

CHAPTER FIVE

THE HUERTGEN FOREST

Background to the Huertgen Forest Campaign

Before discussing the activities of the 2d Battalion within the forest, the situation which it encountered is worth attention.

After breaking out of Normandy, the Allies pursued the withdrawing Germans across France. Strong German resistance continued in many places, but in general, American troops mobilized swiftly to prevent the Germans from dropping back into Germany to reinforce their units behind the West Wall. When the 2d Battalion was stationed along the Loire River it was to prevent the Germans from withdrawing in force to the Siegfried Line. During the pursuit, Allied supply lines became overextended and many vehicles needed repair or replacement; but the high command hesitated to halt the momentum of the chase. Besides the acquisition of territory, the moving pursuit was encouraging to American soldiers who had suffered so much in the painfully slow advance in Normandy. In addition,

the faster the US could pierce the Siegfried Line, the less time the Germans would have to move in strong reserves.

The initial American objective was to penetrate the Siegfried Line just south of Aachen in the vicinity of the Huertgen Forest (Fig.46), cross the Roer River to the Roer River plain and then move northeast in order to join Montgomery's British forces which were scheduled to push inland after opening the port of Antwerp to Allied shipping. After the link-up of the British and US forces, the plan was to drive toward the Rhine and Berlin.¹

The main effort was assigned to General Collins' VII Corps. In fact, by 16 September, the momentum of the American forces did carry the 47th Infantry of the 9th Division into the Huertgen to within only seven miles from the town of Duren. It was the deepest penetration that the Allies would establish for many disastrous weeks. It would take three months and seven divisions before the Allies would be able to cover those remaining seven miles to the Roer River. The commander of the 47th halted his men at Schevenhuetten because of the threat of being cut off by the enemy. His regiment was much in advance of the other flanking US protective units. During the same day, the German troops opposite the US intrusion were reinforced by the German 12th Infantry Division. At this time, difficulties for the US forces began and did not abate until 20 December. The Allies had plunged into the

Huertgen Forest. No one in authority could possibly have anticipated that the battle for the Huertgen would be so lengthy or cause such huge losses.

As only one of many examples of the slow US progress through the forest, the 39th Infantry of the 9th Division had moved forward only one mile in five days in October. But during those days, it incurred 500 casualties. The account of the 9th Division effort continued to be distressing. By 10 October, the 9th had lost 4,500 men and had advanced only 3,000 yards into the forest.² The 9th Division became so weakened that it was relieved by the veteran 28th Division under Major General Norman D. Cota, a hero of the D-Day assault of Omaha Beach. By 8 November, the 28th had sustained a terrific beating and had 6,184 casualties.³ The 104th and 4th Divisions joined the attack on 6 November. At the same time, the 1st Division was added to Collins' VII Corps. There was a US offensive on 16 November, but the 1st Division had progressed only two miles by 19 November. On that day, the 28th Division was relieved by the 8th Division. The condition of the 4th Division was already grim and the 1st Division paid with 4,000 battle casualties by 29 November. By 1 December the 1st Division was withdrawn from the line. To replace it, the 9th Division was brought back after a month's rest. On 9 December, the 4th Division was relieved by the 83d Division from Echternach.

The 83d Division was to continue the mission of the 4th Division. It was to fight to emerge from the forest, open roads to the southeast for the 5th Armored Division to proceed toward the Roer River. That objective accomplished, the 83d was to push on to the northeast and capture Duren. In some places it was only three miles to the Roer from the US lines and in other places only one mile before the forest broke out onto open ground. But it had become clear that distances in the Huertgen were deceptive.

Military historians, and in particular Charles MacDonald, who specialized in the conflict along the Siegfried Line, proposed many reasons for the disasters in the Huertgen. The enterprising US soldiers had overcome similar difficult situations in many places, but in the Huertgen it was the combination of so many disadvantages at the same time which proved fatal.

The forest itself was both a physical and mental obstacle. From reports of soldiers who served in the Huertgen, there was always a hint of forboding when they spoke of the forest. The writer of the Combat Digest said, "We crossed the border into Germany on the 10th of December. For weeks we had heard and read of the bitter hell that was the Huertgen Forest. In spite of ourselves, as we were now being swallowed up into its darkening depths, an unconscious feeling of dreadful anticipation

came over us."⁴ Another example can be seen in Figure 47. It is a copy of a letter sent to General James Gavin by a major who had fought in the forest. It is a moving account of one of his memories of the forest during the winter of 1944.

The forest was not a flat, pleasant woodland with meadows, but a bewildering and dark place. It was situated across terrain that was made up of steep hills and deep ravines. There were repeated instances of soldiers becoming lost. Even if light filtered in between the tall trees, it was usually from a gray sky with either snow or rain falling, and the mud was knee deep. Vehicles slid in the mud and constantly "bellied out."(Fig. 48)

Later in the war, in February after the battle in the Ardennes was completed, General Gavin's 82d Airborne was assigned to the Huertgen. When the men arrived they found frozen bodies. The December fighting was so fierce and the weather so bad, that the fallen soldiers were soon covered by the snow and not retrieved for burial. General Gavin had to reassure his men that should they be wounded or killed, their bodies would not be abandoned.⁵ Besides the bodies, the landscape was littered with abandoned weapons and disabled vehicles. Tanks had slipped their tracks in the mud and become inoperable. It was not even uncommon to see tanks that had slipped from the roads and plunged into deep valleys.⁶

The effectiveness of the reciprocal infantry-tank-artillery technique which was so important to US tactics could not be sustained in the Huertgen. It was difficult to negotiate the narrow forest paths. What roads there were, often could not support the weight of heavy tanks, which forced them to make detours causing delays in rendezvous to provide firepower for the infantry. In the instances where the commanders used tanks protected by infantry, the results were good; however, too often the attacks did not take place as a coordinated effort and US troops were either badly beaten or they had to fall back and relinquish any temporary gain. Furthermore, the German tanks were superior. The US Sherman and the British Churchill were smaller, faster and more maneuverable than the German tanks, but they were very deficient in firepower.(Fig.49) The gun on a Sherman could not pierce the armor plate of a German Tiger or Panther tank. The fact that the Allies had an almost inexhaustible supply of Shermans did not seem to overbalance their relative ineffectiveness when confronting a Tiger tank mounted with an 81mm gun.⁷(Fig. 50) Perhaps in open country the mobility of a Sherman or multiples of Shermans might bring equality, but within the close precincts of the Huertgen a Tiger tank could easily outface the first Sherman in a column. After destroying the tank at the head of a path, the disabled hulk of that vehicle would block the advance

of any other tanks. This happened over and over again in the Huertgen. The mud, German Tiger tanks, and mines restricted armored deployment throughout the forest.⁸

The Huertgen gave a considerable advantage to the defender. Since it was a portion of the Siegfried Line, the Germans had prepared their defense in the forest, and occupied bunkers underground which were lined and roofed with logs.(Fig. 51) The tops of these flat-roofed outposts were almost on ground level, so they made almost no visible targets. They were so well camouflaged that a soldier could be practically on top of a bunker before noticing it.⁹ Each German gun emplacement had carefully measured its field of fire, overlapping the field of each neighboring position. The trees were booby-trapped and there were mines everywhere. There was also something unique in the German artillery defense in the Huertgen. The Germans fired artillery shells directed at the tops of the tall trees. The shells burst and showered thousands of lethal shell fragments on the US troops at the base of the trees. These were called "tree bursts" and they caused more casualties than frontal attacks. The advancing US forces had no roofed bunkers, so when the tree bursts began, they would throw themselves to the ground. This position would in fact present more of their bodies to the dreaded fragments than would have been exposed if they had remained standing.

Living for extended periods in the open with continually cold and wet conditions produced dullness and an almost resigned indifference in the men. After only a short time in the dark, cold forest the initiative and fighting edge of most soldiers was blunted. There were also increased cases of the debilitating trenchfoot malady. Trenchfoot can result in permanent damage and some soldiers "would be incapacitated for life."¹⁰

Allied supplies were coming in only at Cherbourg and had to be transported long distances to the front lines at the West Wall. There were ammunition and gasoline shortages. The British were not able to open the port of Antwerp until 9 November and the first Allied convoy of supplies was not unloaded until 26 November. By that time the supply problem had become acute. Not only the quantity of supplies was affected, but within the Huertgen the method of supply was necessarily primitive. Supplies were often hand-carried by crews who filed along the paths by night, protected by a few riflemen and exposed to all of the standard forest dangers.

