

# IN MEMORIUM



To the brave, selfless men of Company A, 275<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 70<sup>th</sup> Division who made the ultimate sacrifice that we may enjoy our freedoms not to mention lives:

14 reported killed after Angelsberg skirmish of the Battle of Philippsbourg (p 45-48)

2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt David P. Scobey,	Attempted rescue of Winderman Patrol
Sgt Leroy H. Bussman,	Winderman Patrol
Pfc Ned E. Smith ,	Winderman Patrol– wife and 2 children
Pfc Alfred Heard,	Winderman Patrol
Pfc Lester Hiltenbeitel,	Winderman Patrol
Pfc James E. Foley,	Ammo Carrier for Hazmuka LMG Co A Wpns Pltn Squad
Pfc Charles L. Bruner	Uncertain
Fvt Charles R. Spurgeon	Uncertain

The remaining 6 men were killed on the retreat from Angelsburg.  
One member of reconnaissance squad is believed to have died from wounds suffered during Obermühthal ambush.

# **OPERATION NORTHWIND**

**Written by Timothy McG. Millhiser in conjunction with Capt. Ross R. Millhiser  
(Retired as Major)  
In preparation for family trip to Lower Vosges, June 26-28, 2000**



**Dedicated to our Father and Grandfather who, like the million of other Americans, did what he had to do to protect our freedoms. Then he returned to pickup his life before it was interrupted.**

**He and his fellow soldiers are the timeless model of ordinary men as heroes.**

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**Attachments:**

- A. Picture Ross R. Millhiser while in Camp Ritchie, MD Intelligence School 1943
- B. Account by Robert Fencl, 1<sup>st</sup> Bn HQ/275 of Jan 3-5 fighting in town to hold Philippsbourg
- C. Account J.C. Holt, D/275<sup>th</sup> 81mm mortar attached to A/275<sup>th</sup>, part of Klien Mortar squad that came under direct attach morning January 3, 1945.
- D. Letter, map and account by SSgt Peter Haugan, III, A/275th first day light January 3, 1945
- E. Account by Pfc. Frank Hazmuka, 1<sup>st</sup> gunner, 2<sup>nd</sup> LMG, A/275<sup>th</sup> of Jan 2&3
- F. Account by machine gunner Lee Miller, January 3, 1945
- G. Account by POW Irwin Cone of first few days of being captured with **RRM**
- H. Letter from Father Mike McPhelin, Capt ChC., dated Jan. 17, 1945 to Eleanor Millhiser
- I. Special Orders, March 26, 1942, **RRM** to report to Infantry Officer Candidate School
- J. Special Orders, July 4, 1942 making **RRM** 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant
- K. Special Orders, October 13, 1943 making **RRM** Captain
- L. Identity Card for Ex-Prisoner of War, May 11, 1945, issued at Camp Luck Strike
- M. Letter by Lt. Col. Ronald J. Pierce, August 6, 1945, recommending **RRM** for promotion to major
- N. **RRM**'s Certificate of Service (honorable discharge), December 10, 1945
- O. Presidential Directive, December 20, 1945, awarding **RRM** Purple Heart Medal
- P. Appointment, May 9, 1947, appointing **RRM** Major effective October 24, 1945
- Q. Award, March 13, 1990, **RRM** Bronze Star Medal
- R. Award, March 28, 1990 **RRM** Prisoner of War Medal
- S. Order of Rank, WWII
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- V. Picture **RRM** recounting ordeal at base of cliff behind Obermühthal
- W. Picture **RRM** and family, June 27, 2000

**ARMY LINE OF COMMAND:**

US Forces	LtGen Bradley		Commander of the European Theater of Operations, US Army
Group	VI Group – LtGen Jacob L Devers		US 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 7 <sup>th</sup> Army & French 1 <sup>st</sup>
Army	7 <sup>th</sup> Army - LtGen Alexander Patch; LtGen George S. Patton Orig 7 <sup>th</sup> later the 3 <sup>rd</sup>		2 or more Corps
Corps	VI Corps - Maj. Gen. Brooks; XV - MajGen Wade H. Haislip	50-300,000	2 or more Divisions
Division	70 <sup>th</sup> “Trailblazers” Brig Gen Thomas W. Herren	14,250 <sup>1</sup>	Command, 3 Infantry Regiments, can include supporting artillery, armor, and engineer units and has its own communication, supply, maintenance, and evacuation services.
Regiment	275 <sup>th</sup> Regiment - Colonel Charles S. Pettee	3,118	Command, 3 Infantry Battalions
Battalion	1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion - LtCol Ronald Pierce	871	Command, 3 Infantry Co., Heavy Weapons Co
Company	Co A – Capt Millhiser	193	Command, 3 rifle platoons, 1 weapons platoon (2 LMG, 1 HMG, 3x60-mm mortars primary, 3 antitank rocket launchers
Rifle Platoon	Lieutenant	36	3 rifle squads
Squad	Sergeant	12	

<sup>1</sup> “Army Almanac,” Table of Organization #1, Infantry Division, July 15, 1943

## **ABBREVIATIONS:**

BAR	Browning automatic rifle
Bazooka	AT rocket launcher
Bn	Battalion
Burp Gun	German machine pistol, weapons fired on RRM and recon. Squad when captured
CG	Commanding General
Co	Company
CP	Command Post
Div	Division
88	German 88mm gun
81	81mm mortar
EO	Executive Officer
ETO	European Theater of Operations
57	57mm anti-tank gun
FO	(artillery) forward observer
G-3	senior staff section for operations or its chief
G-2	senior staff section for intelligence or its chief
HMG	Heavy machine gun – 50 mm
Hq	Headquarters
I & R	Intelligence and reconnaissance (platoon)
KIA	Killed in action
LD	Line of departure (in a defensive arrangement of forces)
LMG	Light machine gun – 30 mm
MG	Machine gun
MIA	Missing in action
MLF	Main line of resistance (in a defensive arrangement of forces)
M-1	Standard rifle for US infantry troops, also known as Garand
105	105mm howitzer
OCS	Officer Candidate School
OP	Observation post (at which an artillery FO operates)
Regt	Regiment
SHAEF	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces
Staff Designation:	
S-1	adjutant
S-2	intelligence officer
S-3	operations officer
S-4	supply officer
60	60mm mortar
Springfield	Special US infantry rifle used for grenade launching and sniping – also known as the '03, for 1903, its model year.
TD	Tank destroyer
VG	<i>Volk Grenadier</i>
WIA	Wounded in action

# Chronology of RRM's WWII

## 275<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Company A

What follows is one man's war:

December 15, 1944	<b>RRM</b> and the 275 <sup>th</sup> Regiment arrive at Marseilles
January 3-4, 1945	Battle of Philippsbourg
January 5-10, 1945	Defensive Position near Dambach
January 11, 1945	German Zintzel Valley Thrust – Obermühthal Skirmish & Capture
March 27, 1945	Patton's illfated "Liberation" of <b>RRM</b> and other POWs
Late April 1945	<b>RRM</b> free.

### **History & Geography:**

(see map 1) The villages of Philippsbourg, Obermühthal and Baerenthal lie in the midst of the Lower Vosges Mountains in northeastern France near to German border. They had been pawns between Germany and France, having switched hands three times within the 75 yrs prior to WWII. So all people who had lived to be 50 had had their national flag changed at least once.<sup>2</sup>

The area had been last taken by the Germans in about 1860 by the Prussians. WWI gave it back to France. In 1940, Germany broke through Luxembourg and Brussels and Paris surrendered. However, about November 1944, the Germans retreated to the Siegfried Line, essentially the German border and the Americans arrived.

The Village of Philippsbourg was adjudged to have been 44% destroyed primarily by the fighting of Jan 1945.<sup>3</sup> Philippsbourg was important because it was the last choke point in the Falkenstein Valley before exiting to the flat lands of the Rhine River plain. It was a critical town because it sits on an intersection of the important N62 French highway and is also on the railroad line between Bitche and Haguenau. This was the sole route on which the Nazis could move tanks and supplies to sustain the breakthrough they sought. The Germans were willing to pay a high price to gain control of the village.<sup>4</sup>

Falkenstein, a common name of landmarks and of the Philippsbourg Valley, comes from name of an early local noble family who owned the area.

Operation Northwind (*Unternehmen Nordwind* as Hitler himself had code-named it.) or the Second Battle of the Bulge lasted a month longer than the original Battle of the Bulge and cost the lives of some 16,000 American soldiers and perhaps twice the number of French soldiers serving under the American command.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ordeal in the Vosges, Prologue, XV

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., XVIII

<sup>4</sup> 275<sup>th</sup> Division History, Part 1, [http://www.trailblazersww2.org/division\\_history.htm](http://www.trailblazersww2.org/division_history.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Operation Northwind, Intro.



**WWII:**

- Sept 3, 1939 Hitler invades Poland and England and France declares war.
- 1940 Germany breaks through Luxembourg and Brussels and Paris surrenders.
- June 1941 Grandfather and Sissa graduate from college.
- Dec 7, 1941 Pearl Harbor
- Dec 11, 1941 Germany and Italy declare war on USA
- January, 1942 **RRM** Drafted **RRM** first sent to Camp Lee, near Petersburg, VA then Camp Weehlan, Macon, GA basic infantry training and then soon reassigned to Combat Intelligence Training.
- April 8, 1942 **RRM** sent to OCS, Infantry School, Ft. Benning, Georgia. Known as 90-days wonders because after only 90 days candidates graduate as officers.
- July 4, 1942 **RRM** graduates from OCS as Second Lieutenant. While at OCS volunteers for paratroopers. On day of graduation, Army uncharacteristically took no one for paratroopers. **RRM** later is told that paratroopers who were accepted a couple of days on either side are wiped out in drops in North Africa.
- July 14, 1942 **RRM** & EKMcG married. Ten days leave for marriage and honeymoon. Paapaa get newlyweds drawing room on train to Chicago. For remainder of trip to Camp White, Medford, OR, they travel on a new very deluxe train with air-conditioning and polarized glass windows.

Army assigns him to 91<sup>st</sup> at Camp White, Medford, OR who in turn assign him to S-2 (Intelligence) of battalion commander Macsalka, tough Brooklynite former reservist.

One of E. Ross Millhiser's businesses, Richmond Cedar Works, has a mill in Medford. Through this connection, he finds room for **RRM** & EMcGM at a private home in Medford.

Meanwhile, EMcGM is trying to find an apt closer to camp and indoors, by scouring all the housing service listings. Found small apartment in GeBour Apartments in middle of town. Bedroom was an unheated enclosed porch. The natural refrigeration was good for keeping hams Fifi and Paapaa sent. An unheated Oregon porch in the winter would be luxurious compared to the nights to come in Philippsbourg.

Thanksgiving 1942 EMcGM buys and carefully measures turkey at PX. Even after several measures by army personnel, turkey won't fit except on a cookie pan. Kinks of measuring and cooking turkey were quickly worked out, as all can attest to many the wonderful subsequent Thanksgiving and (Christmas) dinners. The turkey was kept under the bed in the unheated sleeping porch.

May 2, 1943 Ross, Jr. born

June 15, 1943 70<sup>th</sup> Division activated at Camp Adair, OR

June/July 1943 Lt. Col. Macsalka, BN CO, presumably likes other S-2 officers more, so he sends **RRM** to new 70<sup>th</sup> Division, Camp Adair, OR, where regimental command in turn assign him as S-2. He is later promoted to Captain though regimental S-2 requires a major per the TO.

July 10, 1943 Allies land on Sicily. Gen Patton activates the 7<sup>th</sup> Army aboard ships just before landing.

August, 1943 **RRM** given opportunity to go to Camp Richie, MD, Military Intelligence Training Center, for air photography interpretation course. Fort Richie, now, is known to be a choice assignment, so **RRM**'s regimental CO, Col Wolfe, has **RRM** promise he will return to Wolfe's command.

While at Camp Richie, he meets Lt or Cpt Irving Press from Yale days at J. Press, New Haven, habidashers who, because of his friendship with Richie S-1 (personnel) offers to get **RRM** transferred through the S-1 permanently to Camp Richie. S-1 confirms that he would be happy to do so. **RRM** turns the offer down because of above promise.

**RRM** is due for promotion to major as regimental S-2 but CO Wolfe says **RRM** needs experience field captain promotion but CO Wolfe says **RRM** needs experience as line command troop leader. He assigns **RRM**, to be recalled subsequently to regimental staff, to his worst company, Co A. Shortly thereafter, CO is sent overseas. New CO Col Richardson(?) does not know **RRM**. **RRM** stays with Co A.

June 6, 1944 D-Day

### **275<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment:**

Nov 11, 1944 The 275<sup>th</sup> Regt moves under great secrecy from Fort Leonard Wood, MI to Camp Myles Standish, near Taunton, MA for preparation and practice. Only the 274<sup>th</sup>, 275<sup>th</sup> and 276<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments of 70<sup>th</sup> Division embark from Boston for Europe.

During above train ride, **RRM** makes point of asking Co A men, as he had done on train ride from Oregon to Missouri, why they will be fighting. Some understand fighting Japan because of attack on Pearl Harbor. Most are not sure why they are fighting Hitler

since the Germans had done nothing to the USA (except unilaterally declare war against USA December 11, 1941). Hitler gratuitous declaration of war against the USA the day after Pearl Harbor gave the American leaders the focal point at which to aim our propaganda, but even three years later, the average citizen is not fully convinced. One can draw the conclusion that USA citizens are not so idealistic.

The 275<sup>th</sup> boards *USS West Point*, formerly *USS America* (see attachment U), a new former luxury transatlantic liner built in 1940 or '41; pride of the USA Merchant Marine, faster than and as luxurious as the English *Queen Elizabeth* and French *Normand*. (**RRM** had planned to take his Yale graduation gift from his parents, a trip on this new liner but the ship was requisitioned for the military and turned into a troop ship.) The ship departs 1600 December 6, 1944 for an unescorted, stormy, sea-sick North Atlantic crossing. Its speed gives it a good chance to outrun submarines and it is too fast for other troop and supply ships being escorted. It runs non-stop through the Strait of Gibraltar to Marseilles.

**RRM's** Company A soldiers are fortunately assigned to the main deck fantail, easier to abandon ship if it is torpedoed, which is better than being stuck inside on decks below the water-line. A number of officers were assigned to each cabin elsewhere.

The 275<sup>th</sup> and its sister infantry regiments' training is cut short and they are sent to Europe as a result of the demand from the front for replacements. The 275<sup>th</sup> was to finish training in Europe but the Battle of the Bulge (Ardennes) started which required all available men. Support and armored regiments were to be sent later.<sup>6</sup>

Dec 15, 1944. Arrive Marseilles. Go 20 miles north near Aix-en-Provence where they join the 274<sup>th</sup> and 276<sup>th</sup> and all gear, trucks artillery are made combat ready. The weather is cold, rainy and muddy. On Dec 22, 1944, the nine battalions of the regiments are expedited by 40x8 (40 people or 8 horses) box cars to Alsace and designated as Task Force Herren, after the 70<sup>th's</sup> CO, Brig Gen Herren.

Dec 15, 1944. Germany launches WATCH ON THE RHEIN attack north of Alsace in Belgium and Luxemburg (also known as the Battle of the Bulge) (see map 3).

