, at that time, line coach at TMI.

Lt. Bob Thomson (Co. B) has many vivid memories of 517 combat experiences. Especially, the unit's first day in Italy, when he issued his first combat command "Scouts Out." **Ed Jordon** and **Tex Carpenter** responded and by 0730 "the fat was in the fire." The race was on to occupy a ridge to his Platoon's immediate front. Unfortunately, Lt. Thomson was struck in the leg shortly thereafter and was thinking "What a short war ." **Doc Keen** was quickly on the scene to administer aid.

Don Fraser and two other men from Company A were successful in their attempt to extract **Kirkpatrick** from the hospital at Camp MacKall immediately prior to the unit's departure for FOE. "That was one nice thing about being an independent unit, we could help our people and keep it quiet."

Bill Boyle was not at all pleased with the Germans when their shelling of his position interrupted his Cribbage game with **Joe Brody**. Seems that Bill was in one of those rare situations when he had a good chance of beating Joe. Needless to say, Bill did not see sufficient reason to stop the game and insisted that it resume shortly thereafter.

Richard Jackson (Co. H) "At Peira Cava, we dug in and patrolled vigorously. On one patrol the mission was to capture a prisoner for questioning. In an ensuing fire-fight, the potential prisoners were done away with." Later, the Platoon bunker received a direct hit burying the occupants for several hours.

Clarence Karsten (Co. H) Remembers his first action at Montepescah & the concentrations of machine gun fire. He was suddenly trying to find a rock large enough to put in front of his head. Later , on the drop in Southern France, he was amazed to learn that he had landed 25 miles from the intended Drop Zone. In September, his patrol was ambushed by the Germans; however, they managed to escape unscathed. Company H positions at Peira Cava were shelled 18 days in a row. One 170 mm shell scored a direct hit on an occupied building. As luck would dictate, the shell proved to be a dud.

Jack Kinzer (460) "The blood and sweat shed during our combat experiences cemented many life-long friendships over military and civilian careers."

Richard Wheeler (460) was induced to join the Paratroops after hearing stories about parachute training from his uncle, **Lt. John Brearly** (Co. E/517). He remembers that the purpose of the training at Camp Toccoa was to make new recruits quit as rapidly as possible. The basic fun-and-games entailed duck walk, leap frog, bear walk, running backwards, and many other techniques he has long since forgotten.

Merle McMorrow (460) "I had been at Camp Mackall for 2 days and noted that none of the batteries were up to full strength. As a result, everyone caught KP quite often. The 3rd day in camp was my birthday. **Bill Westbrook** rattled my bunk at 0430 and told me I was due on KP. I told him that there must be some mistake as it was my birthday. He retorted, 'I don't give a damn if its Roosevelt 's birthday, you 're on KP'."

John D. Wilson (460) "I consider the 460th to be one of a kind. I did service with some of the best, like the 1st and 2nd Divisions. None could hold a candle to the Airborne."

Thomas Mehler (460) "The jump into Southern France was my first night jump, my first combat jump and also my qualifying jump. I had been an artillery observer with the 1st. Armored Division prior to entering jump school and had completed only 4 jumps prior to the day of the invasion."

Norman L. Johnson (460) remembers German prisoners making comment about our belt-fed artillery.

George Schnebli (460) "After we jumped in Southern France and were assembling, I and several other men came across a group of tattered troopers resting in a wooded area. Most of them had injuries ranging from sprained ankles to bad cuts. I told them we would send an aid man and see about having them evacuated. To the man they declared, 'we are not going to be evacuated.' They hobbled along with us to the Battalion assembly area.

Leo Turco (460) After 2 years with the Big Red One Division he volunteered for parachute duty. Later, he cad red the 460. Leo remembers being assured by the pilot of his plane that his experience from the Normandy drop would assure an on-target drop in Southern France. This did not prove to be the case as Leo landed in a tree several miles from the DZ. To make matters worse, the tree was right behind a building that was occupied by German soldiers, After taking refuge in a garden area the Germans tracked them down and sprayed the area with small arms fire. In the ensuing fire-fight, the Jerries were driven away and Leo continued to the assembly area.

Richard and Roger Tallakson (460) were a set of twins to serve with the Combat Team. While they performed many duties together, they preferred not to fly in the same plane. On August 15, 1944, Roger landed about 26 miles from the intended DZ and Richard was about 30 miles away. Daylight brought lots of activity and each questioned nearby troopers on the whereabouts of the missing brother. Richard had been informed that Roger suffered from a broken back and had been flown back to Rome. Roger heard rumors that Richard had been evacuated to Rome with a broken leg. Two days following the jump, Roger was staggering into the assembly area when he spotted Richard sitting beside a freshly dug fox hole, reading a letter from home.

Whitey Hillsdale and **Al Paciotti** (Co. B) were observing the silhouettes of two men that were approaching the platoon outpost near St. Jacques. Whitey made the determination that Al should hold his fire until a more positive identification could be made. Good thinking. The men approaching the outpost were **General Gavin** and his radio operator.

Robert L. Olson (460) "The extra pay wits inducement to become a jumper It took an awful lot of nerve to volunteer But nothing in comparison to the amount of nerve it took to say, I quit."

Houston Roberson (R Hq) has demonstrated that he is a master at writing 517 short stories. His selection includes Suzette and The Balaulli Family, Just Barely Missed, Prisoners By The Thousands, The Big Buck, The Live Shell That Didn't Make It, The Stationary Mortar, Leon Goforth and The Garden Wail, What Am I Doing Here, and Invasion-Nice. These stories, and others, should be best sellers.

For additional stories from 517 troopers, as collected from [MailCall](#) publications beginning in 2001, visit the [Recollections](#) page on the web site.

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