Because of the fantastic rate of attrition, there were rarely any reserves available to be used to press an advantage or forward movement when one did occur. The divisions were each assigned too wide a sector for the number of men they had available. Often a regiment was shifted from one division to help out another, which left

the original division short-handed. The military term for this is "cannibalizing of units," and it was a common practice in the Huertgen because of the shortage of line troops.

The combination of these misfortunes, plus the excellence of the German soldiers characterized the bloody battle for the Huertgen Forest.

Against this background, the story of the Huertgen Forest continues with detailed accounts of the activities of the 2d Battalion.

Sharpe's Second Battalion in the Huertgen Forest

In the battalion history, Combat Digest, there is a description of a soldier's first impression upon arriving in the Huertgen.

Our first day in the forest was anything but encouraging. All around us the tall trees seemed to reach up to touch the cloudy, rain-filled skies. Wherever we walked, we had to wade through sucking, soupy mud that reached well over the top of our combat boots. Many a vehicle was bogged down for long hours in this mire. We dared not wander far off the beaten track as we were encircled by an invisible ring of snipers, and the booby-trapped trees and mines made each of us more doubly cautious.¹¹

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On the 9th of December, I got a call from division headquarters to go get information about an impending move, reported and found that we were to be relieved by elements

of the 4th Infantry Division that had been severely chopped up in the Huertgen Forest. We were supposed to go up and relieve them and initiate an attack on the 12th. (Fig. 52) So I called from the headquarters to alert my quartering party which would be headed by Captain John Devenney, the Battalion S-1 Adjutant. The return message I received was that Devenney was not in a condition to go, he had had too much alcohol and was indisposed. Well, the other people got the party ready to go, it was an S.O.P. (standard operating procedure) type function so they carried Devenney along and I'm sure when he found out what was happening, he sobered in a hurry. The quartering party moved out and went to the area of the Huertgen Forest.

The nature of the move dictates whether the commanders go forward with the quartering party or the executive officers. As an example, if it's an administrative move from assembly area to a new assembly area the executive officers go forward with the quartering parties and the commanders stay with their troops. However, in this case we were going into an attack position from which we would launch an attack. Therefore, the commanders went forward as members of the quartering party since the commanders needed to see the ground and make plans for the attack.

Our 2d Battalion party was made up of the battalion S-1, the battalion Sergeant Major, jeep driver, and one guide; the communications vehicle with wire and radio

teams; E Company vehicle with company commander, driver, radio operator, and one guide; F Company vehicle with company commander, driver, radio operator, and one guide; and the same for G and H Companies. A regimental quartering party is made up of three battalion parties, the regimental headquarters party, and the regimental trains party. Once the battalion quartering party reaches the forward area, each company is shown the area to which their unit has been assigned, and they then reconnoiter the area to decide where each portion of their unit will be bivouacked. Their unit guides then go to a release point (RP), meet their parent unit as they arrive, get on the lead vehicle and guide the unit into their assigned assembly area.

In this situation the battalion commanders of the 329th Infantry went to the designated regimental command post of the 4th Division which we were relieving and there received the attack order from Colonel Crabill. Then with my staff I went to our assigned area, made our reconnaissance, met with my company commanders, and issued my battalion attack order for the next day at 1000 hours.

On the afternoon of the 10th our troops were moving, and as they came into the assembly area on the 11th of December they sent their leaders forward and we briefed them in preparation for the next morning's attack.

The area was a miserable place, it was deep in mud,

and in most cases the vehicles couldn't move. It was going to be a basic mud operation. The 4th Division had been chopped up in the Huortgen, as had the 28th ahead of them, and the 9th Division before that. And it was obvious to those who made the reconnaissance that the one thing we must do was to get through and out of the forest as quickly as possible. If we stayed in there, we would just be chewed up with tree burst from artillery and mortar fire.

The rationale of the enemy defense was to have observers sparsely spread through the woods, housed in log and earth covered bunkers with heavy roofs over them and firing slits in the sides. They also had trenches to support the firing boxes. The Germans knew the distances to each key position in the forest. They knew where our lines were, and anytime the Americans were out of their holes they would fire mortars and artillery. To get observation we would have needed to get to the edge of the wood, but life would be unbearable since they would be able to fire on the woodline and inflict heavy casualties while we would be trying to dig in for cover. A regular foxhole or slit trench was not much help because it afforded no overhead cover. When an artillery or mortar round hit in a tree the shell burst up in the air giving a spray cone effect covering a large area with hundreds of small fragments. This was why the other four or five divisions before us had lost so many men.

My instructions to my commanders was, "the objective is the edge of the woods, we are going to make a passage of lines, that is, the 4th Division troops are going to stay in place and we are going to pass right through them and go to the edge of the forest." The principle of this procedure is that the unit being relieved stays in place and supports the attack of the relieving unit by firing from their position. The 4th Division mortars and artillery were already registered on key enemy targets and could easily hit many key terrain features on call. In our case it would have been difficult to get our weapons registered with our limited observation.

My conviction was that there was only one thing to do, that was to attack with everybody forward, no depth to speak of, look for holes if we could and wherever we found a hole to go on through it, but not to stop until we got to the edge of the forest. Those were my orders and I advised them, 'fix your bayonets.' This was the first time we had ever had an occasion for such a thing but it was imperative to rout the enemy out with bayonets or whatever was necessary. I reiterated that they were not to stop, not to have any fights, just keep going and get to the edge of the forest.

Looking at my sketch, the scheme of attack was to stay away from the road as we went forward, since historically the enemy, as we did also, stayed close to the roads. (Fig.

53) Therefore, my idea was to head for the edge of the forest but stay away from the road. The formation was two companies abreast. One was G Company and I have forgotten if the other was E or F Company. The companies attacked with bayonets fixed, and the reports that came back to me said some were used as they hurriedly moved forward.

Three hours is excellent time to cover the approximately 1000 yards, since in heavy woods the small units must halt frequently to regain contact and direction. As I recall, we got to the edge at 1300 hours.

The spot shown on the map as Hof Hardt was only a few battered buildings, but they gave us some cover for the short time we were there. I recall arriving there and finding a lot of men bunched up around the buildings. I had a horrible feeling that a few well placed enemy rounds could have inflicted heavy losses on G Company. When I yelled to the troops not to bunch up, they spread out a little, but then I realized that even a few stone walls were still better protection than the woods with its tree bursts. The troops had been instructed to stay away from the edge of the woodline to minimize enemy observation. As it worked out, the enemy didn't seem to realize that we were there. It is my opinion that our attack came as a surprise since the 4th Division had been taking it easy, that is not starting any firefights, because they were too decimated. Actually there were not many Germans manning

the positions, which was fortunate for us. However, it would be classified as stubborn resistance, which meant we had to dig them out or shoot them in their holes. It was very improbable that the Germans would have withdrawn their forces since in only six days they were going to make their final big push toward Aachen and the resultant Bulge.

There is an interesting story involving two of my men that relates to the operation at this point. When we were back in Luxembourg Hugh Bates was the commander of G Company. (Fig. 54) He had been a replacement and when we went into Luxembourg he had difficulty with Sergeant William Connally. Bates told me that Connally wouldn't do what he was asked to do, and that Connally was insubordinate. Bates asked me to transfer Connally to some other unit. I was sympathetic with Bates to the extent that, yes, he might have a problem because Connally was a headstrong, six foot 2 inch red-headed Irishman. But Connally had been a fantastic leader for me in the original G Company, I knew exactly what he was like, and felt that Bates just had to win the right to be heard. I advised Bates that it was his problem to get along with Connally, but I also advised him that if he had to fight, Connally would be his most valuable man. As it turned out, while preparing to make the attack in the Huertgen on the morning of 12 December, Connally went to Bates and said, "I'll go with one platoon and you go with the other one and we'll

beat you to the edge of the forest." My secondhand information was that Connally did beat Bates to the edge of the forest, but it opened up a comradeship that was unsurpassed. In this attack Bates had proved himself to be worthy of the company commander job, and he and Sergeant Connally went on to do great things.

So, we got to the edge of the forest, to Hof Hardt, a little after noontime, consolidated the position, and started making our reconnaissance for a continuation of the attack the next day. I assembled the company commanders and issued orders for the attack the following morning.