Dec 22, 1944. Patton's Third Army starts its thrust in the southern shoulder. Shortly after, the German high command, including Hitler, recognizes that WATCH ON THE RHEIN is a failure. Hitler then decides to make a thrust south into the Saar/Philippsbourg area to attack the thin Allied line and break through out of mountains to meet up with the other Germans in the "Colmar Pocket" and pin the allied troops against the Rhine.<sup>7</sup> (see map 4)

Dec 25, 1944. (see map 6) Late Christmas Day (maybe earlier per **RRM**. See Dec 27<sup>th</sup>) the first train-load of 275<sup>th</sup> Infantry (cover designation, WRECKER) troops, come to Brumath, 40 KM south of Philippsbourg, after three-day trip from Marseilles. Some men

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p9

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p2

of Co A manage to find a chicken and cook it. **RRM** successfully divides the chicken among the group of twenty men. (**RRM** does not remember this event.)

Dec 27, 1944. First assignment along Rhine, Co. A, **RRM**, is deployed along west bank near Fort Louis. **RRM** recollects Lt. David Scobby playing carols in Fort Louis on a found organ on either Christmas or Christmas Eve which would make this December 24 or the 25<sup>th</sup>.

Average temp since arrival in Rhine Plain 24-29 deg F.

Dec 30, 1944. (see map 8) The three Divisions that make up the German LXXXIX Corps, which is to make the Bitche Salient offensive, are told that Operation Northwind will start that evening at 2300. The Corps's three divisions are not ready. The 361<sup>st</sup> VG Division is the most ready, operating in familiar territory and having its battalions brought up to 400 men each. The 256<sup>th</sup> VG Division arrives just in time at the offensive take-off point, presumably having been brought up to the same strength as the 361<sup>st</sup>. The highly regarded and highly successful 6<sup>th</sup> SS Mtn Div, thought to be roughly battalion strength initially, arrives from Scandinavia north of Bitche. They are to be assigned to the WATCH ON THE RHEIN offensive but because the Allied actions causes delays, they are reassigned to be part of OPERATION NORTHWIND. They are to be reserve for the other two divisions.<sup>8</sup>

Dec 30-31, 1945. Three order changes come through, steadily speeding up the movement of the 275<sup>th</sup> from the Rhine to the Lower Vosges where they are to relieve TF Hudelson and be attached to 45<sup>th</sup> Division. The 45<sup>th</sup> will use them to fill, consolidate and strengthen its line in anticipation of what must have been clearer and stronger indications that OPERATION NORTHWIND would start 1/1/45.<sup>9</sup> (see map 8)

### **OPERATION NORTHWIND:**

#### **Jan 1, 1945 (clear weather, -3 to +7 deg F!!!)**

(see map 7, 8 & 9) The Germans start their attack at midnight with the 256<sup>th</sup> Div attacking through Neunhoffen and Lieschbach and with the 361<sup>st</sup> attacking Baerenthal. The 6<sup>th</sup> SS Mtn Div is held in reserve. The Bitche Offensive is primarily south and southwest from Bitche staging area, through the mountainous woods toward Philippsbourg and Baerenthal and on toward the Saverne Gap, the ultimate objective. They have little trouble achieving their initial objectives of taking Neunhoffen, Lieschbach and Baerenthal within several hours and on schedule against the very thin defense force of TF Hudelson. Further progress for the Germans is slow because during the next 4 days, Americans insert regiments from the 45<sup>th</sup>, 79<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> Division. At first this results in a quiltwork of overlapping Divisional forces building a secure line of defense. In subsequent days, the tangle of forces are untangled and rationalized.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p15

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p20

2<sup>nd</sup> Bat, in particular, has a difficult time as the Germans quickly take control of Baerenthal but the 2<sup>nd</sup> prevents the Germans from further penetration.

Meanwhile, the then resident USA 62<sup>nd</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion's thinly spread troops are easily passed over toward Philippsbourg and Baerenthal. The Americans are still in the process of consolidating their forces. By the end of 1/1/45, the local American command believes that the primary German offensive in the Lower Vosges is coming through Philippsbourg, Baerenthal and, maybe, Reipertswiller in order to open the corridor through Philippsbourg. Consequently, all three Bat of 275<sup>th</sup> are to be fully committed to the Philippsbourg corridor along with the 274<sup>th</sup> and 276<sup>th</sup> to the right and left respectively.

**Jan 2, 1945 (-10 to +4 deg F!!!)**

(see map 10) 1<sup>st</sup> Bat, the last of the 275<sup>th</sup>, finally moves up to Philippsbourg. Company A (**RRM**) is assigned to Angelsberg and Co. B to Falkenberg on south and north sides, respectively, of the Neunhoffen road which they hike to immediately. [Co. B CO, Capt William C. Schmied from Baltimore, had married a Richmond woman and lived in Richmond after WWII, working for Central National Bank.] (See detailed account of Battle of Philippsbourg p38.)

South of Baerenthal, the Germans continue to send out tank and infantry raids which would have some contact, then retreat. US anti-tank guns/bazookas finally make their way up to the front, disabling several tanks, but not enough. American companies E+G suffer significant losses and broken retreats. The superior German tanks can withstand many direct hits from anti-tank fire. The US multiple use, anti-tank bazookas are unable to pierce the German tank armor. In contrast, the German, single use, anti-tank missile can readily pierce the US Sherman tank. However, the German infantry behind the tanks suffers great losses.

3<sup>rd</sup> Bat, Co I,K+L, along Bitche road north of Philippsbourg, comes under heavy fire early in morning. All are called back. Co I is sent out again and ends up picking up 45 German soldiers who surrender unprovoked. Many are smooth faced, under 15.<sup>10</sup>

The German command orders the commitment of the 6<sup>th</sup> SS Mtn Div Battle Group in the direction of Wingen at the western end of the Lower Vosges.

**Jan 3, 1945 (-4 to +7 deg F!!!)**

(see map 11 & 12) German command carefully reevaluates difficult resistance to achieve primary objective of Philippsbourg. They gather together special motorized task force built around the German 256<sup>th</sup> Division's elite assault group, the Fuesilier Company, men of exemplary combat records. This group also includes a platoon of assault guns, a reinforced engineer platoon and self-propelled (4-barreled) 20mm AA guns.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p 93

Their plan is to start with heavy artillery on Philippsbourg for five minutes around daybreak, then have the task force move from the Lieschbach assembly point under the protection of the artillery just ahead. The tanks and troops continue to move through Philippsbourg and once through turn around and clean out the Allied forces. In fact, the Germans go around Philippsbourg (perhaps without heavy equipment), encircling it, mostly from the west side, then attack and set up a short-lived machine gun roadblock, preventing entry to Philippsbourg.<sup>11</sup> The primary attack consists of the main force of the tanks followed by foot soldiers along the road from Lieschbach under the cover of lead artillery. This primary force is thought to have been delayed 15 minutes. During this time, the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn CP and its defense forces are able to get themselves organized to start to fight back.

During the first hours after midnight, there is occasional shelling (with tree bursts per **RRM**). **RRM** sends Sgt. Pannell back to the Battalion HQ to report and to request that communication wire be strung. Pannell arrives about 0300 about the same time Co. D mortarmen return from Falkenberg, retreating from enemy troops. The mortarmen bring back word that a German force is between Co. B and Philippsbourg. This convinces Col. Pierce that not only is B in a dangerous position but A, **RRM's** company, is also threatened. He sends Pannell back with orders that A should withdraw. Once Co A reaches Philippsbourg, it could be used to assist the rescue of B or join with the defenses on the east side. **RRM** decides to wait until daybreak to gather everyone and everything but at daybreak artillery and/or mortar fire intensifies just as the long-awaited mail arrives. The company quickly starts to move down the Angelsberg nose and then back southwest along the valley between Weihersberg and Angelsberg, distributing mail at the same time. Moving slowly with previously injured men, they are subject to heavy German artillery tree burst fire and direct 88 fire, causing casualties and fatalities. (see Attachment E, Pfc. Frank Hazmuka's graphic account of the artillery fire and his injury therefrom.) During the first couple hours, there are several brushes with the enemy parties – probably the backside of the German forces surrounding Philippsbourg. Enemy contact is initiated by forward and side scouts. With each firefight, movement would stop and the men nearby would join the action. After the column reaches the end of Angelsberg, there are no more contacts with the enemy.

Company A continues on various trails, generally south, eventually coming out on Niederbronn road in vicinity of hamlet of Schweizerkopf. **RRM** receives instructions from the Battalion to go to Niederbronn. He reports to Battalion command and gets rid of prisoners and is reassigned to join the canon emplacement just south of Philippsbourg.<sup>12</sup> Here they hold a protective screen to the front and flanks of the Cannon Co. gun positions.<sup>13</sup> **RRM** spreads his men out so that incoming artillery will have minimal effect.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p101

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p120-2

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p237

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p253

About 0830, Col Pettee requests, and is provisionally granted, authority to have Co. L, A and B withdraw back to Philippsbourg apparently in reaction to information from Maj. Dykes that the Germans are about to attack the right rear of Philippsbourg. The CG (Commanding General) stipulates the companies can pull back as long as they aren't weakening their line north of Philippsbourg. The order qualifies that it is hard to understand how withdrawing Co A&B could do anything *but* weaken the line north of Philippsbourg. Pettee, nevertheless, considers the situation serious enough and uses his discretion to, thankfully, have Co L, A&B withdraw. Unfortunately for B, these orders probably come too late, if ever, as almost all of Co B are captured and some are killed.<sup>15</sup> RRM recalls 6 men make it back.

By 1130, Philippsbourg is surrounded and under heavy attack. Command, based on POW information, believes Germans consist of about 100 experienced Fusilier soldiers. In fact, German force is a reinforced infantry regiment,<sup>16</sup> probably about 2,000 men vs. the American 70/275 1<sup>st</sup> Bat and part of 3<sup>rd</sup>, about 1,000.

By 1815, Col Pettee calls G-3 with the dismal report that the Germans two battalions attack force has the north part of Philippsbourg and WRECKER (275<sup>th</sup>) is barely holding the south side. He has no idea where Co L, A and B are. He needs reinforcements badly because at night the Germans would probably be able to surround and infiltrate his positions and take Philippsbourg. This partial capture of Philippsbourg is one of only few successful achievement of objective for the Germans. In the process, however, the Germans so exhausted itself that it becomes completely worn out. Furthermore, its battalions have become separated and needed time to consolidate before attempting subsequent operations. Thus the Germans' opportunity evaporates to follow up gains against the incompletely trained combat neophytes of Task Force Herren.<sup>17</sup>

At 1900, Pettee's G-3 verifies his depiction except that their source indicates only one battalion of Germans.

At 2130, after marching for the entire day from the Rhine, reinforcement 1<sup>st</sup> Bat/274<sup>th</sup> has to backtrack to Philippsbourg from about 20 miles southwest of Niederbronn via La Petite Pierre.

**Jan 4, 1945 (+6 to +13, balmy)**

1<sup>st</sup> Bat/274<sup>th</sup> arrives at Niederbronn 0400. They get a very quick review of the situation and orders to proceed to Philippsbourg to clear out the Germans on the surrounding hills in order to gain control and then join the counterattack in Philippsbourg. These activities take all day. By the end of the day, Philippsbourg seems to be at least stable, if not almost reclaimed.

A Battalion of the German 952<sup>nd</sup> Infantry sets out south from Thalhaeuseln on the southwest side of Baerenthal through a gap in the American deployment. They must drag

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p103

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p106

<sup>17</sup> When the Odds Were Even, p207

all their heavier gear on sleds through the mountainous woods without many trails. 24 hours later they reach their objective and are able to set up roadblocks on the Baerenthal-Zinswiller road a little north of Zinswiller.

**Jan 5, 1945 (+3 to +7 deg F!!!)**

(see map 13) The Allied command has reports of enemy troops moving generally from north of Philippsbourg toward Baerenthal, toward Dambach and, perhaps, toward Reipertswiller, thus trying to make progress through the three other valleys around Philippsbourg.

Many encounters all day. The roadblock north of Zinswiller is of most concern as it cuts off the 275/2<sup>nd</sup> Bat road of supply. By evening, with the help of light tanks, the roadblocks are broken up.

By evening, no big offensive has occurred.

In Philippsbourg, the 275/1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> with 274/1<sup>st</sup> Bat continue the counterattacks of the previous day. They meet significant resistance but by end of the day, they have routed the enemy from Philippsbourg.<sup>18</sup>

After holding a protective screen to both the front and flanks of the Cannon Co. gun positions south of Philippsbourg, **RRM** is redeployed to fill a gap in the line between Philippsbourg and Dambach. They truck to an area north and east of Niederbronn, meeting 157<sup>th</sup> Infantry guides. The guides take them to their new positions southwest of Dambach, which will help close a gap that still exists in the line. This deployment is probably in reaction to the earlier report concerning the redeployment of 500 German troops from Philippsbourg to Neunhoffen (just north of Dambach). This report was either incorrect or the German troops were redeployed elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> During Co A's stay here, they are issued reversible parkas with white on one side – sufficient for one platoon. When a platoon is sent on patrol it is to be given the reversible parkas.<sup>20</sup> RRM does not remember his company or him ever receiving any whites.

**Jan 6, 1945 (-4 to +3 deg F!!!)**

Co B's executive officer has managed to standoff the Germans inspite of having been encircled since their first night out Jan 2-3 and having a wounded and incapacitated Captain. On the 6<sup>th</sup>, Co B's EO decides to surrender because they have run out of ammunition, food and water and have received no instructions from command since Jan 2.

Only 1 mile away, the contest for Philippsbourg is over except for occasional enemy probes and counterattacks.

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<sup>18</sup> Ordeal of the Vosges., p238

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p 237

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p284



Col Pettee is relieved of command of the 275<sup>th</sup>. He is replaced by Col John H. McAleer, previously commanding officer of the 315<sup>th</sup> Infantry/79<sup>th</sup> Div. [**RRM** thinks Pettee was unfairly disciplined for Philippsbourg because he severely questioned the soundness of the original order from higher command to deploy Companies A and B on Angelsberg and Falkenstein north of Philippsbourg. He was again ordered to do so and followed orders as **RRM** recalls being told by D.C. Pence who was at Regimental Headquarters.]

**Jan 7, 1945 (-4 to +5 deg F!!!)**

Orders come to the German command that their new objectives are the mountain exits at Niederbronn and Zinswiller at the end of the Falkenstein and Zintzel Creek valleys. This means pushing through the significant and deep defenses of the 275<sup>th</sup>. The local German command would prefer to allow his tired, cold and depleted forces some time to regroup and recover but he knows he has to take the initiative if he is to have a chance.