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The battalion account of the advance said, "G Company literally butchered their way forward, and their bloody bayonets stood mute witnesses to how difficult their going was. That evening, we talked with especial pride of the men of F Company, who, by sheer courage alone, had rushed and overrun 5 machine gun nests."¹²

In his book, The Ragtag Circus, Colonel Crabill described the same situation in this way, "The regiment jumped off in attack on December twelfth, taking some of the German strong-points by marching fire and outflanking others. The fighting was wicked and at close range. The attackers were either killed or they overran and killed the

defenders."¹³

The division history simply related, "Next day we attacked through the mine-infested forest in the face of machine gun, small arms, and artillery fire and captured Hof Hardt."¹⁴

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The immediate problem at hand was to come up with a plan for the attack of the town of Gurzenich (Fig. 55) which was going to be our next objective, and was right in the middle of my zone of action. Our reconnaissance along the eastern edge of the forest revealed a flat open flood plain of grassland reaching up to 2,000 yards to our front with the town of Gurzenich about 1,000 yards away. The town was down on the river valley, it was flat, and it was in plain view of a section of woods that came out to our right front just before you got to the town. Secondly, there were two little villages off to the left that were also in view at all times.

The logical avenue for a covered approach to the town was around to our right through a peninsula of woods that led up close to the town; however, once discovered, our men would be subjected to the already fateful tree bursts and channelized in the woods. The alternative would be to avoid the woods and move directly across the open field and

into the near end of the town. This approach would be wide with no protection against small arms. However, if we could temporarily blind the enemy with smoke while we quickly moved two rifle companies in column (that is, one in front, with the second behind the first) across the open ground, we might get a foothold in the town.

A refinement of the plan was for the first company to seize the tip of the woods that commanded the road and entrance into town with one platoon, then to pass with the second and third platoons right into the near end of the town and get a foothold in the buildings on the right. The second rifle company was to cross immediately behind the first with their objective being the first road junction inside the town. Their mission was to take up defensive positions in the buildings and protect our battalion position against counterattack. Inherent in the plan was the idea that the elaborate smoke screen would hide our movement and would initially be a surprise, but it would be too costly in ammunition and too risky to try it a second time. Therefore, the third rifle company would wait until dark to move up into town.

Three other aspects of the plan bear mention. First, what do we do if the enemy discovers us in the open while crossing? Secondly, the town was very long and one battalion would not be enough to hold the town against a determined counterattack. Thirdly, the road would have to

be cleared of mines during darkness so we could bring up our antitank support of tanks and tank destroyers, our weapons carriers with ammunition, our medical aid jeeps, and our chow trucks.

As a precautionary measure to lessen the casualties should we be caught out in the open and pinned down by fire, I talked to the artillery that night, the 324th Field Artillery, and requested that the 155mm Howitzer battalion, the large guns, fire a pattern of shells across the open ground to give us shell craters which the men could dive into in case anything went wrong while they were out in the open field. I asked that they fire delay fuses, which meant that the shells penetrated deeper before exploding and thereby kicked a big hole in the ground. So the support artillery put a pattern of these large shell craters all the way across the field in preparation for our next day's attack.

On the 13th of December, before the time for the attack, I called for smoke on the two little villages off to the left, on the town of Gurzenich, and on the woods off to our right front. Now when you put that much smoke out it takes a long time to get a good smoke screen going, and it takes a lot of smoke to keep it going. We didn't realize how much that was going to take. As I've said, the plan of attack was to advance in a column of companies, in order to keep the minimum amount of exposure at any one time. After

the smoke was sufficiently thick, the first company started across while the second stayed back in the woods and waited. We got the first company across with no problem. They attacked the point of woods that stuck out in front of us just before the entrance to the town, and caught the enemy by surprise, captured some antitank guns, other weapons, and several prisoners. They dropped off one platoon to protect their right flank and the right flank of the battalion, and went on into town and captured the near end of Gurzenich. The second company then came across, but we had to fire a whole set of separate smoke screens for them and it turned out to be a very expensive use of weaponry. I didn't feel we could justify firing this whole thing the third time in order to get the other company across, so as planned, we waited for nightfall to get the last company into town. An interesting sidelight here, the enemy was taken by surprise and apparently didn't have communications with their rear or we had knocked out their communications; consequently, the Germans that we took on the edge of the forest and the ones we took on the near edge of town had no way of notifying their superiors of our presence, and the Germans fired their protective fires around the town that night, intermittently, thinking that we still had not come into town yet.

So the second company became operational, we fired the smoke, got them across, and they completed their trip into

town. The plan was to consolidate on the first crossroad that we found, get our rear pulled in, get the road open, and prepare to continue the attack the next day.(Fig. 56) All in all, it had been a successful endeavor.

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The divisional history stated: "Moving in a column of companies, the battalion slugged its way into the village by nightfall. This rapid and aggressive advance drove a deep salient into the enemy's defensive positions west of the Roer. With both flanks exposed, the 2d Battalion consolidated its positions during the next two days in spite of repeated enemy attacks and intense artillery fire."¹⁵

Almost every account agreed that G Company led the attack. Although in the initial taped interview, Sharpe referred to them as the first and second companies, he later identified G as the first, F as the second, and E as the third which came in during the night. In addition, all accounts except MacDonald's The Siegfried Line Campaign agreed that by nightfall the 2d Battalion had captured half of the town. MacDonald wrote that by nightfall the regiment had cleared Gurzenich and occupied much of Birgel.¹⁶ However, no account but Sharpe's included the artillery formation of shell craters or the pre-dash smoke

screen. The regimental history incorrectly had E Company in town before nightfall. There were also some inaccuracies in the battalion history. The Combat Digest reported that during the night the other two battalions came up on line with the 2d. Actually, the 3d was sent to Birgel and the 1st fought resistance outside and to the right of Gurzenich, with only B Company of the 1st Battalion sent into Gurzenich on the 14th to help Sharpe's 2d Battalion hold the town. In fact, the 2d was left alone to secure the town that night and the others never did come into the town. When the Germans attacked on the morning of the 16th of December, the 2d Battalion had not been reinforced in Gurzenich. These inaccuracies can be explained by the frequent desire of military writers to tidy up the battlefield. By way of tidying, MacDonald made the general statement that the regiment cleared Gurzenich on the 14th of December.

When comparing the accounts of the operation in Gurzenich, it is easy to see that Sharpe's personal record provides a more precise picture of what took place. It is clear from only this limited sequence of the story that the more removed the writer was from the site of the battle, the more general the description. As Sharpe's narrative continues, it becomes obvious that small unit histories will be more specific than the divisional history and that none of them will be as detailed as Sharpe's first-hand

description.

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That night when we got everyone in and settled down, we had to get the road open. It was still mined with mines and booby traps and barbed wire. We sent for the ASP platoon of the regiment to come up and open the road. They came up and started to work on it and then got shelling by the enemy because the Germans normally fired their final protective lines along this set of obstacles. When they started firing, the ASP platoon figured that was not a nice place to be and it left. The platoon left, and of course we had to call it forward again the second time and finally about 0200 they got the road open and we were able to get the vehicles into town. We brought in a couple of TDs, brought in the chow trucks for the two companies, and we moved the advance command post of the battalion up into the town before dawn. That was the end of the long day of 13 December.

The day of the 14th was the second day of the attack and we intended to move up through the rest of the town. We had three companies of the battalion inside the town by then. G Company was at the near edge in the first part of the town, F was on the right farther in, and E had been brought in on the night of the 13th and took its place on

the left. We consolidated the far end of Gurzenich and made reconnaissance down toward Duren to see if the bridge was open and to size up the situation. The idea was to move as quickly as we could down toward Duren to see if it was possible to capture the bridge. The reconnaissance that we sent out from the upper end of the town was immediately brought under fire, both small arms and tank fire. We tried several times to patrol in that direction, but each time the enemy was obviously sensitive to this and drove us back into town. The night of the 14th and during the day of the 15th we strengthened our position. B Company of the 1st Battalion was brought in and it secured the right-hand side of the town, while the 2d Battalion occupied the remainder of the town. We were strong on the far end but we weren't in a position to attack at that time. What we didn't know, but we know now, was that on the morning of the 16th the big counteroffensive by the Germans would begin. One of the prongs of their advance was supposed to come in and go right through Gurzenich and head on back toward our rear area. If you look at a chart of the battle, you can see that when the Germans did make this offensive, one of the prongs was headed right from Duren into Gurzenich. But the chart showed the battle prong making a loop and heading right back out again, so obviously our defense of the town of Gurzenich was significant. The record will show too,

that there were 280 dead Germans around the outside of the town as a result of this battle and any number of disabled tanks, TDs, and other vehicles. We knocked out some of theirs and they knocked out some of ours.