Orders come through to move troops so that 275<sup>th</sup> is to the left (west) of 274th. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bat is the western most at Baerenthal next to the 1<sup>st</sup>. This regrouping allows Gen. Herren to resume command of his TF Herren. In the meantime, some of the 276<sup>th</sup> will be moved in to fill the gap around the no-mans land of Obermuehlthal (where **RRM** gets captured 3 days later), about 5 square miles of wooded, mountainous terrain.<sup>21</sup> (see map 14)

As an aside, following is the story of Father Michael McPhelin, a good friend of **RRM**. This being Sunday, he is making his rounds to say Mass. In the daylight, the men cannot stick their heads up without being shot at from Germans on higher ground. When he arrives at Co F in the forward-right sector below Baerenthal, he is told that the men could not possibly risk coming together for Mass. Chaplain McPhelin replied, "Well, if that's the case, I will have to go to them. That's my job." While there is every expectation that the Germans will shoot him, since they can clearly see him move from foxhole to foxhole, they don't.<sup>22</sup>

Per 275<sup>th</sup> Unit Report, "Enemy action is limited to patrolling, sniping and occasional small arms exchanges along the Baerenthal/Philippsbourg fronts. Quiet in the sector of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bat west of Dambach. Occasional artillery falling in the Philippsbourg area. No contact with the enemy on the right flank except the occasional visual sightings north of (our) positions."<sup>23</sup>

**OBERMÜHTHAL & CAPTURED:**

**Jan 8, 1945 (-3 to +8 deg F!!!)**

**Jan 9, 1945 (0 to +10 deg, balmy)**

**Jan 10, 1945 (-10 to +5 deg F!!!)**

(see maps 15 & 16) The German troops are exhausted and depleted. Command decides to make a change and concentrate their efforts by committing the highly experienced and valued 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Panzer divisions, which have been in reserve since the beginning of the battle. Such commitments are, however, conditional – before the Panzers can go into

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p274

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p275

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p279

action, the Zintzel Creek valley has to be penetrated by an infantry attack to the edge of the mountains near Zinswiller.

Gen Herren resumes command of TF Herren – 275<sup>th</sup> at 0800 and 274<sup>th</sup> later in the day. Records indicate that command expects the new offensive on Jan 9.

German plans for this Zintzel Valley Thrust are to have twin assaults penetrating around the high ground dominating both sides of the entrance of the Zintzel Creek valley below Baerenthal (see maps 15 & 16). Each of these twin thrusts would then come to a perpendicular valleys, Rehbach (where Obermuehlthal is located) and Spurthal, which enter the Zintzel valley from opposite sides at about the same place. In the follow-up phase, the center attack group would push down the Zintzel Creek valley from Baerenthal.

The 481<sup>st</sup> Grenadier Regiment is to advance southward from its assembly area at the foot of the north slope of the hill immediately north of Hill 364 (just west of Obermuehlthal) to the Rehbach valley.

Jan 10, 275/1<sup>st</sup> Bat moves out of Dambach to near Niederbronn, as reserve.

The Germans start their two pronged attack but meet substantial resistance. At the end of the day, the German command decides to consolidate and hold their gains via a line on both sides back to Baerenthal. Keeping Baerenthal is the highest priority.

Meanwhile, 45<sup>th</sup> Div command is concerned about the German 276<sup>th</sup> attacks south and east of Obermuehlthal in the Rehbach Valley, insisting that the attached Co C/276<sup>th</sup> be released. Co G/275<sup>th</sup> replaces Co C/276<sup>th</sup> at about 0300. Shortly after daybreak they hold off the German attack. At the end of the day, they are spread around Untermuehlthal, leaving the area around Obermuehlthal thin. As a result, the 274<sup>th</sup> feels they are being sniped at unnecessarily from the northwest because of insufficient patrolling by the 275<sup>th</sup>. TF Herren command decides to send in the reserve 1<sup>st</sup> Bat.

Jan 11, (-13 to -6!!! deg F!!!)

Both Germans and Americans are concerned about control of Hill 364. At 0920, the 276<sup>th</sup> attached to the 45<sup>th</sup> calls TF Herren HQ that they are getting mortar and fire from the direction of Obermuehlthal and the heights of Schwarzenberg to the north of it. (Hill 364, the tallest hill in the area, is the next one west of Schwarzenberg.) They need relief. At 1230, the 45<sup>th</sup> makes another call for relief. At the same time, TF Herren hears that Co G is under accurate fire.

Meanwhile, Co G has started to go west along the slope north and parallel to the Obermuehlthal road. They come to the grounds above Obermuehlthal, then turn to go around the east end of Schwarzenberg. As they round the peak at the east end, they take enemy fire from the hill north and dig in. They continue to take fire and some casualties during the afternoon. They then decide to split up to try to take out the soldiers firing on

them. By night fall, half of Co G has dug in at the north side of the western end of the Schwarzenberg ridge.

At 1200, Col Pierce gives the order to **RRM** to break out of the Battalion and march off-road at the southwest edge of Schlagenberg near Mühlthal on the Zinswiler road toward Baerenthal. As Co A waits for further orders, **RRM** has kitchen truck called up for the first hot meal since arriving at Niederbronn – Jan 1. The company kitchen truck arrives shortly and as the hot meal containers are being unloaded, a jeep follows with urgent orders to move westward in preparation for what CO had hoped would be a coordinated attack with Co G. The meals were never opened. **RRM's** memory is that Co A is ordered to go to the south of the east end of Schwarzenberg and await further orders to be ready to take hill 364. He also remembers receiving no information of another company on Schwarzenberg. (Company G was actually on the northeast, **RRM's** right flank, side of Schwarzenberg.

As they cross the small running Zinswiler Creek, several men including **RRM get water in their boots** on the coldest day they have seen. As they turn north to the steep-walled, cul-de-sac deadending immediately to the north of Obermühthal, they are hit by continual mortar fire, which immobilizes the company. Col Pierce shows up and shouts to **RRM** to keep the men moving through the village to the end of the cul-de-sac to the far cliff on the north side of Obermühthal. It is a 200 ft almost sheer climb through heavy snow, requiring pulling by hands as well as legs up a natural escarpment to a logging trail. The good news is that the rise protects them from shelling coming from the other side of the hill.

Upon reaching the top, the company spreads out along the trail. A 1<sup>st</sup> battalion S-3 Maj or Capt Carrier brings the objectives. As **RRM** remembers the oral order, it prescribed that Co A is to attack to seize its objective, Hill 364, and the company commander could set the time of attack at his discretion, but not later than daybreak the following morning. **RRM** remembers receiving no information about Co G, but the circumstances and some evidence indicate that the intention was for coordinated attacks by Co A and the Co G task forces on their respective neighboring objectives. Although **RRM** does not know the location of Co G, it is just on the other side of Schwarzenberg; somewhere north of **RRM**.

Daylight is fading as **RRM** contemplates his map and the order he has just received. If he is correctly oriented with respect to Co A's position on the map, the objective lay beyond the next spur of the mountain on which he stood, and the line of departure for the prospective attack is on the forward side of that spur. The order's requirement that the attack begin no later than daylight means that the Co's approach to the line of departure from its current location – apparently a distance of 6-700yards – would have to be made in the dark. The arrival of an artillery FO to direct supporting fire -- first time Co A receives such – makes it important to pinpoint precisely Co A's location on the map to avoid "friendly fire" preceding attack. An examination of the terrain up to the line of departure appears to be called for.

It is now dark. The Co A commander asks his first sergeant, Herbst, to assemble a squad to accompany him on the reconnaissance, and Herbst is back presently with a squad from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, a half dozen or so men. It includes one rifleman who, early that morn, comfortably back 5 or so miles, was an assistant cook; all of the rifle squads are undermanned, and he is one of several who has been diverted from the Co's rear echelon. Some of Co A's foxhole soldiers, who might have envied the new rifleman's former relative safety and comforts in the kitchen, could now feel some sympathy toward him as he filed out with his new squad behind the company commander.

**RRM** starts westward along the moonlit, snow-covered, forested trail with the crest of Schwarzenberg, 300 feet higher, on the right. He halts at intervals to make comparisons between terrain and map, squats to make his checks with map and flashlight concealed under his outer jacket. Arriving at a land feature he could identify on the map in the moonlight, he turns about, and starts back along the trail. **RRM**, leading the squad, stops to make a final map check, moving to the side of the trail while his squad walks past some yards further. At point blank range, the Germans open fire from dug-in positions at the down hill edge of the trail. The Americans disperse in all directions and attempt to return the fire. Some 500 yards back along the trail, Co A's main body hears the firefight and can easily distinguish between the angry buzz of the German burp guns and the slower cadence of the American M-1's and BAR. In a short time, the burp-gun fire predominates, and then there is silence.

Meanwhile, when the enemy opens fire, **RRM** scrambles upslope off the trail and hits the ground to avoid burp gun fire. Even if he were to try to use his carbine, it is worthlessly jammed with dirt and could not be moved into the firing position. Now pinned down, the bullets nip his clothes but never hit him. Remembering the .45 pistol he had gotten from a wounded soldier, he retrieves it from his pocket with some difficulty. He pulls back the slide to load the chamber. The slide locks in the back position. His cold, benumbed fingers cannot disengage the lock, which is probably fortunate for a German trooper, whose name **RRM** indelibly remembers as Steinhof, was standing over him with a burp gun ready and aimed. **RRM** realizes why he has been unable to detect any enemy movement during the action – the German is wearing white camouflage clothing. Rising to his feet, **RRM** is motioned by the German to return to the trail, where he finds his men already assembled by their captors. Two members of his patrol are wounded. Quickly, the Americans are marched to the rear, where, separated from his men, **RRM** spends the rest of the night in a log roofed bunker. **RRM** believes one man subsequently died from complications of burp gun wound.

The ambushing of the **Millhiser** recon squad is done by enemy troops dug in and concealed in white snow mantels alongside the trail. The Germans allowed **RRM**'s recon squad to pass by on their outbound leg, a standard infantry tactic, and then, there being no larger force following, slammed the trap shut when they returned with essentially point-blank burp gun fire.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p304-308

**RRM** has also said that he violated a cardinal rule of infantry reconnaissance – never return on the same path one goes out on.

Earlier, when Co A commander and his squad had left the main Co A body, the gathering of scattered troops on the forested mountain side had continued. Though the moon was bright, little of its light filtered through the snow-laden pine boughs, as squads and platoons were sorted out and positioned. Then 15 minutes, perhaps longer, after the reconnoitering group's departure, they heard the firefight. Lt Woodward, the executive officer of Co A, sent out patrols to scour the area after the firing stopped. There was no trace found of the **Millhiser** party, nor was any further contact made that night with the enemy.

Years later, Father McPhelin wrote of the event: "I can recall many an hour at Barten's fairly roomy (battalion) CP in Mühlthal. That's where I wrote a letter (see Attachment H) to **Ross** Millhiser's wife, Eleanor -- a discouraging one -- when we learned that **Ross** was MIA. The reports were grim, first only burp-gun fire. Later when a Co A officer led a small patrol to discover what had happened, he found no sign of **Ross** or his men. Bad news."

In general, the Americans and Germans were stalled battling along a line going northeast-southwest. The Germans had made some significant progress to the west and a bridgehead on the Rhine to the east. Concern was that the enemy could break out sideways, particularly with the Rhine Bridgehead at Gamsheim just north of Strasbourg.

During this time, there was one of the first reports of a jet – a Messerschmitt 262.

**WRAPUP:**

***Jan 12, 1945 (-9 to -1)***

***Jan 13, 1945 (-1 to +7)***

Co G & A continue to take casualties from artillery fire and skirmishes with German troops. Contact is reestablished with Co A and via messengers with Co G. Co A & G try to achieve their respective objectives but are pinned by the better positioned enemy. Co G has lost almost half of its men—killed or injured. Co A also has heavy losses. Col Pierce decides to commit Co C/275<sup>th</sup>.

Co C advances past Obermuehlthal under the protection of the slope on the north of the road, following the slope to the saddle between Schwarzenberg and Hill 364. Along the way, they come across the perimeter of Co A in the general area where **RRM** had been captured and start to climb the slope of the hill north of Hill 364. From here they devise the plan for one group, consisting of two machine guns, to make its way to the top of Hill 364 to a position above where they believe the Germans were (on the southeast slope). In turn, a platoon of the company would make its way up from below, thus attacking from both directions. The Germans are placed as expected but are more numerous and well dug in. The American machine guns do not work initially because of the cold, causing the best of the element of surprise to be lost. The men of Co C bravely continue

to pursue their objective while sustaining great losses. They successfully knock out two of the three German machine guns before nightfall and complete darkness.<sup>25</sup>

*Jan 13, 1945* – Father McPhalin writes Eleanor of RRM being MIA. (see Attachment H)

### **PRISONER OF WAR:**

Soon after being captured **RRM** remembers being asked, “*Haben sie Chesterfield?*” to which he replied, “*Nein, aber, ich habe Philip Morris.*” The German then proceeds through his pockets and takes them.

While in the bunker, perhaps in Pirmasens, the German CO, a Captain (*Hauptman*), comes in and tells **RRM** the Germans are going to still win because they have a secret weapon “*weepon*”, the V1/V2 rockets. He also says that he had been living in Chicago working for a rubber company but had returned to the “Fatherland” to fight. During the night, **RRM** tried to step out to take a leak. When he sticks his head out, the guard hits him on his helmeted head and says to get back in. He relieves himself in the bunker. (See account of POW Irwin Cone – Attachment G. Some details do not agree.)

A few days later in the town of Landstuhl, **RRM** is put in a large room with a potbellied stove and wet wood. Repeatedly, he no sooner gets the damp wood burning and dozes off than he wakes up to the cold from the fire going out. Sleep deprivation is demoralizing and disorienting. After a while, he is ordered by a guard to another room with blinding lighting and a architypical, arrogant Nazi staff officer (SS emblazoned on his lapels) who threateningly interrogates for military information (cf., following political questioning at Bad Orb). In fact, he seems to know all about the regiment’s history starting from their leaving Boston. He probably gleaned information from a Co A jeep bringing USA homeside mail which the Germans captured north of Philippsbourg c. January 2.

Said he had lived and had gone to college in NYC, and had come back to fight for the fatherland. He didn’t like NYC!

He makes threats to put **RRM** out in the snow and extreme cold similar, he went on, to the Americans putting the German POWs out in the hot sun in the North African Desert. **RRM** just gives his name rank and serial number. The German asks what is his age and **RRM** says he must already know it.

Later at another location, a German corporal takes all of **RRM**’s personal belongs except his personal watch, which **RRM** insists on keeping. **RRM** has second watch, government issue, to which the enemy is entitled under the Geneva Convention. **RRM** insists he is entitled to retain it and the Germans return it. The Germans properly give

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p320-6

him a receipt for all his possessions including the French and USA money he has, which they tutionally separately indentify. They must sense the war was going badly by then.

**RRM** marches for a couple of days with other POWs and then is jammed into a train of locked box cars. Trains are often major bombing targets, particularly when they are in rail yards. The train stops in a railroad yard which **RRM** thinks may be Ludwigshafen-Mannheim. He can see through the cracks in the car. By chance, Allied bombers fly over and bomb the railroad yard sending shrapnel and splinters into the car but no one is injured. Worth noting per **RRM**: the cursing incivility of the soldiers changed immediately to more civil praying when they are POWs; consistent with the observation, "There are no atheists in foxholes."

Following this boxcar journey, **RRM** winds up for a night or two at Bad Orb where there is an American enlisted mens' POW camp, Stalag #?. **RRM** stays with several American Officer Doctors who are there evidently to minister to the POWs.