There was a question about who owned the town for several hours that day and at one point the aid station was taken over by the enemy or isolated by the enemy. The Germans had a fantastic attack plan for recapturing the town. A German armored outfit and their 3d Parachute Division were in the sector which included Gurzenich. Furthermore, Gurzenich was situated at a significant spot; it was at the boundary where the 15th and 7th German Armies came together. Therefore, the town was at a juncture where three large German units were operating. On 16 December, the German attack started before dawn. They started firing preparation fires all along the town and particularly at the main road junctions in the town. Since they were firing throughout the whole town we couldn't identify the fact that they were going to make an objective of each of the three road junctions. They fired a blanket fire around the whole town, they fired heavy artillery, light artillery, they fired mortars, 81mm mortars, and the big 120mm mortars, and then they fired tanks. All of this went on for about thirty-five or forty minutes, and it was a tremendous concentration. Because of all the things that were going on, we couldn't identify what was really

happening. During that inundation, they lifted the fire at the three road junctions and sent combat patrols in and seized the junctions in the town, one at the far end, one in the middle, and one at the near end. It was obvious that something was happening but we couldn't tell that they were actually attacking us, we thought they were just shelling us. This had been going on for awhile and as dawn broke, the Germans had combat patrols on all three road junctions. Then they secured those junctions by putting people in the surrounding buildings. Now of course we also had people in the buildings all down the street, but in most cases, our people were up on the second story. Then the firefights started throughout the town between soldiers from both sides. For perhaps two and a half hours no one was sure whose town it was. Our people were firing, they were firing, and as I said the aid station was cut off.

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Both the battalion and regimental histories reported that the battle lasted for four hours. The Combat Digest described it well, "Everyone fought that day: mess sergeants, up with chow unexpectedly but willingly, became riflemen; telephone operators and clerks pitched in to help fire away at the enemy, and many a painfully wounded soldier begged the medics to let him return to his place on

the lines."17

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At the north end of town, which was the end toward Duren, the Germans attacked with tanks. One of our TDs was knocked out on the corner, and one of the German tanks was knocked out at the same corner, which left only enough room to move one tank past the inoperable other two. (Fig. 57) When the Germans came in with more tanks they had difficulty negotiating this area. Captain Bates (Sergeant Connally's Captain Bates) was in a warehouse on the right-hand side of the town as you go out. He had a chance to fire at a German tank which was attempting to advance through the small space. He used a regular carbine grenade and caught the tank at a very vulnerable place on the track and amazingly knocked it out. By having that tank knocked out at that spot, the whole area was blocked and the Germans were unable to come in and use the road. That was a key event and in a sense it might have saved the town, we don't know. But the Germans continued to come, and as I said, at dawn they came in in great numbers. Afterward, there were 200 and some found dead around the town. Fortunately, we only had a few people killed in Gurzenich, but we had a considerable number wounded. We took 580 German prisoners. One of our men that did get killed, a

very key member, was the communications platoon lieutenant. He was killed on the second day that we were in Gurzenich as he was attempting to come down the street with the wire team. The communications men were invaluable. They advanced right along with the spearhead riflemen carrying reels of wire in order that the battalion commander would have instant phone contact with his company units as well as the regimental headquarters in the rear. They laid wires along the streets and over any obstacle or projection they could find. My communications men were excellent.

The aid station event was also interesting. We had wounded people in the aid station who took up arms and protected the aid station when they got cut off in that section of town. There was much heroism throughout the whole town during this battle. The men did amazing and very brave things. Later, a number of decorations were awarded to individuals because of their valor in Gurzenich. In addition, the battle for Gurzenich and the defense of Gurzenich was the essence of a Presidential Unit Citation. (Fig. 58) The battalion plus B Company of the 1st Battalion, and the TD and support units were cited for outstanding performance in battle. It was a very special recognition of the efforts of the 2d Battalion, 329th Infantry in the battle for Gurzenich during the Huertgen Forest Campaign. The battalion had been instrumental in halting one of the major German columns that was supposed

to have gone through the US lines during the big German offensive.

Two comments about apparel may be worth telling in this section. By the time we got to the Huertgen, I had begun wearing tank trousers and jacket with my own alterations because I was always needing places to put things. I had sewn pockets down on each of the legs of the trousers and I had sewn big pockets inside on both sides of the front of the tank jacket. That gave me at least six extra pockets. For instance, you might want to carry extra K rations, well I had pockets which would just fit K rations. And I needed to carry pencils, my papers and maps, and stuff like that. Instead of carrying a briefcase, I carried all of those things in my pockets.

Another story about clothing involved Captain Raymond Grice. It took place on the day we attacked the town, 13 December. Captain Grice, F Company commander, was moving his men along behind the houses on the main street. While going between houses and into backyards, Grice slipped on one of those little ramps, and fell into what we called a sump. (Fig. 59) It was the place where the animals hung around to keep cool. In some cases, villagers kept pigs in them. In this particular case, it must have been a very filthy place, because when Grice came in to get his instructions on the next part of the attack, he was so foul smelling that I had to dismiss him. I had to tell him to

get himself cleaned up and send somebody else in to get the instructions, it was impossible to have him around. He proceeded out to get a change of clothes and we were all grateful.

On the 16th of December, after the Germans had finally withdrawn, we followed up by having B Company of the 1st Battalion attack from our backyard across to the town of Rolsdorf in order to hold the enemy in position. Then the main body of the 1st Battalion moved around and made the attack and took Rolsdorf from the north. A German major in charge of Rolsdorf was very peeved about this maneuver and thought that we had done something illegal when we flanked him in that manner. Anyway, the 1st Battalion took Rolsdorf and that was good.

The 2d Battalion continued down toward Duren on the 17th and on the 18th we attempted to get to the bridge, but the Germans blew up the bridge in our faces. We set up defensive positions on the bank of the Roer River and waited there, through about two days of heavy and almost continual German artillery barrages until the other 329th units joined us. (Fig. 60)

Because of the German offensive in the Ardennes, our assignment was changed and we were to be relieved and then rushed to the aid of the 78th Division in Belgium. On 20 December, the 414th of the 104th Division relieved us on the river bank opposite Duren. Then we were on our way to

the Ardennes.

* * *

After seven divisions had participated during three months of fighting, the 83d Division was successful in finally breaking free of that infamous area which the Germans had defended for so long. And the 2d Battalion of the 329th was the first unit to get out of the Huertgen Forest. In MacDonald's two books on the subject, the effort of the 83d was consigned a minor position. Not only did he indicate that the difficult fighting in the forest was completed before the 83d arrived, but his account of the battle in the 2d Battalion sector was sketchy and his emphasis created inaccurate conclusions.

MacDonald's evaluation does not correspond with Sharpe's memories, or the events recorded in the battalion, regimental, or division histories. His idea that German resistance had abated and that the 83d accomplished its objective because conditions were easier, is not substantiated by the casualty lists. Of the seven divisions which fought in the Huertgen, the 83d's total was second only to the losses sustained by the 104th Division. The Germans were still in the forest and the 83d was treated to the same obstacles as the former divisions.

There were two instances where MacDonald failed to

grasp the correct process of the 2d Battalion's mission. The first was in his explanation of the approach to Hof Hardt. He indicated that because there was a road in the 2d Battalion's sector, the troops proceeded swiftly along this route to the town. Yet Sharpe indicates that he avoided the road. Afterward, it is true, the road made resupply and armored support available, but during the attack, the 2d Battalion worked its way through the forest just as other units were obliged to do. The second instance was when MacDonald overlooked the entire battle for Gurzenich. Generals Collins and Bradley identified the German attack on Gurzenich as the northern prong of Hitler's huge combined offensive. However, MacDonald mentioned only that the 329th mopped up in Gurzenich.¹⁸

When the details of the small-unit deployment in the Huertgen Forest are analyzed, Sharpe's recollections are without question the most precise account. Traditionally, historians have been suspicious of first-hand accounts. There is the much repeated homily that at any given event, there are as many different versions as there are people present. However, this attitude is not true of the combat record of the 2d Battalion. In the case of such incidents, the first-hand memories of participants have been consistent, while some written reports exhibit discrepancies. Sharpe volunteered a story which illustrates the value of actual participation when studying

military situations. Just after the war, Sharpe was a member of the first class at the Command and General Staff College in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. The class was made up of decorated and promising young officers who had combat service during the war. The instructors taught command tactics by using World War II battles as examples. Sharpe related that again and again, while a battle was being analyzed based on the maps and administrative reports, one or another of the students would interrupt to say, "I was there, that's not what happened."

One way to explain the success of the 83d in breaking out of the forest and reaching the west bank of the Roer is that the US forces had finally learned from their earlier mistakes. The requirements for success in that special type of forest fighting, although in many ways counter to usual practice, became obvious after repeated miscalculations and dismal results. It is certainly possible that the success of the 2d Battalion could have come because it changed the established procedures. In Sharpe's account he mentioned that although the forest would have been the usual choice because it afforded cover, when possible he sent his men across open ground in order to avoid the tree bursts. When it was necessary to go through the forest, he instructed his men to fix their bayonets and not to stop for any reason. Until then, during more cautious advances, the US troops were delayed

by German skirmishers. Because they stopped and tried to dig in, the enemy was able to pinpoint them for concentrated artillery fire. Sharpe was convinced that the most acute danger for his men lay in remaining among the trees. MacDonald reported that the troops in the forest were stricken by a torpor. They got bogged down in their advance and became potential victims of the dangerous environment. Sharpe also told his men to stay away from the tree line and the road. The German artillery had already accurately zeroed in on the edge of the trees and the road. In addition, the road was heavily mined.

There is no doubt that Sharpe was profiting from the earlier experiences of combat troops in the Huertgen. He then thought of various means to counteract the German advantage. He was also exhibiting the creative bent that he had shown throughout his combat service, and the fine ability to analyze battle possibilities and balance them with a concern for his men. The 2d Battalion was clear of the Huertgen and headed for the Ardennes.

CHAPTER SIX

ARDENNES

The American defense lines in the Belgian Ardennes were very thinly held. It was the weakest section of the 450 miles of the Western front, protected by battle weary units who were sent to the region for a rest, or fresh untried units which had not seen combat. By the end of November, 1944, Hitler had collected twenty divisions behind the Siegfried Line to be used for his huge counteroffensive through the fragile American frontier in the Ardennes. The German attack was aimed at an 85 mile section from Monshau in the north to Echternach in the south.¹ That sector was held by General Hodges' First Army and right in the center of the sector was General Middleton's VIII Corps which the Germans would hit the hardest. The German objectives were to penetrate the American lines in a concentrated surprise attack, establish "hard shoulders" north and south of the bulge to prevent being pinched out, cross the Meuse River, and push on northwest to Antwerp. It was an ambitious plan.

The German counteroffensive occurred at 0530 hours on

16 December and by 20 December the Germans had created a penetration through the American lines. Twenty German divisions attacked positions held by only six American divisions. Because of the shape that the German drive created through the American lines, the conflict is called the Battle of the Bulge.

Because communications were knocked out during the first surge of German troops, the American high command was unable to get a true picture of the situation. Reports were often totally absent and when they did come in, they were sometimes inconsistent. It was 19 December before the enormity of the event was understood and an organized plan made to push back the bulge. By 25 December, 180,000 American soldiers were on their way to the Ardennes to reinforce Hodges' First Army.

The Germans surprised and then overran American outposts until there was no American front from Bastogne north to St. Vith. In between those two American-held towns was the important road network at Houffalize. The German divisions were pouring through the gap between St. Vith and Bastogne, pushing westward toward the Meuse. By Christmas Day, the II Panzer Division had moved sixty miles from the German frontier and was only four miles from the Meuse when it ran out of gas near Celles, Belgium. This was to be the German division which made the deepest advance into American held territory.

The US planned to contain the bulge by pressuring the Germans from the northern and southern edges while attacking the enemy at the tip of the bulge in order to stop the German progress. Since General Bradley's 12 Army Group had been cut in two by the bulge, the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower decided to give command of the American units north of the bulge to Field Marshal Montgomery who commanded the 21st Army Group. Montgomery wanted the most aggressive corps commander to spearhead the American counterattack so he chose General "Jumping Joe" Collins of the VII Corps.²

On 20 December, the 83d Division was alerted that it would be relieved in the Huertgen in order to join the US units which were being rushed into the Ardennes to stop the German advance. The 2d Battalion went into Ninth Army reserve in Aachen and then on 25 December, the 83d Division was reassigned to the First Army sector and moved sixty-five miles to assembly areas near Havelange, Belgium.

The 83d Division was to become part of the VII Corps counterattack force, but while it was forming, the 329th was needed to slow down the German drive and retake the town of Rochefort from elements of the 9th Panzer Division. General Earnest Harmon's 2d Armored Division was headed toward Rochefort and would try to take the town, however, if they were unsuccessful with their armor, they would fall back and be replaced by the infantrymen of the 329th.

Rochefort was situated at the tip of the German bulge. General Hasso von Manteuffel's central thrust ended in Rochefort, and when the town was retaken and secured by the 329th on 30 December, those members of the German V Panzer Army began their retreat toward the Rhine.

The 160th Brigade of the 53d British Division relieved the 329th at Rochefort. It was assigned to occupy Rochefort while the 83d Division reverted to General Collins' VII Corps for the big American counterattack on the northern side of the bulge. On 3 January, the 83d Division relieved the 504th Regiment of the 82d Airborne Division which had stopped the German Battle Group Peiper north of Stavelot. All three of the battalions of the 329th Infantry were placed on the line.

General Collins sent the 83d Division and the 3d Armored Division southeast toward the Houffalize-St. Vith highway. The plan was to link up with elements of Patton's Third Army which were driving north toward Houffalize from Bastogne.

The 83d and the 3d Armored were opposed by the 12th and 560th Volksgrenadier Divisions, and the 2d SS Panzer Division.³

On 8 January, the 3d Armored passed through the 83d and took up a position on the right, the 83d on the left. Together, they pushed toward Houffalize with the infantry division clearing a passage for the armored division

through the Bois de Ronce.

In particular, the 2d Battalion was assigned to take the German positions at the Langlir river crossing. By 24 January, the 2d Battalion had captured Langlir and occupied the towns of Honeylez and Bavigny. The 3d Armored passed through and cut the Houffalize-St. Vith highway. As part of the VII Corps, the 83d Division had helped to push back the German bulge. The Battle of the Bulge was over by 28 January and the original American front was reestablished.

But during the Ardennes campaign, as many men were lost from frozen feet as from enemy fire. The weather and terrain were very difficult. The soldiers not only had to march in knee-deep snow, but had to sleep in it as well. After the ordeal in Belgium, the 329th went into reserve until 6 February during which they had hot meals and warm places to sleep.

* * *

The Germans had made a bold and decisive move with their 16 December counteroffensive. They made an effective penetration deep in the Allied lines. The Ardennes for us started after we completed the Huertgen Forest/Duren operations. We had attacked through the Huertgen and into Gurzenich and there on 16 December had repelled the great German counteroffensive. Other units along the front were

not as fortunate as elements of the 83d Division who were able to repulse the German attack in their area on the day of the big German assault.

General Gerd von Rundstedt had masterfully planned the now famous Belgian Bulge, however, three US Armies, the Third on his left and the Ninth and First on his right had managed to halt the German offensive. The Americans were now moving hundreds of units over distances exceeding 100 miles into blocking positions, skillfully making counterattacks, and step by step containing the bulge penetration.

The snowy, cloudy weather favored the enemy and severely limited Allied close air support. The 83d Division was ordered to move back to the vicinity of Aachen. On 20 December the 414th Infantry of the 104th Infantry Division relieved us in the Roer River sector and we began our trip to Aachen where we would be part of Ninth Army reserve.