**RRM** is questioned by an apparent German civilian dressed like an English Squire or Scots Laird - tweeds, argyle hose, wing-tipped shoes. Speaking English fluently, his interrogation is political rather than for military information, e.g. "as an American Officer obviously a member of the Bourgeoisie who owns private property, why are you fighting on the side of Communist Russia? What do people of the USA feel about Germany?" So, **RRM** concludes he is trying to gather information with which Germany can try for negotiated peace rather than unconditional surrender. Either before or after **RRM**'s interrogation, the American Doctors informed **RRM**, they had been interrogated by this same individual and that he was one of the Gestapo.

Later, he is separated from the rest of the prisoners because he is an officer and is taken by a guard in a civilian train compartment to Hammelburg. The train leaves **RRM**

While on the train, **RRM**, still dress in an American uniform but with an orange bullseye and "KGF" (*Kriegs Ge Fangener* not Kraft General Foods) painted on his back, is seated with his armed guard in a normal European-type railroad passenger compartment. Facing **RRM** is an archetypical "*Hitler Jugend*," bebadged 11-to-13 year-old, glaring at **RRM** and stirs up the other civilians in the compartment with excited references to the American "*t`errorfliegers*" who are bombing Germany. **RRM** points out, "*Ich bin Infanterie nicht Terrorflieger*." Fortunately, they then arrive at Hammelberg 55 miles due east of Frankfurt where he and his armed guard quickly "detrain" and take him to his destination, a prison camp on the edge of town – *Oflag XXIII-B* .

General conditions at *Oflag XIII-B*, Hammelburg:

Prison life is grim. While in prison, **RRM** sees one officer shot by a tower guard for returning to the barracks too slowly when an air raid alarm sounded, and another prisoner shot arbitrarily while heading to the latrine. As an officer he is kept with other officers who get better - but not good - treatment than enlisted POWs in *stalags*.

**RRM** helps pass the time by sharpening his sole razor blade on the window. Also starving like everyone, he writes imaginary recipes for when they return home. They get sparse cooking heat from tin can fires. Desperate for wood, he and a buddy, Lloyd Burns, decide to sneak out one night, dodging sweeping tower search lights, to an unused barracks and steal a door for fuel. They are successful at getting to the door and removing it from its hinges. But the two freeze in horror as the door swings down and falls to the floor with a deafening bang. They are sure they will be shot but nothing happens. They sneak back with the door, break it up into match size pieces, hide the pieces before morning and have fuel for a while. A short while later, before the wood is completely used, Patton's task force reaches the camp.

Under the original Senior American Officer (SAO) moral and discipline is bad; not until Col. Goode arrival later is moral and discipline improved. Col. Goode had been captured February '43 with Col. Waters (q.v. below) at the disastrous battle of Kasserine Pass.

Almost everyone, if not everyone, has dysentery. Many become infested with lice, **RRM** never is.

Large dollies with about 4-5 foot end frames, stacked to the top with maggot infested horse heads roll past the barracks on the way to the central cooking facility. **RRM** loses 30 pounds while being fed watery "horse" soup with floating. The horse heads are boiled with caraway seeds until the skin and scarce meat fall off the bones at "central kitchen;" then brought in with floating cooked maggots in a giant pot to each barracks for well enforced equitable ladling. POWs receive some bitter black bread which was thought to contain saw dust.

Thank to immediately neighboring Yugoslavian (Serbian) Officers, part of whose former area Americans now occupy and who voluntarily give the Americans from time to time some of their precious International Red Cross food parcels, provide a critical boost from the starvation diet. It is worth noting that the Serbs were the only Yugoslavs on the Allied side. The others, Slovenes, Croats, Hercegovinians and Bosnians, are all ardent to fanatic Nazi allies. Among the fanatics is their SS equivalent, the Ustasis, who massacred the Serbs.

### **LIBERATION:**

March 26-28, 1945. Gen. Patton, CG 3<sup>rd</sup> Army sends a task force to find his son-in-law, Lt. Col. John K. Waters, who had been captured in Tunisia, during the disastrous North Africa, Kasserine Pass battle in Feb '43. Patton has been pushing east in the last throes of the war and is on the east side of the Rhine about 50 miles from Hammelburg when he receives orders from Gen. Omar Bradley to drive north. Gen Alexander Patch would continue the drive east with his 7<sup>th</sup> Army. Patton's office issues a last minute order for a task force (294 men, 53 vehicles including 10 Sherman tanks) commanded by Capt. Abraham Baum. Most of Patton's senior officers advise him against the mission. A force large enough to accomplish the job safely would divert too much of Patton's strength; the small task force he envisions is too risky. It has been argued whether or not Patton's



commanding officer, Gen. Bradley, knew of and gave permission for the task force. The mission is a disaster.

The plan is for the task force to penetrate the 50 miles into German controlled territory by country roads at night, pick up the some(!) prisoners early morn and return the next day under coordinated air cover. Of course nothing goes quite right. It takes them hours longer to get through the first town and at Lohr they waste yet more hours looking for a bridge they can cross. By the time they get to Hammelburg, the Germans have tanks moving to attack them.

The plan was for the task force to arrive at the prison early the next morning. Instead, it arrives late the next day. There are about 1,500 POWs. The task force is only instructed to get Waters and is prepared to carry some 300 or 400 men . Individual POWs decide if they wish to try to join the task force on its return.

The Germans are waiting for the task force attempted return with the prisoners who elected to try to escape. Indeed, the tank that **RRM** jumps on, when the TF stopped just inside the prison camp, is blown-up later that evening at a road-block. Fortunately, **RRM** was ordered off the tank earlier by a TF officer, **RRM** believes Capt. Baum, task force CO. Per **RRM**, the 2 or 3 POWs who shortly jump on this tank are killed when this tank is hit frontally and disabled by a *Panzerfaust* at a road block. During that night, the disorganized, spread out and shot-up TF breaks radio silence to try to regroup in a clearing on the top of Reussenburg (see map 19). Unbeknownst to them during the night, the tattered rescue force and prisoners are surrounded and suddenly attacked the next morning as the mist clears. **RRM** manages to crawl and run into the nearby woods with his buddy, Lloyd Burns and a POW, Major, West Pointer, paratrooper, who somehow still had his hand compass. This Major had survived previous jumps including his ill-fated D-Day jump which landed him amidst German soldiers.

Heading away from the approaching line of advancing uphill Panzer fire, they go through a small woods beyond which they cross a clearing and settle in a clump of bushes right by a country road. No place to hide in this typically German park-like woods!

The rescue party is virtually wiped out as the Germans fight extremely hard even though they can see that the end of the war is near. Nine men are killed, 16 MIA are presumed killed, 32 are wounded, most of the remainder become POW; all 53 vehicles are destroyed or captured. Col . Waters, wounded in the rescue attempt confusion, recovers and years later retires as a three-star general.

In the aftermath, Ike severely reprimands Patton orally, but takes no official action. Captain Baum is promoted to Major and given the Distinguished Service Cross not the Congressional Medal of Honor Patton had promised. A Medal of Honor requires a Congressional investigation. Patton has declared the mission Top Secret, no investigation will be permitted. Nevertheless, Major Baum continued to feel that Gen Patton was one of a kind. The army needed him, the Allies needed him, even though the

war was ending. Maj. Baum let Gen Patton know that he could continue to trust his loyalty and insisted that Patton put him back with his men.

**PRISONER AGAIN:**

All day, German soldiers flush POWs out of the woods but do not see **RRM** in a small clump of bushes. A German machine gun squad comes walking down the dirt road immediately behind **RRM**, continues past and sets up a machine gun a short distance WEST! That is exactly the direction he intends to head at nightfall. One of the men with **RRM** throws up as a result of eating too much of the rations found on the liberating tanks. These sounds give away their position and they are taken prisoner again at rifle point.

**END OF WAR:**

Sometime in April 1995, the Germans start marching the POWs south from *Oflag XXIII-B*, Hammelburg. As they march, **RRM** and some others conclude that they were being marched to Hitler's redoubt to be used as hostages. **RRM** and his associates hang back to try to slip away. They immediately realize there are German soldiers everywhere. In fact, most look like Hungarian SS troops who the Americans believed were determined to be more Nazi than the Germans. They decide they have lived this long and they should rejoin the POWs more than a mile away now. While making their way back by following the distinctive boot markings of the US POWs, they do meet some German soldiers but without incident.

The POWs continue to march both south and a little east to keep the Allied troops from catching up with them. As **RRM** recalls, some time later, the long POW officers' column, marching on a clearly defined road just south of Feucht (southeast of Nuremberg), is mistakenly strafed by machine gun fire from an Allied fighter plane. Everyone gets off the road in a hurry. **RRM** can not remember any casualties there. All this part of being marched under guard south and some east to keep our troops from catching up with them.

Another "friendly fire" incident occurs next to the railroad yard at Nuremberg when American planes bombed the yard. One bomb hits the sandy soil just 20 feet from **RRM** creating a crater into which **RRM** immediately dives. Several guards and POWs are killed and an ammunition stock-pile is hit sending projectiles in all directions. After the bombing stops, **RRM** runs across the road and goes into a bomb shelter where he finds himself with a German family. German guards, at end of bombing, raid route prisoners at gun point out of the shelter to rejoin and continue the southerly enforced march of the POW column.

At some point while marching through a town, **RRM**, at the end of a column, grabs a loaf of bread from a German civilian, who surprisingly – for the Germans are low on food themselves – says nothing. During the march, the Germans would corral all the POWs into a section of a village encircled by guards. **RRM** and some other POWs would sleep among the animals to try to keep warm. At the same time, they would steal eggs. Once

**RRM** and buddy, Lloyd Burns, misplaced pilot, noticed the eggs tasted a little strange. When they examined one the next day, they realize the eggs had begun to gestate.

Another day while asking a villager for salt (to offset their salt depletion), an older lady gives it to them and tells them that Roosevelt has died. She asks what will happen. This is the first they hear of Roosevelt's death.

April 12, 1945, Franklin Roosevelt dies

April 28, 1945. Mussolini killed by Italian partisans.

April 30, 1945. Hitler commits suicide.

About May 1945, the war is going badly for Germany and soldiers start to retreat back to Hitler's Bavarian fortress, taking prisoners with them. About 15 miles from Munich, in Gars a Inn, a village on the Inn River, they can hear the Allied artillery coming closer and closer. The prisoner representative convinces the German commander that they would be able to move faster without the prisoners. The freed prisoners stay overnight in the town, taking over the beds and rummaging for food. Those who grab the beds, not **RRM**, are rewarded by being infested with bugs. The Allies catch up with them that day or the next, and the former POWs are trucked to the Inglestadt airport.

May 8, 1945. V-E Day

After two or three days of entrepreneurial living, the POWs are flown from Inglestadt to Fécamp, France, Camp Lucky Strike – if you will excuse the expression - a processing camp for RAMPSs (Recovered Allies Military Personnel). Processing camps are inundated with ex-prisoners. The first step for all POWs is to be sprayed with delousing powder, showered and issued a new uniform.

**RRM** says he wants to locate brother Ken, whom he last knew to be in the meteorology section at a B17 base north of London. **RRM** says he finds an unattended field phone -- that is a phone in a canvas bag -- hanging on a vertical plank, stuck in the ground in the middle of open camp grounds. He picks it up, asks for Air Force HQ in England, gets through, asks for his Yale friend, Col. Spanton, gets him and confirms Ken's location!

By happenstance, an old Richmond friend, Capt Joe Lee Frank, Jr., MD, is stationed at Lucky Strike with his medical battalion. He has been looking for and finally sees **RRM's** name on a list; he locates him and starts to fatten him up at his battalion mess.

In order to get rid of RAMPs, Camp LS offers to give *unauthorized* printed orders sufficient to get them to England via a Channel boat. This is done on the proviso that RAMPs destroy the papers once there. (see ID, Attachment L) The only problem is the sole ID **RRM** has is a card with his name on it saying RAMP: it is almost worthless. Once in England, he finds an appropriate military office, talks his way into having proper official officer's AGO ID processed with a picture. He returns the next day and picks up

his officer's ID card. While giving **RRM** the new ID, the phone rings with orders to issue no more IDs. Scores, if not hundreds, of RAMPs must be sent back to France to be processed properly. **RRM**, with the last ID issued, leaves quickly and heads for a bank to have funds wired from Richmond. The official ID card makes this possible. He then catches train to Kenneth's airfield.

Some days later, the military gives up trying to corral RAMPs for return to Camp Lucky Strike and other processing camps in France. An announcement is made in a giant cafeteria in Grosvenor Hotel. "Attention RAMPs!! You will not be returned to France. Report tomorrow morning to Grosvenor Square and you will be sent back to States directly." Magically, hundreds appear.

Transportation turns out to be LST (landing ship tank), flat-bottomed, ferry size craft for the transatlantic crossing. Though a rolling ride back, the passage turns out to be much more comfortable than aboard a troop ship. **RRM** has his own officers quarters and has 24 hour kitchen for the still ravenous POWs.

Mother receives communications that **RRM** is alive from both the Army and the information about the funds being wired to **RRM**.

**RRM's** outer jacket has small tears in side from the bullets that missed his corpus. This jacket is later lost as one of his teenage sons leaves it somewhere.

August 6, 1945. Atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima

October 24, 1945 **RRM** effective date for appointment as Major.

December 10, 1945 **RRM** is released from active service as a Major and assigned to Officers' Reserve Corp. He later receives the Bronze Medal, Combat Infantry Badge, Purple Heart (December 22, 1945) and POW medal.

September 29, 1953 **RRM** released from US Army Reserves and discharged.

March 13, 1990 **RRM** awarded the Bronze Medal.

### **AFTERWORD:**

**RRM** reports that Father McPhalin told him shortly after the war that many of his men had said that they hated their commanding officer, **RRM**, and would have liked the opportunity to shoot him in battle. Keep in mind that few non-coms have any nice words for officers.

Thirty or so years later at a couple of reunions, EMcGM says that many of these same men said they were eternally grateful that **RRM** had been as tough as he was because it was his leadership and guidance that got them out of the war alive.

# SUMMARY AND OVERVIEW

Operation NORTHWIND, as the Germans called Hitler's last ditch thrust south, was an attempt to break through the Allied juggernaut rolling the German spent but still very effective military machine. The Battle of the Bulge had started December 15, 1944. NORTHWIND was conceived after the Bulge stalled to be a second prong using three (6<sup>th</sup> SS Mtn, 256<sup>th</sup> and 361<sup>st</sup>) divisions. The defense of three parallel valleys - the Falkenstein Valley (Philippsbourg), the Baerenthal Valley [town of Zinswiller (Northwind) at the southern end] and the Dambach Valley - were the responsibility of the 275<sup>th</sup> 3 battalions (2872 men) attached to 45<sup>th</sup> Division (see maps 1, 7 & 8). Countering them were three enemy battalions,<sup>26</sup> apparently about evenly matched in number although not experience. While the 275<sup>th</sup> had never seen battle, the German forces were a mix of experienced troops including the very seasoned 6<sup>th</sup> SS Mtn Div, fresh and full strength, in from Scandinavia, and augmented by new recruits which, at this stage of the war, were 15-year-olds and old men. Also for winter fighting, the Germans were equipped with white covers while only about a third of the Americans had whites.