For our move we were allocated only ten 2½ ton trucks. This was eighteen trucks short of what was needed. The planners had to consider that there were 160 men per line company to be moved, divided by twenty men per truck (the ideal load for comfort and safety) established a requirement of eight trucks per line company. However, if you are short trucks, which we were, you can load twenty-seven men per truck for short distances. Thus

requiring six trucks times four line companies equals twenty-four trucks plus four trucks for Headquarters Company or a total of twenty-eight trucks required to move the infantry battalion. Since we were allocated only ten it meant everyone could not ride all the way, but if everyone walked part of the way, using the shuttle method of movement the move would still be feasible using only the ten trucks allocated; and for the soldiers certainly preferable to walking the entire trip.

Therefore, regimental headquarters designated a two day move for us with an assembly area about fifteen miles, or halfway to our destination of Alsdorf, on the north side of Aachen. The idea of designating two days for the move when it was only going to take us five hours each day was tactically sound for the following reasons: With the stated truck shortage if we had moved the entire thirty miles the first day it would have caused the battalion to be ineffective as a fighting force for over a day, we would have been strung out over much of the distance without adequate communications. And since the entire front was very fluid no one could be sure where the enemy would break through next. The shuttle method move made the battalion available, operational, and at a specific location which would make it more usable as a portion of the the Ninth Army Reserve.

You may ask why we only had ten extra trucks to make

our move? This truck shortage was a frequent occurrence. With the many tactical troop movements taking place it was a normal result. Regular infantry units are not organized as motorized units. To have infantry units motorized they must be augmented with regular truck companies, or borrow supply trucks from other units, or borrow artillery trucks which are classified as prime movers and are designed to pull the artillery weapons from position to position. As an example, when the big push was on to get units over the Rhine bridges as quickly as possible, many artillery units left their guns in position west of the Rhine in order to be able to use the artillery trucks to transport infantry divisions more quickly over the river. This has also been done to deliver much needed gasoline for forward armored units.

So we dispatched a quartering party under command of the battalion S-1. The party was composed of an officer and two men from each company, along with the advance section of the communications platoon. When they arrived at the designated assembly area the S-1 assigned an area for each unit, a place for the battalion headquarters, and the battalion motor pool. Each company laid out their area to accommodate a CP location, a kitchen area, and a latrine location. The battalion area always has a designated traffic pattern of trails so vehicles can operate freely through the area.

This particular move (Fig. 61) provided for the first shuttle to transport one rifle company (E) in six trucks to provide security for the new assembly area, plus Headquarters Company in two trucks to establish the new battalion command post, and two trucks to carry part of H Company. This column would leave early, before the troops started marching on the muddy roads. As soon as the truck column departed, the first marching column, composed of one rifle company (F) and one third of H Company would depart. This marching column usually would cover about five miles in two hours. We always tried to find a pick-up area about five miles down the road to simplify loading the second shuttle. Once loaded, the second group of ten trucks would go directly into the new area, unload, and release the trucks to go back for the last group of G Company and the last part of H Company. This third and last group normally could sleep-in since it would delay departure about two hours or it would have to march more than five miles which wasn't necessary. This last company is normally assigned the duties of rear guard security, closing out the battalion CP, inspection of areas, closing latrines and kitchen sumps, because we never left anything that the enemy could use for information.

The next day the shuttle movement was the same except the last ones in yesterday are the first out today. They don't have to walk today, but they do assume the security

duties of the new area.

For the infantryman I have adopted a slogan, "You can enjoy only that which you can carry conveniently." The five mile march from Gurzenich was a testimony to this slogan. Gurzenich was the first town inside Germany. US Army policy was that the soldier does not loot. Throughout France, Luxembourg, Holland, and Belgium I had implemented the policy without exception. However, now that we were in Germany I agreed that if the soldier found something he could use without becoming encumbered, he could liberate it. A case in point was down comforters which were obviously desirable and could be very useful in the cold. However, they were cumbersome to carry on your back along with the standard required items. So after we left Gurzenich I saw all kinds of things strewn alongside the road. These items had been cast aside, down comforters among them, and became testimony to the slogan, if you can't carry it conveniently, you don't want it.

We started toward the Ardennes on the 20th of December and we completed our move by the 22d. We were in Aachen in Ninth Army reserve on the 23d of December. We spent most of our time cleaning equipment and getting reorganized, having inspections, indoctrinating new replacements, putting them in the right places, and briefing them on our new situation. The day before Christmas my staff and company commanders spent most of the

day in reconnaissance for contingency plans. The troops were kept on semi-alert since the Germans were still active. On 25 December, some of the company commanders and I went on more reconnaissance to get ready to relieve elements of the 78th Division. Therefore, I had to miss Christmas dinner. The battalion had had the traditional Christmas dinner including turkey and all the trimmings. Those of us who had been on reconnaissance were not forgotten. We had all we could eat, and it was delicious even warmed over.

When we got back at the end of the day we found our orders had been scrubbed and we didn't go on that mission to relieve the 78th Division after all. On the day after Christmas our assignment was changed and we started another move to the First Army sector, sixty-five miles away in Belgium. This time our mission was to be prepared to handle German counterattacks or be ready to counterattack ourselves after it was established where we could do the most good. On 27 December we moved to a forward assembly area. The 2d Battalion was at Serinchamps, and the 1st Battalion was ordered to relieve elements of the 2d Armored Division to free them for another mission. The tactical situation at that time was very fluid. The American high command were scrambling to forestall the Germans by quickly shifting divisions and just as quickly changing their minds in order to plug the gaps and relieve the pressure on some

of the most beleaguered American units. I think the Germans were surprised at the mobility and responsiveness of our troops. I know that in seven days we had moved our division over 100 miles and had our mission changed three times. The Germans had put a deep salient in the American lines and our units were rushing to put a stop to their drive. (Fig. 62)

The Germans had penetrated to the town of Rochefort. Our 1st Battalion was ordered to go to Rochefort and we in the 2d Battalion were to be on their left and extend on down to be sure that the Germans stayed on the south side of the L'Homme River. Since the Americans were not sure what they would run into, we were to the left rear of the 1st Battalion so that we would be able to flank the Germans on the left if need be. The attack took place at 1500 hours which was unusually late for a daylight attack, but these were stressful times and every moment counted.

It looked as though we would have new snow and there was fog on the river. The little town of Rochefort was situated in a crook of the river. (Fig. 63) B Company was on our right. B Company waded across the river away from the bridge undetected by the Germans and got into town before the Germans realized what had happened. After the Germans were alerted, they started firing at us (2d Battalion) on the high ground to the left of the town. We concluded that we couldn't get off the high ground and into

town without heavy risk, therefore, since it was late in the day we decided to button-up for the night.

The story that unfolded in Rochefort the next day was really a freak one as far as military encounters were concerned. B Company was in the town but could not maneuver anywhere, because the Germans strongly occupied the town with infantry and tanks. B Company ordered its men to the upper stories of the buildings. The German tanks couldn't raise their muzzles high enough to reach them. The town had narrow streets so the tanks were restricted. They couldn't do anything and neither could we. It turned out that these German troops had begun a delaying action. The Germans left in Rochefort were now a delaying force. Unfortunately, we didn't know this at the time.

So the next day the regiment fired a smoke screen, hoping B Company would come out. But they remained in their position and we lost communications with them. Division was notified of the situation and there was concern that B Company had been captured. Actually, their radio batteries had given out.

Looking at the situation, most of our battalion had by-passed the town on the left and gone on down and cleared the enemy to the river. The town of Rochefort was a difficult place to get into. The Germans had a strong defensive position, with tanks, and good artillery support.

As I recall our mission was to attack south to the river, and to maintain contact with the 1st Battalion. When the 1st Battalion did not get into town in the afternoon attack, and lost contact with B Company, I feel sure regiment probably directed the 2d Battalion to bring pressure to bear on the left side of town and try to get access into town and link up with B Company.

Finally, the next morning E Company attacked and was able to get into a section of the town, but as they attempted to move down the street they by-passed a hidden tank and had some men shot from behind. It is one of the exigencies of warfare that we lost more men in trying to rescue B Company than they lost during their foray into town the day before. We began our attack on the 28th of December at 1500 hours and continued the attack on the 29th. During the night of the 29th the enemy withdrew. At dawn on the morning of the 30th civilians appeared in the streets and that was always a good indication that the enemy had pulled out. Then B Company appeared and announced they had all survived.