The 42<sup>nd</sup>, 63<sup>rd</sup> and the 70<sup>th</sup> Divisions had been rushed through abbreviated training cycles, disrupted by periodic drafts of thousands to replace battle casualties. Though these measures were based on careful estimates, the command could not have anticipated that the Northwind offensive would come when it did. Still, when this final German offensive was defeated, the Allied Supreme Commander remarked that the hurrying of those regiments had been a very fortunate expedient.<sup>27</sup>

## **STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS:**

Unlike the surprise of the Battle of the Bulge, Allied intelligence was all but certain that NORTHWIND's scheduled start was January 1, 1945. Nevertheless, Allied troops were concentrated on the Battle of the Bulge which left the defense from the Sarre Valley south thin and poorly defended. In fact, Germany still controlled the area around Colmar – the “Colmar Pocket” and German troops came across the Rhine at night for small raids with near impunity.

On December 30<sup>th</sup> when the 275<sup>th</sup> was ordered to speed its movement from the Rhine plain to the Vosges Mountains, the Allied command had been considering a “strategic” withdrawal since before Christmas when the Seventh Army had been directed to discontinue offensive operations and to adopt a defensive posture. At this time, Allied forces had reached the French-German border, the “Siegfried Line” (see map 4). As a result of this change in attitude, General Patch and his staff realized that the same geographic features which the Seventh Army exploited while on the offensive would cause problems now that the Army was in a defensive mode. The Seventh Army's active front was split by the 10-12 miles wide Vosges barrier. On the right flank, the Rhine River passive front now afforded opportunities for the enemy to achieve bridgeheads by infiltrating forces across the river from their sanctuary of the Siegfried Line. On the left,

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<sup>26</sup> 275<sup>th</sup> Regt AAR Jan. 1945 Report <http://www.trailblazersww2.org/275thdocuments.htm>

<sup>27</sup> D. C. Pence Account of Battle of Philippsbourg <http://www.trailblazersww2.org/pbbattle.htm>

favorable terrain features of the Sarre River basin could be exploited by the enemy to execute a penetrating thrust (see map 1).

The Americans counted 21,002 infantrymen on the line and 8,100 in reserve, and the Germans were throwing about 25,430 against them, with reserves of about 4,500 more, for totals of 29,102 for the defenders and 29,930 for the attackers.<sup>28</sup> While the German Panther tanks were qualitatively superior to the Shermans, they were outnumbered 430 Allied tanks vs 200 German tanks. Adding to this was the expected fair weather in early January which would allow the Allied air superiority to further tip the scales against the Germans in the event of a bogged-down slugging match.

The best, and by their own doctrine, most correct use of the Germans' armored assets, would be to exploit the penetration made by XC and LXXXIX Corps in the Low Vosges by rapidly sending the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer and 25<sup>th</sup> *Panzergranadier* Divisions through the area after it was secured and the roads were cleared. If the western attack succeeded – that is, if the Americans reacted to the XIII SS Corp's thrust by sending their armored reserves to meet it – such a maneuver would allow the German operational reserves to effect an encirclement by bursting out of the Low Vosges at Rahling or Diemeringen (see map 1), cutting the Allied lines of communication, and attacking the Allied armor from the rear. Exactly such a possibility was facilitated by the *Führer's* alteration of the original Nordwind plan. Although it lacked a clearly identified main attack, the portion of Nordwind to be conducted in the Low Vosges was otherwise doctrinally sound.

Given the need for rapid success, both to relieve the pressure on Army Group B and to take advantage of the anticipated Seventh Army reaction to the XIII SS Corp's attack, effective (and doctrinally mandated) tactical reconnaissance of the zone of attack would be essential to ensure timely development of the situation. Similarly, extensive briefings and detailed planing at all echelons would be necessary to facilitate rapid progress, given the generally low level of training and shared combat experience (especially in offensive maneuvers) present in most of the assault units. Finally, given the rugged nature of the terrain and the need for especially fast penetration, the troops needed to be well rested for the coming battle.

Those were exactly the things that did *not* happen.

To preserve what they imagined to be secrecy regarding their intentions, the Germans purposely elected to not reconnoiter their zones. In the further interest of security, only division commanders and operations officers were briefed on the attack plan on Christmas Day; commanders at the regimental level and below did not receive word regarding their missions until the night before the attack. Obviously, at the platoon and company level, where the fighting would be done, there was practically no time for organization or other essential preparations. Since most of these units had never attacked before, this was disastrous.

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<sup>28</sup> When the Odds were Even, p193

As a final, and almost calamitous, operational security measure, most units did not move into their attack positions until the night before the attack. As a result, many of the troops went into their first attack ever without having slept for at least twenty-four hours.

In all but the 361<sup>st</sup> *Voksgrenadier* division's zone – the Baerenthal Valley, just west of Philippsbourg -- where troops and leaders had spent several weeks delaying in the area through which they were about to attack, these shortcomings would cause serious problems with the progress of the German offensive.<sup>29</sup>

#### **AMERICAN-FRENCH STRASBOUG DISCORD:**

In recognition of this new situation, on December 28, 1944, the Sixth Army Group had sent an instruction to the Seventh Army and to the First French Army which envisioned a series of withdrawals by the two armies to the eastern slopes of the Vosges Mountains. Consequent orders, issued by Seventh Army on 2 Jan, had identified three lines to which the Army would be pulled back prior to reaching the Vosges defense line prescribed by Sixth Army Group. The third line was identified as Bitche--Ingwiller—Strasbourg.

French high command put up intense opposition to the intended laying-open to German reoccupation of Strasbourg, a city valued by the French for its beauty and for its history as a pawn of German-French wars. Gen DeGaulle threatened a general strike. Gen. DeGaulle's objections caused SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) on January 3 to order the holding of Strasbourg. The withdrawals previously planned were then modified and the schedule delayed. Finally, only two withdrawals were made as the consequences of this reassessment--one on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, when VI Corps elements east of the Vosges were withdrawn from a point across the German border back to the Maginot Line, and the second on the night of January 20-21 to a line south of Haganeau but north of Strasbourg (see map 1). The French First Army, already spread thinly trying to push the Germans out of the Colmar Pocket, was assigned to defend Strasbourg.

#### **SARRE VALLEY:**

The Germans made a major attack in the open Sarre Valley. Patch and Haislip had expected such an attack and had jammed the XV Corps zone with three infantry divisions buttressed by the two regiments of Task Force Harris (63<sup>rd</sup> Regt) and – if the theater reserve units were counted – two armored and another infantry division in reserve, with a third armored division arriving. In addition, there was significant air support. The Germans barely made a dent, although not without heroic efforts by American forces, most notably the Wingen stand. On Jan 4<sup>th</sup> German High Command called off the assault.

The Allied command had probably expected a significant offensive from Lauterbourg (along the Rhine River plain) and not through the difficult terrain of the Lower Vosges –

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<sup>29</sup> When the Odds were Even, p194-6

Bitche Salient. Clear in retrospect, the German's hasty reorganization of the troops for this offensive resulted in disorganization. Troops for the Sarre Valley and the Bitche Offensive were under one commander, Blaskowitz, and those for Lauterbourg Offensive were under Oberheim. Hitler ordered Oberheim not to initiate any offensive until either the Sarre or Bitche offensives had succeeded. Blaskowitz's request to delay the attack so his troops and supplies could be better organized were denied by Hitler. Finally, the Allied forces could move more easily over the relatively flat terrain of the Rhine plain allowing them to shift reinforcements quickly.<sup>30</sup>

The Lauterbourg Offensive was countered by almost an immediate retreat from the German border back to the more easily defended Maginot line thus making almost a straight front from the Sarre to the Rhine.

### **SIDES TAKE THEIR POSITIONS:**

The Germans thought the heavily forested Vosges would offer cover from Allied air observation and interdiction during the critical first phase of the attack. In addition, about half of the large Maginot line fortresses around Bitche were still in German hands, providing cover and concealment for assembly. The fortresses were of little other use since they were facing the wrong way. German command believed that what they suspected as a weakly defended gap in the American line would be breached by their fast moving infantry.

Four German divisions pushed off from the Bitche area along a southwest axis through the Vosges toward the Saverne Gap. He who controls the Saverne Gap could move troops readily to the Rhine plain or Sarre Valley. A plausible explanation of why Hitler's soldiers traversed the Vosges for almost down their entire length can be found in his plan to have soldiers first envelope key locations with infantry, followed up by tanks and then more infantry by road down the valleys, such as at Philippsbourg. This two direction approach, down the spine of the mountains and then at right angles through the valleys, provided maximum coverage for his men but also exhausted them. However, with bad terrain undoubtedly causing bad communications, the attacks were open waves and often suicidal. Under such conditions, it is sometimes difficult and even dangerous to fire one's rifle during the attack, especially when other friendly soldiers are all around and the enemy is difficult to locate.

One concept that surely was present in the American withdrawal planning was that the enemy would pay dearly for any ground yielded to him before the planned withdrawals were executed. And, if that was so, it followed that General Patch had the option to decide whether and when the situation had reached the point warranting the execution of the withdrawal's next phase. At any rate, that is how the battle that grew out of the NORDWIND offensive seems to have been managed on the American side.

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<sup>30</sup> Riviera to the Rhine, p492-512



Within the constraints of higher level strategy, the commanders of the U.S. VI Corps and 45th Division waged an active defense, launching counterattacks to recover lost ground, regain the initiative, and punish the enemy wherever they were encountered. Indeed, the VI Corps-wide operational plan undertaken some 24 hours after the German offensive arrived seems to have been intended to establish the American MLR (Main Line of Resistance) along the Maginot Line, the line designated by Seventh Army for the first-phase withdrawal. So, while the 45<sup>th</sup> Division was making limited withdrawals of its own battalions to that line to the right of the Bitche Salient, other American battalions along the periphery of the Salient were attempting to advance to that line.

### **WRECKERS ASSIGNMENT** (275<sup>th</sup> Regt. cover name)

Among the battalions reassigned were WRECKER 3rd Battalion from Philippsbourg and 2nd Battalion from Baerenthal. It was within the context of this active-defense strategy that the 275th Infantry Regiment, after its commitment in the Vosges during New Year's Day, took on the bulk of the German 256th Division and fought it to a standstill.

At the conclusion of their first 5 days in action, the WRECKER battalions -- reinforced during this time by the WYOMING 1st Battalion -- had inflicted heavy losses on this German division. So heavy that, when on 10 January it launched its important and carefully planned attack to reach Zinswiller, the German high command quickly realized that their 256th was too weakened to accomplish anything and called off the attack within a few hours of its start. A week before (when RRM was assigned Angelsberg just east of Philippsbourg), the attack on Philippsbourg by one of the 256th regiments had been formidable and had come close to succeeding. However, the January 10 attack by two regiments of this same division, now badly depleted, was so feeble that the WRECKER defenders, after brushing it back, failed to mention the event in any after-action report. (Note RRM was captured January 11 during the Allied final resistance of this German attack.)

### **THE LARGER PERSPECTIVE**

In the larger perspective, it is worth remembering that the mission of the German First Army in undertaking the NORDWIND offensive had been to force the American high command to divert troops away from the Bulge where, 2 weeks after two German armies had launched their drive for Antwerp, they had become stalled and were themselves under heavy pressure from Allied counterattacks. How much relief did the NORDWIND offensive bring to the Germans' situation in the Bulge? A succinct answer is revealed in statistics cited in the U.S. Seventh Army's "Report of Operations" - on 7 Jan 1945, when the German offensive in the Vosges was in full swing, SHAEF was allocating reinforcements in a ratio of about eight for the U.S. Twelfth Army Group (deploy around the Bulge) to one for the Sixth Army Group (which included the Seventh Army). Moreover, there was no shifting of American combat units away from the Bulge to bolster the defenders of the Bitche Salient -- not before 8 January, when the German withdrawal from the Bulge began; and not before 16 January, when two advancing American armies linked up at Houffalize to reduce the Bulge to less than a third of its maximum depth.

It is clear then that Hitler's NORTHWIND diversion completely failed its purpose. It was an expensive failure, for the German divisions all suffered fearful losses -- losses which could not be replaced. They would be sorely missed during the next two months, while the U.S. Seventh Army and other Allied armies were driving the tattered remnants of German units back to the Rhine. Afterward, the thin defensive shell of the *Wehrmacht* could offer only token resistance as the Western Allies broke across that river into the heart of Germany to end the war.

These were consequences for which the WRECKER doughboys who had held Philippsbourg and guarded Zinswiller could feel pride in having a good share of responsibility. That both villages were yielded to the enemy in the course of the Seventh Army withdrawal of January 20-21 may have dismayed some whose courage and perseverance had prevented its happening during the first 2 weeks of NORTHWIND. Only much later would they have been able to understand that the purposes of denying these places to the enemy had already been effectively served. The Germans had depleted a significant part of their precious *Wehrmacht* and supplies while the Allies organized themselves for a new Main Defense Line.

From the point of view of the American high command, the giving-up of territory in northern Alsace-Lorraine during the withdrawal was strategically desirable. If some American combat troops, not privy to or much interested in the big picture, wondered about the wisdom of first defending bitterly and then voluntarily yielding a large area, they could not have been nearly so perplexed as the French natives who then underwent another German occupation.

Dr. Jean Beck, a native of Niederbronn and today a professor at the University of Arizona, has described the experience. "Until January 20, it was pretty quiet in Niederbronn; that was a Saturday. The Americans retreated southeast in the direction of Pfaffenhoffen. All Sunday long, there was not one soldier left in town. However, in the night of Sunday - Monday we heard shooting (from the direction of Philippsbourg). On Monday at about 10 a.m., the Germans came from Philippsbourg. In front were a few cars pulled by horses, the Germans being out of gas. Then came a cannon pulled by horses. Everybody else was on foot. We could not understand why the Americans had retreated. Gradually, the Germans took over everything. In our house, they located the headquarters of an infantry regiment."

"Fortunately, they were not fanatical Nazis; otherwise, I would have fared ill, because in November 1944 I had received an order to report to the *Waffen SS*. I ignored it and from then on had to keep in hiding. On 15 March, the Americans returned, preceded by planes and bombs, two of which were released over our house but hit the house below us, killing four people. The Germans retreated without a fight, but they laid explosives -- among other places in the Grand Hotel, where the Americans (afterward) installed a field hospital. A big explosion occurred there and there were many dead--half the hotel was in ruins."

Some Frenchmen remember the January, 1945 American withdrawal to this day and ask for explanations from visiting American World War II veterans. That some resentment still remains was illustrated in 1979, when the factory guard at the gate of the Dietrich iron foundry in Niederbronn turned away a group of WRECKER veterans who were seeking to revisit their 1944 New Year's Eve bivouac site. He explained his uncooperative attitude in a scolding about the January 1945 American abandonment of Niederbronn. It seems doubtful that any native who remembers the pitiful German force that entered his town behind the retreating Americans and the further devastation that soon followed would be much impressed by any explanation.

The three regiments of the 70th Division met their baptism of fire in the midst of the most difficult period of the U.S Seventh Army's World War II combat experience. During its ten months in action, the Army suffered by far its greatest numbers of casualties during the months of December 1944 and January 1945 -- 12,113 and 15,275 in killed, wounded, and captured.

In January, the bloodiest month, the combined TF Herren regiments, among 12 division-size units assigned to the Seventh Army, ranked along with the veteran 45th and 79th divisions as having suffered the highest number of killed and wounded--approximately 1,100 each.

On January 1, 1945, the 275th Infantry Regiment had a strength of 2,972 officers and men. Ten days later that number had been diminished by over a thousand to 1,899. About half of the reduction in numbers was accounted for by losses in the killed, wounded, and missing categories. It appears that the other half can be attributed to temporary absences from duty, mostly of men undergoing treatment for trench foot and frozen extremities.

A few days after its relief in the Vosges, the 275<sup>th</sup> Infantry moved westward to the Sarre Front, where it and its sister regiments were assigned to the XVth Corps, on the left flank of the Seventh Army front. There on 6 February, the 70th Division was reconstituted and Task Force Herren was deactivated.

In the middle of the month, the Division began a limited offensive to drive northward to capture the heights along the Sarre River south and southwest of Saarbruecken.

By the end of February, the Division had largely achieved its objectives, but not without some hard fighting and considerable losses. Transferred to the XXIst Corps in late February, the 70th Division was assigned to take Saarbruecken to open the XXIst Corps mid-March offensive, the objective of which was to break through the Siegfried Line and invade the German Saarland. The achievements of the previous month's hard fighting now had their effect. These preparations and the threat of the U.S. Third Army's eastward thrust to the north of the German defenses along the Siegfried Line caused the abandonment of Saarbruecken, and the troops of the 275th and 276th regiments entered that city on 19 March without a single loss. That was the beginning of the end. The 70th

would remain with the Seventh Army for a few more weeks, but the hard fighting was over.<sup>31</sup>

It appears that the Germans could claim superior commanders because of the nation's far greater experience in the conduct of land warfare over the two previous generations. These commanders, however, were handicapped by the generally poor abilities of their units to execute the plans arranged for them by these capable and seasoned leaders. As a result the operations by the units of German Army Group G generally was considerably inferior to that of subelements of the Seventh Army.

Even the "new" divisions like the 275<sup>th</sup> were relatively more effective because of the long periods together, from activation to deployment, in which the majority of the troops and nearly all of the leaders underwent extensive and comprehensive multiechelon training. The much higher casualty rate of the units like the 275<sup>th</sup>, which had suffered hemorrhages of trained men shortly before commitment, demonstrates the importance of the more complete training and cohesion attained by the majority of the new divisions.<sup>32</sup>

Oberst Hans von Luck, who commanded units in combat against the French, Russians, and British before leading the *Panzergranadiers* of the 125<sup>th</sup> *Panzergranadier* Regiment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division against Seventh Army soldiers in the Vosges, observed;

In one respect, they seemed to have the edge over the British allies; they were extraordinarily flexible; they adapted immediately to a changed situation and fought with great doggedness....We discovered later, in Italy, and I personally in the battles in France in 1944, how quickly the Americans were able to evaluate their experience and, through flexible and unconventional conduct of a battle, convert it into results.<sup>33</sup>

So the WRECKER veterans, along with those of their two sister regiments, do not have to kid themselves and their grandchildren when recounting the story of their initial trial in combat--the going could not have been tougher. Not to be forgotten in the telling of the WRECKER story were the natural conditions of the setting--the remorseless hostility of those rugged mountains bound in the freezing snow and the ice of the harshest European winter of the century (temperatures daily averaged +7 deg highs). To protect himself in this environment, the doughboy rarely had more than his fortitude and the inadequate clothing he wore.

It was an unrelenting trial of the human spirit. In a letter written to his parents in mid-January 1945, the C Co BAR-man, Donald Docken, described the doubt and the rededication which attended his soul-searching during the Vosges action. "Things have been pretty hot for us in the past two weeks, and I haven't been able to get a letter off. My mind is absolutely stripped of any traces of reason for war -- as if there was any there in the first place. Maybe the overall picture justifies what goes on up here, but, from an

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<sup>31</sup> Ordeal of the Vosges, Epilogue p 332-8

<sup>32</sup> When Odds Were Even, p216-7

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p231

infantryman's point of view, it is hard to see. A lot of friends are not here anymore, which is a terrible reminder of the evil of war. It makes more solemn the fact that they should not die in vain. Every once in a while, I have to stop and justify what goes on here by thinking of the great cause we are fighting for."

While undergoing his own personal trial, the individual soldier had occasion to observe how others were faring with theirs. In the fighting, the men had to depend on each other for accomplishment and survival. Cornelius Cremer, the F Co machine-gunner, would review his judgments of his fellow soldiers: "Some bright spots shine through, even after all these years. Lieutenant Hunt, our Wpns Plat leader, was one of the finest officers I have ever known. Also fine soldiers were Sergeant Dawson, our platoon sergeant (later a 2nd lieutenant), Pvt Jim Hooley (later staff sergeant), Sergeant Howe of one of our rifle platoons (later a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant) and Private Jones (later a staff sergeant). There were those of us who went where we had to and tried to get the job done; others loved the adventure of war and killing; others were cowards. It was these last, officer and men alike, who made life rough on the rest of us in F Company. I had great respect for Colonel Barten and sympathy -- if privates can have sympathy for battalion commanders -- for the terrible task he had in trying to get his battalion to fight effectively."

# BATTLE OF PHILIPPSBOURG

## 275th Regiment

You are here: 275th Regiment: Able/Dog 275<sup>th</sup> <http://www.trailblazersww2.org/abledog.htm>

### Able Dog 275th

*The following account was sent to me by Charlie Pence, the Association Historian. It details the first day of action of A and D Company, 275th Infantry Regiment, during Nordwind.*

#### ABLE/DOG OPERATIONS

**2-3 JAN 1945**

#### INTRODUCTION

The deployment on January 2, 1945, out of Philippsbourg of the 275th's 1st Battalion was ordered by Colonel Charles S. Pettee, the Regimental Commander. Pettee's order was issued to attain objectives assigned to his regiment by the 45th Division Commanding General, the 275th having been attached to the 45th two days before. This subordination to the 45th Division came about in conjunction with the Regiment's move, started on the last day of 1944, from the Rhine plain into the Low Vosges mountains. The original departure time for the move had been hurried up by 12 hours as new intelligence confirmed Seventh Army G-3 expectations of a big enemy attack along its front facing north along France's border with Germany. On that New Year's Eve, LtGen Alexander Patch had met his Seventh Army corps commanders and told them that the enemy would hit during the first hours of New Year's Day. As the enemy's actual zero hour arrived shortly before midnight December 31/January 1, trucks carrying the 275th's lead battalion--the 3rd--were arriving at its Niederbronn march objective and those of the 1st Battalion's convoy were soon to pull into Reichshoffen, the next town back along the Regiment's route.

#### COMPANY A ASSIGNMENT:

The German offensive struck as expected and, while blunted further west, it made some headway to the east of Bitche, where Task Force Hudelson's thinly spread troops defended. Some 24 hours later, the 45th assistant commander--Col Paul Adams--came to the 275th regimental CP in Niederbronn and discussed the situation with Colonel Pettee. Then Adams, grease-penciling goose eggs on the 275th's operations overlay as he talked, prescribed the Regiment's objectives to be taken in offensive action on the 2nd of January. **Two of Adams' penciled ovals outlined the heights Angelsberg and Falkenberg north of Philippsbourg, and their occupation became the assignments of Co's A and B.** During the same night of this Adams-Pettee meeting, the first committed of the 275th's battalions, Maj William Shepherd's 3rd, had been in a fight along the Bitche road from Philippsbourg. Then, even as this skirmish was in progress, LtCol George Barten's 2nd Battalion, deployed astride the Zinswiller-Baerenthal road, was receiving the first of a series of probing attacks out from Baerenthal made by the 361th VG Div force that had taken it that afternoon.

Task Force Hudelson had been formed some 10 days before the German attacks, from components mainly of the 14th Armored Division. The Task Force's mission had been to provide a light cavalry screen covering some 10 miles of the recently much extended Seventh Army front where, running east-west, it crossed the Vosges Mountains. Initially the German attack had routed two cavalry squadrons covering the western two-thirds of the Hudelson front. This area was refortified by the 275<sup>th</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Bat. However, the 62nd Armored Infantry Battalion on the right, gave a much better account of itself.

The enemy's NORDWIND operation comprised two axes of attack the main one at Rimling in the Sarre Valley and the supporting push on the left, that is, on the east side of Bitche (see map 1). In the supporting Bitche salient thrust (see map 7), the 361st *Volks Grenadier* Division had the main effort., with the 256th *Volks Grenadier* Division covering the 361st's eastern flank and attacking on its left. One of the 361st regiments, the 953rd, had Bannstein as its first objective. The division commander reported that its night attack had been discovered before it had gotten under way, and the objective could not be taken until the next day. The tardy success had needed help of "heavy weapons" (presumably, assault guns) which had had to be brought up to overcome stubborn American resistance. Two of the 256th's three *grenadier* regiments were employed in Philippsbourg fighting in the first days of NORDWIND. At zero hour, the Division's columns were just beginning to reach their forward assembly areas after two days of marching to get there, and their initial attacks would be notably tardy. The 456th Regiment had Neunhoffen (3 miles northeast of Philippsbourg) as a first day objective. Next it was to send a strong reconnaissance group to probe over the mountains toward Philippsbourg while making contact with the 476th *Grenadiers* on its right. The 456th had no trouble with the first part of its mission, for Neunhoffen was only lightly outposted by the Americans. A German account of action on January 2nd tersely noted that the 456th encountered enemy resistance in its advance toward Philippsbourg, nothing more. That day a projected 476th attack on Philippsbourg from the west reportedly never got started, poor roads and rugged terrain in the locality being blamed.

### **NORDWIND HITS 62nd ARMORED INFANTRY**

Jan 1 – Late Jan 3

Having been alerted to expect an enemy attack that night, the 62nd's dispositions had all three lettered Companies on line. Charlie Company, on the left, was first to receive the enemy attack before midnight. Then, under mounting pressure, it gradually gave ground. From his CP near Bannstein, the company commander tried through radio contacts to keep abreast of his forward platoons' situation and guide their actions. Co A (not RRM) on the right--below Neunhoffen--remained awaiting the enemy until 0300 of the next morning. Then a triggered trip flare burst to reveal a white-clad enemy patrol at the defensive wire. Able's spirited reaction with fire from its own weapons and that from supporting artillery routed the intruders. After a quiet spell the enemy loosed a counter barrage and followed this up advancing its infantry to hit Co A and then, on its left, Co B. Both units were hard put to contain the attack, which continued past noon. At nightfall

Co A took up a position on the southwest nose of Weihersberg ridge, overlooking the Neunhoffen road.

Before dawn of the 2nd, fighting broke out anew when Co B's armored infantrymen in their foxholes detected enemy infiltrators in their midst. The intruders were driven off only to reappear after daybreak and the enemy front was extended eastward involving Co A across the Neunhoffen road in the action. Supporting fires were called for, but the enemy remained aggressive until the defenders' ammunition neared exhaustion. At that opportune moment two Sherman tanks--summoned by the beleaguered battalion's commander-- arrived to enter the fray with guns blazing. The tanks' added fire power and imposing presence seemed to take the scrap out of the attackers, and many of them gave up. Later in the morning, as the fighting died down, the armored infantrymen of Able and Baker were able to break off from the engagement. After the Shermans covered this, they withdrew.

On the battalion left, Co C's men under continuing pressure, gradually drew back to the Bannstein area, where they joined other 62nd elements in holding off the enemy until noon. The 62nd's composite defending force radioed that enemy tanks had been committed and these were systematically clearing the village one building at a time. Learning of this, Charlie's CO ordered his units to withdraw along the road to Baerenthal.

### **275<sup>th</sup>, 1ST BATTALION MOVES UP TO PHILIPPSBOURG**

Toward the **end of New Year's Day**, the 1st Battalion had fallen out from its frigid, comfortless overnight quarters in the Reichshoffen wire factory and made the short march to the even grimmer confines of the Dietrich iron foundry in Niederbronn. Approaching the war-blasted factory area the Americans learned that the artillery the gunfire of which had been growing in volume to an ear-splitting level was positioned adjacent to the building in which the Battalion would bivouac. The combination of harsh weather, oppressive quarters, and deafening gunfire made the few hours spent there thoroughly disagreeable. One reassurance came from thinking about the hard time being dished out in the nearby cannonading to an enemy whose physical circumstances could not have been any less rugged than those of the Americans.

After a futile quest for a snooze lying on the foundry floor, SSgt Hammond arose to visit his Co A rifle squad's sentry posts. He was supposed to make sure his men were awake and watchful over the artillery crews and their roaring cannons only a stone's throw away and privately had his doubts about the need. After the squad was relieved, Hammond and his men were able to rest briefly before being roused a couple of hours before dawn to prepare to march. Looking for extra ammo to take along, Sgt LeRoy Bussman found and opened a likely chest. Beneath the lid he discovered a list of names and addresses of girls who, back at a State-side factory, had packed the bandoleers of enclipped bullets it contained. Recognizing the note as an invitation to become pen pals, Bussman, already married, pocketed it to give to a single man.

Nearby, Pfc's Frank Hazmuka and Robert A. Matthews returned from a 2-hour sentry tour, rested briefly, then searched out their LMG squad leader, Sgt Raymond "Stubby"



Stevem. After a remark about their tardy appearance, the sergeant told the two to make light combat packs, put their blankets in the squad roll and be ready to move out. He explained that the Battalion was getting ready to march to the next town, Philippsbourg. The 3rd Battalion had made the same march on the previous day.

It was 7:30 a.m., **Jan. 2**, and still dark in Niederbronn as the 1st Battalion formed in the street adjacent to the foundry and set out for its objective, about 5 miles away. In addition to the foot marchers in two single files, the column included the battalion's tactical vehicles--command cars and weapons carriers. In the dark the sound of their engines kept marchers alert to their presence. Another safeguard--the feeble "cat-eye" head- and tail-lights on the bumpers--kept the foot soldiers conscious of the vehicles. These dim slits of light were the only illumination permitted in the prescribed black-out condition.

Co C was in the lead and next came Co A. Its CO, **Capt Ross Millhiser**, marched with his men until dawn, when the battalion column left the road and dispersed into an assembly area. Then he took a ride with driver and jeep for the mile remaining to the near edge of Philippsbourg, where the battalion CP had been set up in a farmhouse with attached barn. During the march artillery and small arms sounds had become audible up ahead and grew louder as the column progressed. When the jeep rounded a bend and Philippsbourg itself appeared, some shell explosions became visible.

Finding the CP was no problem after the driver parked the jeep. A sign pointed the direction, and Millhiser dismounted and followed it to the first building on the right side of the road. Entering the CP, Millhiser paused just inside. As he looked around to get his bearings, he felt the blast of a nearby shell explosion which propelled fragments whizzing and smashing into the house, somehow missing any human obstacle. Still shaken, he joined other officers in trying to look composed while moving into the kitchen, reserved for operations use. Battalion Commander LtCol Ronald Pierce and his advance party had arrived in the village several hours before the Battalion. Quickly there had been an alarm when an enemy patrol had been reported detected on the ridge just north of the CP--an investigation turned up some tracks in the area.