I learned from Colonel Crabill's book that when the regimental commander asked the B Company commander why he didn't come out when we fired the smoke screen to give them cover, he replied that he wasn't about to give up the ground he had gained because at the original orientation where Colonel Crabill had lectured to the company

commanders, he told them that he would relieve anybody that ever gave up any ground once it had been occupied.⁴

On the night of the 31st of December, the 160th Brigade of the 53d British Division arrived to relieve us in Rochefort. They came in with the lights blazing on their vehicles and made no effort to show the customary night discipline. We were concerned that the Germans would shell us.

The weather was very cold and the roads icy, the tanks and vehicles frequently slid off the road and the recovery vehicles were having a busy time trying to keep everything moving. (Fig. 64) On the morning of 1 January as the relief was still being continued, our troops were going out and theirs were coming in, the entire British column suddenly stopped. When we investigated to see what the problem was, it was ten o'clock in the morning and tea time for the British. They had stopped their columns with their vehicles in the middle of the road. Some men from each vehicle had gotten out and started their little one-burner gasoline stoves, boiling water for tea. Not one vehicle moved until every man had finished his cup of tea. Then the columns resumed moving into our former position.

It was the 2d of January and we moved on to Vaux Chavanne to relieve elements of the 82d Airborne Division. Our mission was to follow behind an Armored/Infantry Task Force made up of the 3d Armored Division plus the 330th

Infantry Regiment. The Task Force was attacking southeast toward the St. Vith-Houffalize highway. The 83d Division minus the 330th Infantry was deployed with two regiments abreast, the 331st on the left and the 329th on the right. The tactical plan was for the 83d to leapfrog its infantry battalions forward from blocking position to blocking position, being in readiness to counterattack should the enemy break through. This was on 3 January. On 4, 5, & 6 we continued the same.

On the 9th of January the Task Force met strong resistance and pushed the Germans for awhile. The enemy then pulled back into Petite Langlir and Langlir, behind the Ourthe River line. It was a good defensive position and the Germans stopped the advance of the Task Force.

The 329th was given the mission to make a passage of lines and attack through the units of the Task Force that were being held there. Attacking Petite Langlir, the 3d Battalion was on the right and the 2d Battalion was on the left. It was 1000 hours. It was very cold. The snow was knee-deep, and the ground sloped gently from the higher wooded hill down toward the village and river.

Once the 3d Battalion reached the edge of the woods it received strong enemy fires from dug-in tanks, infantry machine guns, and heavy concentrations of artillery. The Germans had a good position which was very difficult to get to. (Fig. 65) Each time the 3d Battalion moved a tank

to the edge of the woods into a firing position the enemy tanks knocked them out before they could get into position. After losing four tanks and one TD trying to get into the town, they gave it up as a bad job and pulled back into the woods. The woodline in front of the 3d Battalion extended about 500 yards to their left then turned and went about 400 yards to the river.

Our battalion's zone of action was to the left of the 3d Battalion. We moved through the woods in a column of companies following a small road which led to the edge of the woods overlooking Petite Langlir. (Fig. 66)

The snow was knee-deep and it was terribly cold. One of the big problems we had in this type of warfare was the effect of the cold on our vehicles, weapons, and soldiers. We had to start up the motors at least twice during the night if we wanted to be sure they would start next morning. We had a similar problem with our weapons. In the forest they frequently became covered with snow. When one came into a dugout or any warmer area, the snow would melt into the weapon and when one went back outdoors it would freeze and cause the weapon to misfire when needed. Therefore, we required the soldiers to test fire their weapons daily. For the water-cooled machine guns of the Heavy Weapons Company, they drained out the water and filled the jackets with antifreeze. While it took a lot of extra effort to keep our weapons and vehicles operational a

bigger problem was guarding against frostbite of the soldiers' feet, fingers, and faces. During the Huertgen and Ardennes campaigns our units had more casualties from frostbite and trenchfoot than battle injuries. Severe cases of frostbitten feet often resulted in trenchfoot, and trenchfoot frequently had to be amputated.

The basic rule for every soldier was to carry an extra pair of socks inside his shirt, close to the body so the heat from the body would dry them out and keep them dry and warm. It was a standing order that everyone change their socks at least once or twice a day. The disciplined soldier didn't have foot problems, but many of the careless and less disciplined soldiers were more lax in their body maintenance. We lost many men because of foot problems associated with the cold weather.

To get back to the snowy road through the woods, our mission was to get the enemy out of Petite Langlir. We were responsible for about 800 yards of open white snow-covered sloping ground with a raised wooded area on the left. We had to get to the edge of the trees before we could see the enemy positions. We had to get observation before we could fire our artillery or tanks. The enemy was already in position so they had the advantage, particularly since their tanks were dug-in with only the turrets above the ground, and they were well camouflaged. It was 9 January.

This is one of the instances where the infantry was in an untenable position. Our patrols moved around at the edge of the tree line in order to tempt the enemy to fire so we could learn their gun positions and we could fire our artillery at them. It was a dangerous place to be, but the Germans fired on our riflemen and we were able to locate the enemy positions. We had a platoon of four self-propelled tank destroyers supporting us. I attempted to get the tank destroyers to move to the edge of the woods, to get in position to fire at the enemy tanks. I ordered the tank destroyer commander to work his way through the trees and position his TDs so he could engage the German tanks we had located. He refused to do this because the area had not been cleared of mines, plus the fact that the Germans would have the jump on him when he moved to the edge of the woods. I attempted to persuade him but he was not to be persuaded. Just then, Lieutenant Colonel Jules French, from division, arrived on the scene. He had come from 83d Division headquarters to see if he could expedite the attack. He saw what the situation was and since the tank destroyers belonged to division he took the matter in hand, relieving the platoon leader and taking him back to headquarters. I never heard what the outcome was. The TD platoon sergeant attempted to carry out the mission; he was not successful, but he made the effort.

Infantry soldiers can usually emotionally handle small

arms or artillery being fired at them. If they conduct themselves carefully there is a chance of surviving. If it is infantry against infantry, small arms against small arms, you have a fighting chance. But when you have direct tank fire being fired at you and you're required to live in that environment, the chances of survival are very slim. Direct tank fire is quite demoralizing; something a rifleman just can't cope with. Our soldiers with OD (olive drab) uniforms were very conspicuous against the white snow. We had received neither the white camouflage suits nor the white parkas which would have been proper attire for the snow. Later we did get a few camouflage snow suits and were able to suit up a few men from each company, but not all of them.

On 10 January we continued to attack Petite Langlir. The Germans were competently and tenaciously holding on to territory they had seized during the bulge. Our mission was to try and get around the left flank. G Company was assigned the mission. They found a footbridge across the creek. The patrol that found it moved across, turned to the right and advanced toward Petite Langlir. G Company followed with a second patrol to get more protection across their front in order to lessen the chance of getting ambushed. G Company moved to the right working its way through the woods staying on the ridgeline. Their objective was to move along through the woods and put

pressure on the flank of the German Petite Langlir defenders. It was very difficult going and progress was slow because the snow was deep and the trees were conifers and very thick, like cedars. Using the footbridge, E Company followed Company G and was working its way through the woods toward Petite Langlir. F Company was in reserve. It was kept back to provide protection for the battalion CP and also provide a blocking position. The kitchens had sent food in Mormite cans. They intended to bring food across the footbridge but in the meantime the Germans had destroyed the bridge. As a result we lost our access to the troops. The kitchen crews stayed at the forward battalion OP until midnight, but after midnight we sent them back to the kitchen area to prepare for breakfast. Between midnight and breakfast the ASP platoon repaired the footbridge. This time we left a combat patrol to defend it. Breakfast was pancakes but somehow I didn't get any. However, that's a rare experience for me to miss a meal. Pancakes were prepared in the rear area kitchens then stacked on top of each other and put in Mormite cans. They became soggy but the soldiers ate them with great relish. On the 11th we continued to attack toward Petite Langlir. Toward late afternoon it looked as though we might possibly make it into Langlir. Apparently the Germans had pulled out of Petite Langlir and withdrawn to Langlir. As we continued our attack it looked as if we might reach our

objective by dark. I contacted the 331st which was the regiment flanking from the right as we were flanking from the left. The indications were that they were getting close also. I was afraid we might fire on each other so I had the communications officer look up the radio call signs for their 1st Battalion. I turned my radio to their frequency, contacted their CO and coordinated how we were going to handle our artillery and other supporting fires so that we wouldn't fire on each other.