Pierce was still a little edgy as he gave his assembled company commanders their orders. These reflected Col Pettee's instructions based on objectives he had been given the night before by the 45th Division's Col Adams, Assistant Division Commander. Accordingly, A and B companies were to advance to objectives northeast of Philippsbourg and C Co would be deployed close in and around the village. At the assigned defensive positions, field fortifications were to be prepared. Co D heavy weapons sections were to accompany the forward rifle companies and lend support. One HMG section was sent to secure a Y junction on the Neunhoffen road--the route to Co B's objective and part way to Co A's. Two Co D sections--one armed with 81mm mortars, the other with HMG water-cooled--were to remain in Philippsbourg.

Back in the 1st Bn assembly area, the march column reformed as each company exited its sector tagging on at the end of the column in its prescribed place. Up ahead, the lead

company reentered the road and turned toward Philippsbourg. In a few minutes the edge of the village was reached and there the column halted and waited. Company A's Wpns Plat jeeps were braked in the column at the south entrance of the village. LMG gunner Pfc Frank Hazmuka dismounted and joined others in stamping feet, waving arms and otherwise exercising to combat the freezing morning temperature. The sounds of gunfire and shell explosions, which had grown as the column advanced, held the men's attention as they tried to accustom their ears to different sounds and distinguish those that indicated a threat to the immediate area.

Further back along the column, a shell explosion nearby scattered members of a D Co mortar section, among them James Holt. Leaving the roadway he raced for cover in a cow stable and shouldered back the heavy door to make way for his entry. Without pause he pitched the mortar baseplate he was carrying in front of him as he took a dive, burying his face deeply into the floor litter. In a moment he became aware of its stench and came up for air. Only then did Holt realize that he was in the company of an aged farmer standing by his cow. The American felt very silly, especially when he noticed the unperturbed look on the old Frenchman's face as he took his seat again and resumed his milking.

The wait of the column had seemed much longer than it actually was when the company commanders returned to their units from the CP. Then they briefly huddled with their lieutenants and noncoms before the column was reformed and moved on. However, only Baker and Able companies and attached heavy weapons sections from Co D were in it, and each company now had related but separate missions. The rest of the Battalion remained behind. Noises of combat suddenly grew louder as the head of the column turned right onto the Neunhoffen road, where it joins the road to Bitche at the main street's north end. There came a welling up of explosions punctuated by a series of loud sharp cracks--later realized to have come from high-velocity tank guns. At the moment it was evident that a vigorous fire-fight was going on and the column came to halt. Then, after a few minutes, the firing died down. Later two Sherman tanks hove into view up ahead. Back-peddling from the skirmish, their big guns were still trained toward the enemy. On each side of the street, the single file of riflemen gave the metal monsters plenty of room as they clattered and jerked their uncertain path to the rear.

After the orders came for the column to move out, members of the weapons platoons, who had been riding jeeps, had joined the riflemen as walkers. The MGs and mortars had been removed from their jeep-drawn trailers and shouldered by squad members who served them. Lugging his light machine-gun, Hazmuka remembers being startled to see approaching a column of about 60 men with hands clasped behind their necks. Their ankle length overcoats and soft caps identified them as Germans and accompanying GI guards indicated that they were POWs. Some of the prisoners bore the bloody scars of battle, and some, supported by fellow prisoners, mirrored agony on their faces stemming from marching on frozen feet. When the whistle of an incoming shell signaled its near approach, some POWs were seen to join the Americans, including SSgt Hammond and his men, in breaking out of the column to hit the ditches together. One of the GI escorts

joined the scramble into the same ditch next to Hammond, who learned from him what outfit he was with--he was an infantryman from the 14th Armored.

Co A was followed closely by the two Co D weapons sections--one, machine gun and the other, mortar--assigned to Able's support. Having left Philippsbourg on the Neunhoffen road, the Company passed the little hamlet of Mambach less than a half mile out. A hundred yards beyond it the column turned right off the road and started up the steep slope of Weihersberg ridge (see maps 11 & 12).

(Writer's Note: After the skirmish between the Sherman-supported 62nd riflemen and the German attackers that morning, there should have been an encounter between the advancing Co A/275th column and withdrawing 62nd troop units before Able's men met the withdrawing Shermans. Aside from 62nd guards escorting German POWs, this has not been noted in any accounts that this writer has become aware of. Perhaps, as has been identified as standard procedure, the 62nd infantrymen after disengaging loaded into their armored personnel carriers which, seen in the withdrawal by 275th observers, were remembered only as withdrawing U.S. armor.)

With the Co D mortar section behind the Co A riflemen, James Holt remembers hiking a little over a mile before leaving the road and confronting an imposing hill (Weihersberg), which the mortarmen labored up packing along the mortar components and ammunition. The jeep and trailer weapons carriers which had accompanied the Co D sections thus far had to halt, the route followed by Co A walkers being too steep. One jeep was sent to scout the trail skirting the southeast foot of Weihersberg as an alternate route--seemingly the route was never so employed. As the mortarmen continued, they passed the remains of a demolished enemy machine gun and shot-up crew before halting about two-thirds the way to the crest. After a long halt, the next leg of the march brought the section moving northeast along a trail well below the crest of the Weihersberg ridge. On this trail the mortarmen caught up A's rifle elements, which had forged ahead during the mortar section's halt.

In their jeep, Able's Supply Sergeant Jim Larson and his driver trailed behind the marching column until it left the road. There the driver halted and, dismounting, Larson followed the Company's route upslope to come upon the destroyed German machine-nest, the only crew member survivor badly wounded. The Co A exec Lt Perry Woodward was already at the scene when Larson arrived. Woodward told Larson to take three men to evacuate the wounded German to the aid station in Philippsbourg and there pick up additional ammunition to be brought back. The downhill carry of the wounded man was no easy task and proved to be futile--the man had died by the time the jeep was reached. Leaving his carrying party behind, Larson and driver continued on his ammunition supply mission to Philippsbourg.

To the northeast the security point of the Co A column approached the bottom of Weihersberg ridge and arrived at a saddle between the north noses of Weihersberg and Angelsberg. Here the trail followed by the Company joined with four others (Col du MODOCH) and the view of Angelsberg's summit and north nose was unobstructed. The

advance was halted and further back in the column, Weapons Platoon members were passed by their lieutenant David Scobey on his way forward.

A few minutes later Hazmuka and Matthews heard a volley of shots from the front, then came a call from Scobey summoning the machine guns forward. The two LMG squads arose and hurried ahead. Frank Hazmuka felt a glow as he received an encouraging wink from a reclining rifleman. Arriving where Scobey waited, the two crews hit the ground at designated positions and joined in firing alternating bursts in the direction indicated by Scobey's pointing arm and hand. Although Scobey made no sign to adjust the aim of either gun, a perplexed Hazmuka asked his assistant gunner how anyone could be expected to hit an unseen target. Matthews was equally frustrated and voiced his hope that the Company's own positions were equally hard to see for the enemy. From that position, there was no visible harm done by the LMG (or rifle) firing during the exchange, but after it had died down an A Co rifleman passed escorting four disarmed Germans with hands raised to the rear--the first prisoners taken by Co A.

Back up the trail along the flank of Weihersberg ridge, the Co D mortar section heard the outbreak of small arms fire and hit the ground. In the scramble, a can of peaches in his pack became dislodged and fell to the ground and, as Holt watched sorrowfully, rolled noisily downslope and out of sight. He had liberated his prize from mess supplies early that morning and had enjoyed the anticipation of a the tasty relief of his growing hunger. Now that promise was gone.

#### **CO A ARRIVES AT ANGELSBURG:**

The advance resumed mid-afternoon after the firing died away. The company moved eastward to the lower slopes of Angelsberg, then halted and dispersed while platoon and squad positions were selected and assigned. The two LMG squads' positions were selected by David Scobey--low down on the north nose. Hazmuka and Matthews noticed theirs overlooked a trail running northeast as it skirted the edge of the massif in which Angelsberg stood. As the two were digging in, Scobey joined them. Studying the outlines of the 2-man hole, the lieutenant told the men to make room for him--as he said--in case of emergency. Nearby, two ammunition bearers in the squad were also at work. As darkness arrived and deepened, any unfinished digging became unprofitable. With this pause came thoughts of rest, but then it was realized that the jeeps with the squad rolls hadn't arrived. Among the men of Co A there on Angelsberg the only comfort was the realization that the misery was equally distributed, and that was scant comfort.

The Co D mortar section remained in place after the fire-fight had died down and the Co A elements had moved on to Angelsberg. Section leader 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Leonard Klein went forward and returned after some time with Capt **Millhiser's** orders--the section was to locate a firing position to the rear from which to support Co A in its defensive positions, then being prepared. Led by Klein, the heavy-laden mortarmen worked their way eastward to reach Angelsberg and the trail running along its western face. They turned south on it and walked to a sharp left turn where the trail rounded a nose, behind which Klein picked their position on the downslope from the trail. Behind the position the slope formed one side of a draw running roughly west. Then the men went to work with their

overmatched entrenching tools pecking at the frozen and rocky ground. After nightfall, some of the exhausted men managed to fall asleep between wakenings by the piercing cold.

It was late afternoon when SSgt Jim Larson rejoined his carrying party where he had left them, adjacent to the Neunhoffen road at Co A's earlier point of exit. He was arriving from Philippsbourg, his jeep loaded with spare ammunition, rations, and mail from home. By the time the party, hand carrying just the spare ammo, started up the Weihersberg slope, it was getting dark. The jeep had been stashed with its remaining cargo. Having arrived at the crest with the darkness, the noncom decided to wait for dawn's light to assist them in locating the Company. The ammo was cached and the party settled down grimly expecting a rough night of waiting.

At the Angelsberg position, Capt **Millhiser** returned to his observation point after again checking the platoon positions and progress in their preparation. The men's difficulties digging in the rocky, frozen terrain worried him. So did the lack of contact with Philippsbourg added to his unease, the Company's SCR-300 radio having been found ineffective in a test call to Battalion. Aside from the German jamming and the hills interference, the relatively new portable technology had not been designed for the severe cold. To be sure, there had been a visit by a Co C patrol bringing 1st Bn's reminder about the need for lateral contact. However, no wire team had arrived. Finally **Millhiser** sent for TSgt Pannell, Wpns Plat Sergeant, and told him to go to Philippsbourg and report the Company in position preparing defenses and request the dispatching of a wire team.

Earlier, right after the Company's arrival on Angelsberg, Pfc George Wildi had left carrying a **Millhiser** message to Battalion. He had followed the out-bound route of the Company and reached the foot of Weihersberg as darkness was setting in. At this point in Co A's advance that afternoon, the route followed had become obscure owing to the broad front of the Company's formation during the fire-fight. While he searched darkness deepened and Wildi realized that he had lost the trail. Still he went on. Sometime later he arrived breathless atop an icy slope only after sliding back to the bottom on his initial attempt. After a breather he started on only to be halted by a whispered challenge. Groping ahead, Wildi had run into the Supply Sergeant's party as it waited out the night. Larson's sentry went through the identification ritual with Wildi and readily recognized his fellow Co A member. The sentry was able to reorient the messenger and send him on his way. He had also been informed that the Supply Sergeant's jeep had mail for the Company on it, but whatever was for Wildi was lost in the confusion of the next days.

### THE SECOND DAY--JANUARY 3

Pannell succeeded in making it to Philippsbourg without incident. In the Bn CP he found and reported to Capt John Carrier. 1st Bn S-3, who then asked **Millhiser's** sergeant to wait until the Battalion Commander could see him. Waiting next to the operations center set-up in the kitchen, Pannell soon became aware that the Colonel was upset--there had been continuing common troubles and such news as was getting through was bad. At last Pierce called for Pannell and curtly told him that the wire crews were tied up and to go

tell the Co A CO to get his company back to Philippsbourg--that was all. Accordingly, Pannell made his way back to Angelsberg, again without difficulty, and arrived at the Company's positions before dawn. He reported Pierce's order to Capt **Millhiser**.

At their position, Hazmuka and Matthews had spent a restless night listening for outgoing shells whispering overhead. An occasional enemy round impacting in the general area added to the tension. The alternating watch period arrangement with an adjacent rifle squad had proved to be hardly necessary-- discomfort had prevented any appreciable amount of sleep by anyone. Between snatches of conversation, there was self-pummeling with hands and stamping of feet to fight numbness. Conversation was mostly about food--there'd been no rations distribution in 30 hours. On Weihersberg ridge to the west, Larson and his ammo party were sleepless too and watched as friendly projectiles seemed to barely clear the nearby crest of the ridge--they could make out the spinning projectiles with spirals of vapor trailing behind.

Cpl Lee Miller, at his Co D HMG gun position deployed with the Co A defenses on Angelsberg, worried about the two chests of belted ammunition that had been inadvertently left at a gun position occupied the previous afternoon. The piercing cold and the bleakness of the mountain position compounded his discomfort making the waiting one of misery. At first light he set out alone, hurrying nervously along the deserted track left by the Company the previous afternoon. He soon found the place and slid down a steep decline to the old position. After an anxious search he recovered the chests, scrambled straining with them up to Co A's beaten path, and headed back. Crossing a trail, he glanced up it and spotted a pair of GIs walking toward him. Miller stopped and at closer range recognized from his own company 2dLt Leonard Klein and a member of Klein's mortar section. Miller received a bawling out from the officer--said Klein--for being on his mission all alone. Klein presumably had been conferring with the Co A leadership over administrative matters such as communications and supply. The machine-gunner and mortarmen quickly went their separate ways and were back at the respective firing positions in minutes.

#### **THE ATTACK ON CO D MORTAR SECTION:**

A snow fall is remembered to have arrived soon after dawn falling thickly enough to make visibility difficult for a time. Then an hour or so after daybreak Klein and his mortarmen were startled by an outbreak of shooting--it came from higher ground to the front and right front. It was rifle and automatic weapons fire and was aimed at them! Quickly some of the advancing attackers were less than a 100 yards away. The enemy group may have gotten past the Co A left flank and perhaps had been the force whose passage during darkness had made enough noise to be noticed by the CO and Exec (as noted below) and surely many other sleepless Able soldiers. However the Co A right flank, like the left, was "in the air" with a much bigger (mile-wide) gap to the east affording a better opportunity for the enemy to slip through unnoticed. It was a gap caused by NORDWIND pressure driving back and lengthening the American front, which was left with gaps as U.S. units were shuffled in the effort to blunt the German thrusts.

With only their pistol sidearms to fight back, the defenders nevertheless blazed away upon Klein's order. However, the enemy was determined and advanced aggressively shooting many burp guns and yelling wildly. The action did not last very long. Klein called for a withdrawal having judged the enemy, starting with a position advantage, to be superior in both numbers and weaponry. After a hasty disabling of the mortars, Klein's section succeeded in breaking off the engagement, moving down the draw to the west. Pfc Norman Wheeler had been wounded during the exchange. His wound seemed to embolden him and he attempted single-handedly to fire mortar rounds directly at the attackers. After the withdrawal began, Wheeler was last seen advancing toward the enemy firing his pistol. Somehow he miraculously escaped capture or further wounds and joined the withdrawing Co A column which arrived on the scene some time later. That Klein's mortar section broke off the fight so easily and evidently without casualties might have been due to the distraction of the attackers by a threat--the Winderman patrol--from the American unit (Co A) in position behind them.

From the abandoned firing position, Klein led his mortarmen on a westward course, down the draw and over a low ridge to reach the trail skirting along the south foot of Weihersberg and running into the Neunhoffen road. As the crow flies, the distance thus covered was about a half-mile. The column turned left on the Neunhoffen road and quickly approached Mambach. Bringing up the rear, James Holt was watching as the Lieutenant neared the first building, before which lengths of palisade-like log fencing formed a gateway through which the road ran. Passing through this gate, the lieutenant halted and raised his hands seemingly in response to directions that Holt could only imagine, then moved out of sight. The same thing happened to those behind...one after the other. After that, Holt backed away and found cover in a large clump of trees. A short distance away he found and joined several Americans whose 57mm antitank gun had been disabled in the German attack on Philippsbourg that morning. Eventually this group made it back to Philippsbourg by circling to the south and west.

Earlier on Angelsberg, Hazmuka and Matthews at their LMG position could hear behind them snatches of a whispered conversation--the discussion of Capt **Millhiser** with his exec Lt Perry Woodward. The night's quiet had been broken by various artillery noises, mostly distant and identifiable as friendly or otherwise. Then the sounds of a fire-fight had erupted long before dawn when the enemy surprise attack was launched in the rear of Philippsbourg and continued fitfully until after daybreak. Shortly before dawn had come a variety of new noises heard coming from nearby on the left which, from training experience, the listeners identified as troops on the move, probably enemy. The two Able officers agreed the enemy was up to something which might need investigating. Then, an hour or so after daybreak came the sounds of gunfire from the enemy attack on the Co D mortar section and the return of fire by Klein's men. From the direction and identification of weapons noises it was not hard to infer the nature of the action--it seemed like the Dog mortarmen with Co A were in trouble. Here was a definite and immediate threat, and **Millhiser** decided to wait no longer.

### **THE WINDERMAN PATROL:**

(Writer's note: The sequence of events that morning can only be arranged using educated guesses with a combination of what little documentary information has become available with the remembrances, some quite time-worn, of the Americans who were there.)

**Millhiser** sent T/5 James Dorsey of his headquarters group to get Lts Winderman and Scobey. It was evident to him that more than a recon look-see would be needed, for now his command was involved in a fire-fight. When the two officers arrived, the CO reviewed the situation with them and, after a brief discussion, issued his order. The patrol was to go to the scene of the on-going action and ASAP send a situation report back via messenger. Then Lt Winderman with the force available to him would give such assistance to Klein's mortar men as he could, pending the arrival of reinforcements. The patrol would be composed of SSgt Hammond's rifle squad from Winderman's platoon and Sgt Evans' LMG squad for support. It has been remembered that consideration was given to sending along one of the Co D water-cooleds, but the idea was dismissed. While the Winderman patrol was being assembled and briefed, **Millhiser** sent for the remaining platoon leaders and sergeants. He had decided to order the Company's withdrawal, the preparations, including fixed bayonets, for which would begin at once and without interfering with the Winderman patrol's departure.

In the dull light of the morning overcast Hazmuka and Matthews could make out members of the other Co A LMG squad as they passed to the rear of their LMG position. Lugging LMG and ammo, Pfc's Alfred Heard, Lester Hiltenbeitel, Ned Smith and other squad members followed their leader, Sgt Evans, disappearing around a bend in the trail where SSgt Hammond and his riflemen awaited them. It seems unlikely that the engagement between the Co D mortar section and its attackers could have lasted very long, because of the advantages held by the Germans. Minutes after the patrol's departure there erupted a staccato chorus of German burp guns responded to by a few pop-pop-pop's of LMG and BAR fire. Their much slower firing rates made the American weapons seem feeble to American listeners on Angelsberg. Then silence. Almost at once, T5 Dorsey came hurrying from that direction followed by four POWs (unexplained) under a guard from Winderman's party. Breathlessly Dorsey announced that Ned Smith had been killed. Hearing of this, Hazmuka remembered that Smith was married man with two small children.

After Dorsey reported Ned Smith's death to the CO, Lt Scobey went looking for and found Robert Budnik at his BAR position. Since dawn Budnik and his ammo bearer Neil Crawford had resumed work to improve their foxhole. The lieutenant explained that there was trouble to the Company's rear, and telling Budnik to follow him, departed in the direction to the trail. Grabbing his BAR, Budnik ran to catch up. Later the two men, hurrying along the trail south along the Angelsberg west slope, slowed as they spotted a figure sprawled in the trail up ahead. The body was indeed Ned Smith's and, after staring moodily at his dead LMG ammo bearer, Scobey started looking for some trace of the patrol. A burst of firing sound gave him a clue and the two men turned right off the trail.



D.C. Knott, BAR-man with Hammond's squad, is the only survivor of the Winderman detail known to have written about this incident. According to him, the enemy force was of company size and simply overwhelmed the Winderman patrol by attacking suddenly with burp guns blazing. The enemy fire on the patrol started with rifle shots, one of which killed Smith. Leaving the trail and going downslope obliquely to the right, the patrol reached a narrow shelf on the decline and from there attempted to return the fire with all weapons. Visibility, somewhat limited by trees, some with evergreen foliage, favored the enemy who for a time stayed motionless in firing positions, on the rise across the bottom from Angelsberg's west slope. The patrol was taking casualties, among them two men on the LMG, killed. Afterward Knott kept his BAR busy for a time as the rifle fire faltered. Sensing this, the enemy advanced, firing as they came. Then Knott, witness to the enemy's deadly firing effectiveness and with an empty magazine in his BAR, made no attempt to replace it. The attackers arrived and Knott held his breath as they walked among the fallen checking bodies. The other two survivors of the patrol, Lt Winderman and SSgt Hammond did likewise.

The Germans left suddenly, perhaps to take firing positions as they sensed the approach of Scobey and Budnik. Knott was watching when they arrived and saw the lieutenant pass, position himself on the edge of the shelf, and begin shouting angrily in German. The blast of answering fire killed David Scobey. Working on his troubled BAR, Budnik remembers seeing that the lieutenant's movement would expose him to enemy fire and calling a warning to him. The firing that killed Lieutenant Scobey seemingly occurred as the enemy still at the scene was ready to withdraw. They could have been a rear guard of a larger force already departed--the rear guard later spotted by Capt **Millhiser** and fired on by Hazmuka (see below). The only members of the Winderman patrol to join the Co A column as it withdrew were Winderman (wounded), SSgt Hammond, and D.C. Knott. Sgt Leroy Bussman, of Hammond's squad, was killed. The remainder were missing, some of them wounded, and all presumably captured.

Soon after this the head of the withdrawing Co A main body came along the trail, and Hazmuka was one who recognized Ned Smith's body, on or close to the trail. Those of two other known KIAs, Heard and Hiltenbeitel of Evan's LMG squad, were downslope on the shelf, which was not found as the Company passed by. Sgt Evans was rumored to have taken a chest wound and been MIA for several days before making it to American lines. In Niederbronn late that day, Capt **Millhiser** reported that his force had sustained 42 casualties, including 14 killed, on the Angelsberg mission.

#### **THE CO A WITHDRAWAL:**

The attack on Klein's mortar positions confirmed his concerns, and **Millhiser** ordered that preparations be made for the Company's immediate withdrawal. Since dawn, another factor had impressed itself on the Captain's thinking in this respect--enemy artillery fire. During the time since the Company's arrival on Angelsberg, enemy shellfire had been a desultory threat helping keep the Able foxhole diggers more purposeful. However, since daylight it had increased in volume and accuracy. The marked improvement in its accuracy suggested that the enemy had gotten an observer close in, arguably on the adjacent ridge--Weihersberg. Regarding his decision **Millhiser** has written: "It was the

fight (attending the enemy attack on Klein's mortar positions) and the intensification of enemy shelling of our position which caused me to decide to delay no longer the Company's withdrawal, authorized or not."

Pannell: "Captain **Millhiser**- called a meeting of all platoon leaders--those who were left--and platoon sergeants. We discussed our situation, our route options, handling of wounded and prisoners, and, particularly, march security. We were gathered around his foxhole. There had been snow and an overcast limited visibility; so a routing of the march to keep near the ridge line was favored to avoid being ambushed from higher around. After specifying the march order, the CO left with the lead platoon behind its point."

It took an appreciable amount time after the Company's point moved out to attain the proper interval between march elements and, as well, between individuals in single file marching along the trail. Back where Able's trailing elements--two rifle platoons--waited to move out, the men's attention was drawn to movements up on higher ground on Angelsberg, to the rear of what had been the Company's defensive position. Quickly it was realized that there was a substantial number of Germans up there. They were taken under fire by those men who were in position to do so, and the enemy returned the fire. Sgt Peter Haugen recalls that he and his riflemen inflicted some casualties. Could this have been the force that had hit Lt Klein's mortar section or Lt Winderman's patrol or both? Eventually the Co A withdrawal was joined by those who had been engaged with this enemy force. In their turn, the Germans made little attempt to maintain contact and the engagement simply died away. The actions that morning involving Co A and its Co D attachments on Angelsberg were evidently consequences of enemy thrusts by elements of the 456th regiment carrying out its mission for January 3--"to probe over the mountains toward Philippsbourg."

Near the head of the withdrawing column, Hazmuka came to the spot where lay the body of Ned Smith--perhaps the first Co A casualty of that day. This was the only evidence he remembers seeing of the Winderman detail's ambush. He is certain that, from the trail nothing of the Winderman patrol could be seen to the right or left and that the slope--upward to the left and downward to the right--was extremely steep. It is not known whether search parties were sent or flankers were told to keep a sharp watch for the patrol. However that may be, having marched only a short distance past Smith's body, Hazmuka came upon **Millhiser** standing beside the trail. Seeing Hazmuka with his LMG, the CO gestured away from the trail--pointing almost due west--and Hazmuka, peering, presently spied an enemy group dashing from cover to cover. Hazmuka and Matthews quickly set up the LMG and fired a half belt of ammo traversing along a thicket into which the Germans had sought concealment. A defiant burst of fire was returned, but only after the crew with its LMG had moved on. Almost immediately, the column was hit by concentrated artillery fire, seemingly directed by an observer, arriving in volleys of three. The third volley included a shellburst immediately over Hazmuka, wounding him and killing Foley, the ammo bearer.

Concerning the intensity of the enemy's artillery fire, Bonnie Pannell remembers: "Shortly after we started pulling back a heavy barrage of enemy artillery started falling

on us, and the heavy, timber was causing tremendous tree bursts, really effective. I remember thinking that if that artillery kept up and we stayed in the heavy timber, our casualty rate was going up dramatically. Our luck was that the enemy lifted his artillery." The accuracy of the German artillery as described by Pannell and Hazmuka strongly suggests that it was controlled by observers' pinpointing of the Co A location. The lifting of the enemy's fire probably resulted when the rounding of a turn by the Able column took it into defilade and masked the observer's line-of-sight to his target.

The column halted and the men dispersed during the barrage, then reformed and moved on after its lifting. However, Hazmuka found he had only one serviceable foot--he had taken some shell fragments in one thigh. He had to be helped along by Co A companions until picked up by a pair of German POWs with a stretcher. The stretcher arrangement proved to be useful on the level but on steep stretches required that Hazmuka dismount and hop alongside hanging onto the stretcher. It was the end of the machine-gunner's brief but action packed combat career-- Hazmuka was medically evacuated that day.

The choices which shaped the march route after Co A left the south end of Angelsberg were made to avoid arriving back at Philippsbourg itself which, from the sounds of battle--growing more distinct as the withdrawing force got closer--was judged to be at least partially in enemy hands. So, by switching from trail to trail, the heading was kept generally south according compass bearings and map checks by the CO. When the ridge was reached with its overlook down to the Philippsbourg-Niederbronn road--on a trail which ran along the eastern slope of the prominent Wintersberg height--the Company was halted and dispersed while the road was kept under observation. After a time a south-bound vehicle was heard approaching and on sighting recognized as a jeep with a GI at the wheel. Halted, the jeep's driver turned out to be a 1st Bn staff officer, who after talking to **Millhiser** drove back to the Bn CP. There his report brought the 1st Bn exec Major John Duffie back with instructions for Co A's next movements.

The 275th Inf CP daily log has an entry made at 1945 hours on January 3: "Capt **Millhiser** reported Regt CP (in Niederbronn) with approximately 125 EM." A reasonable deduction from this is that Captain **Millhiser**, himself, was at the 275th's CP in Niederbronn at the time indicated. His "125 EM" surely weren't with him, but the entry could have indicated the number of rations and blankets Co A needed or Millhiser's estimate of the effective strength of his battered company. In any event, it being still the critical day of January 3 with German pressure continuing in Philippsbourg, it seems most likely that Millhiser's Co A and a still intact Co D HMG section were being kept much closer to Philippsbourg than to Niederbronn. Seemingly Colonel Pettee, in virtue of his high esteem of his Cannon Company's importance to the defense of Philippsbourg, would see to it that, Co A was assigned to an outpost line defending Capt Thomas' cannons in their firing positions. That did in fact happen.

Back in Philippsbourg on January 3rd, Co A's Supply Sergeant Jim Larson learned mid-afternoon at the 1st Bn CP of Co A's location on the Philippsbourg-Niederbronn road. He was also told that Capt **Millhiser** needed transportation to the regimental CP in Niederbronn, where he was to meet with Col Pettee. By this time Larson had become

familiar with the supply situation in Philippsbourg, such as it was. He found and delivered back to his CO a serviceable jeep (with Co D markings). By this means Co A's CO was able to report at "1945 hours" and undoubtedly talked to Pettee in Niederbronn. Concerning the Co D jeep, nothing was said until a general inventorying of equipment was ordered many days later, after the Philippsbourg crisis had abated. As a company supply sergeant, Jim Larson naturally became interviewed. By this time, however, neither Col Pettee nor Capt **Millhiser** were available to support the Sergeant's description of the emergency which led to the separation of its jeep from Co D.

In the disorder of the tense battle which for 3 days ebbed and flowed in and around Philippsbourg, much U.S. equipment had been damaged, left behind, hauled away by the enemy or "borrowed" by friends. Afterwards much was found missing and had to be located and redistributed or ordered and replaced. The higher ups were asking hard questions and placing blame. So, as both supply sergeant for Co A and a party directly responsible, Jim Larson and the D Co jeep received a full measure of scrutiny. On that critical day of January 3rd it is known that the 275th's Colonel Pettee was anxious about the vulnerability of Cannon Co's firing positions behind Philippsbourg. It seems likely that the Colonel had decided to outpost those 105s using Co A--contingent on the condition of the Co A/Co D force under Capt **Millhiser**--as soon as it became available. As to Co A's combat worthiness, Pettee had wanted to advise himself directly by asking the company commander and this was communicated to 1st Bn from the 275th in Niederbronn. It is assumed that this order was conveyed to Co A's commander by the 1st Bn exec Major Duffie when he joined the Captain on the Philippsbourg-Niederbronn road. Larson himself was unable to recall how much of this story became available to him before he faced his investigators--he said simply that he talked fast and the questioners gave him a grudging clean bill of health.

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