It worked fine. We fired heavy barrages of artillery as we approached the town, and the 1/331 did the same. The Germans were caught by surprise not expecting us to make a night attack.(Fig. 67) The town was finally taken. We captured an artillery command post and collected a good number of POWs throughout the town.

Once we reported having seized Langlir we received a special order from division to send one infantry company to secure a particular road junction about a mile out of town. Division said it was critical that we secure the road junction so that the 3d Armored could get their tanks through there the next morning. F Company was in reserve and available so I gave the order to Captain Grice, the F Company commander. He didn't care for the job at all and said so, but being the outstanding soldier that he was, he took the job. The road junction was still behind the German lines. So Captain Grice organized a big combat

patrol, infiltrated through the German lines capturing three German soldiers on the way.

When they arrived at the road junction Captain Grice put the company in command of his executive officer who proceeded to set up the defense of the road junction. At about midnight, Captain Grice with two soldiers to help him and two German soldiers as hostages, returned through the German lines to his previous company position where he had left his four tanks, jeep, weapons carriers, and the rest of his company.

Grice arrived at the old company area, briefed the tankers and the remainder of his company and tied the jeep and weapons carriers behind the tanks so they could make it through the snow. He then loaded the rest of the company on the tanks and vehicles and carefully made their way back toward the road junction. It seems incredible that they could pass through the German lines as they did, however, the unusual circumstances made it more feasible. It was dark, the Germans had been surprised in Langlir, and some were still withdrawing on the roads out of town. There was lots of confusion, a tank is a tank in the dark whether German or American. They are both big and noisy.

In the meantime Lieutenant Boyer, the F Company executive officer, discovered they were at the wrong road junction so he moved the patrol about 200 yards to the right to the correct road junction and started digging in.

Sometime during the night the Germans must have discovered our soldiers digging their foxholes because just at dawn the Germans attacked Lieutenant Boyer and his men defending the road junction. But providentially Captain Grice arrived with the tanks just in time for our first two tanks to take up firing positions and knock out the lead German tank. The rest of F Company flanked the German infantry by surprise with the result that the Germans withdrew immediately.

This battlefield story warrants some elaboration. The actions of Captain Grice were both heroic and unthinkable. For his heroic behavior Captain Grice fully merited a medal for valor. However, a moot question arises, can a commander ever justify leaving his unit during a combat situation. The fundamental answer is that a leader should never leave his unit during an engagement unless ordered back by higher authority. The reasons are many but basically his presence strengthens the unit's will to fight. In addition, any soldier seeing a leader go to the rear in a combat situation might easily become intimidated, panic, and trigger a mass retreat as others joined in. In other words, as a rule, leaders just don't leave their units during a battle.

The truths of this battlefield story led me to congratulate F Company for their good work, to commend Captain Grice for his company's success, and every time it

comes to mind I remind myself that Captain Grice was a tremendously courageous officer. However, I knew that if the account fell into the wrong hands on a review board for medals of valor, Captain Grice might not get his medal, but he could conceivably get a general court-martial. The 2d Battalion received a written commendation from General Macon covering the Ardennes operation. The F Company mission was singled out as outstanding. (Fig. 68)

The F Company attack had gone well, they secured the road junction so the tanks of the 3d Armored Division could move through the next morning. However, the report I received was that only a couple of half tracks came by way of that junction. Makes you wonder, doesn't it? General Maurice Rose of the 3d Armored Division was moving his tanks and vehicles through a nearby road junction. Tanks were slipping off the road and there were vehicles coming from opposite directions causing a huge traffic jam. There was an MP lieutenant on the corner trying to direct the movement when General Rose pulled up and called to the lieutenant, "Are you handling traffic here?" the lieutenant responded that he was and the general added, "Well, you're doing a damn poor job of it."

On the 12th the battalion minus F Company attacked through the woods toward the town of Honeylez. Knee-deep snow, heavy foliage on the trees, limited trails, and no good roads made movement slow throughout the day. In the

heavy woods it's difficult keeping control and we didn't know where the enemy was. It was cautious, slow going. The troops had been going continually all night, and now it was the middle of the afternoon on the 13th when we reached the edge of the woods. Down below us about 500 yards were two small villages, Honeylez straight ahead and Bovigny off to our right. The map showed two more villages, Cierreux on the far left and Courtil to the far right both out of view. Everyone was anxious to attack and get into the buildings for the night but if we were spotted going across the 500 yards of open snow-covered ground we would be like sitting ducks. We couldn't move fast so I decided to wait till dark and make a night attack.

We fired incendiaries to fall on the far side of the buildings so we could see the silhouette layout of the town, also a fire might create a diversion away from our maneuvers. When the troops made their attack we went in columns, and then fanned out just before entering Honeylez. As we were going down the hill some German patrols came by, thought we were Germans and joined our column. They were as surprised as we were but our troops got the jump on them and happily took them as prisoners and let them go into Honeylez with us. The town was taken completely by surprise, because yet again the Germans had not expected a night attack in the snow and cold of the Ardennes. We now had two companies in the town and our soldiers were glad to

be able to get warm.

In the Ardennes, the problem was that there was not relief from the cold. During this period we lost more people with trenchfoot and frozen feet than with battle wounds. In Honeylez there was a German aid station with many German wounded in it. Their soldiers and ours were suffering from frostbite. Our doctor was notified and he was concerned about giving them some help so the division medical battalion loaned our aid station two weasels with their track laying capabilities and took the aid station into the town. (Figs. 69-71) This is one of those times we had the aid station on the front lines. The bad thing about it was that evacuation of the wounded was almost impossible. Our medical personnel couldn't do anything about the wounded except treat their wounds as best they could and hope to get them out in the next couple days. The aid station was set up in a concrete dairy barn at the junction of the roads to Honeylez and Bovigny. When the weasels brought in the medical facilities the vehicles slid down the hill to the dairy barn. But because of the snow and ice, even the weasels couldn't get back up the incline. On the third day, we loaded twenty casualties into a 2½ ton truck and used two tanks in front of it to try to pull it up the hill, but halfway up the slope all three began to slide back down.⁵

The night we came into Honeylez we had surprised and

captured a complete German artillery command post. The next morning, which was the morning of 14 January, only the Germans we had captured knew we were in town. The word had not gotten back to their rear echelon troops. The German kitchen truck came in to feed their troops, our men captured it and enjoyed a good hot meal. We had meatballs and spaghetti for breakfast. During the day we made plans for an attack on the town of Bovigny which was a few hundred yards off to our right.

During the next day we fired artillery on Bovigny by firing on any known enemy position that we had detected. On the following night we scheduled another night attack, this time by F Company. We had one of the largest concentrations of US artillery battalions supporting us as preparatory fires. Twenty-two battalions of artillery supported us that night for our attack on Bovigny. The serenade lasted about twenty minutes. When the fires were lifted, F Company went in and took the town easily. When that many battalions have fired on a town in one night, nothing much is moving the next morning. Everything went according to plan.

We received a letter of commendation from the division commander which cited the different facets of the attack on Petite Langlir, Langlir, F Company's protection of the significant road junction, and our night attacks on Honeylez and Bovigny.

On 18 January the regiment asked me to report to the regimental CP. A woman war correspondent was there to interview the troops and I was to escort her. It was dark when I got to regimental headquarters to pick her up. We had a couple of jeeps, one with a light machine gun and several soldiers, my driver and I in the other. We took a trail to Langlir and Bovigny and let her talk to the soldiers on the ground. Some of those officers and soldiers gave her tremendously gory stories. I never saw any of it in print. I don't know whether she believed the stories or not. On the return trip as we were going down the trail, it was snowing and difficult to see. The front of the jeep fell into a shell crater and threw me out and our guest up on the hood of the jeep. We tried to pull the jeep out but couldn't move it. I called to the mortar platoon. I knew their position was close by. They wouldn't answer because they thought it was a trap. Finally through persuading and some identifying words they came over and gave us a hand and got the jeep back on the road. We returned the correspondent back to regimental headquarters. I don't recall any thank you note.

As far as the tactical situation was concerned, with the help we gave them the 3d Armored Division was able to cut the Houffalize-St. Vith highway and bottle-neck a large number of German soldiers. The attack on Bovigny really wrapped up our part in forcing a German retreat from the

Ardennes.(Fig. 72) On 22 January, the 2/329 was moved to Tohogne, Belgium and began practicing river crossings on the canals in preparation for the crossing of the Roer and Rhine rivers.