

The
THUNDERBOLT
division



**STORY OF THE EIGHTY THIRD
INFANTRY DIVISION**





Foreword

This record of the 83rd Division's activities would not be complete without mention of the men who joined us while we were actively engaging the enemy. To the Reinforcements — without whom our battles could not have been won — I extend a sincere and hearty welcome to our Thunderbolt Division. Our past record is a fine one of which we can all be justly proud, but this will become obvious as you read through the pages that follow.

To those of you who fought in Normandy, Brittany, the Loire Valley, Luxembourg, the Hurtgen Forest, the Ardennes and during the drives to the Rhine and over the Elbe, there is no need to relate the experiences encountered or to remind you of the inspiration set for us by those of our comrades who were killed or wounded. For it was you who made this history, you who performed the heroic deeds recorded here, you who captured St. Malo, took 20,000 Nazi prisoners in one day, reached the lower Rhine before any other troops. It was you who set an infantry record by racing 215 miles across four rivers in two weeks to establish and hold the only American bridgehead over the Elbe.

To all members of the 83rd Division, old and new, I offer my appreciation and sincere congratulations for our splendid victories over the enemy. God bless you all!

ROBERT C. MACON
Major General, United States Army
Commanding

USA-Britain

The 83rd Division was reactivated August 15, 1942 at Camp Atterbury, Indiana under command of Major General (then Brigadier General) Frank W. Milburn, who now commands the XXI U.S. Corps. Training began in November, and progress was so rapid that the 83rd was ordered to Second Army maneuvers in Tennessee in July and August of 1943. Despite the fact it was the youngest division participating, the 83rd received prominent recognition from higher headquarters. After maneuvers, the Division went to Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky, where the men were given advanced training and primed for overseas duty. On April 6th, the 83rd embarked from New York for England under command of Major General (then Brigadier General) Robert C. Macon. For two months the Division conducted intensive training in the Midlands and Northern Wales. Shortly after D-Day, the 83rd was transferred from the Third to the First Army and left Southampton for the Continent and combat.



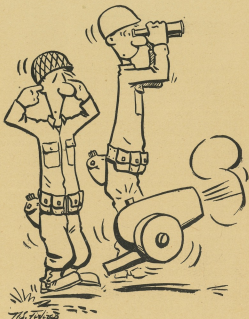
Normandy

Leading elements of the Division landed at Omaha Beach on June 19th after lying offshore in rough channel weather for almost a week. The Division assembled in the vicinity of Bricqueville, Normandy and then moved west to Carentan, where elements of the 101st Airborne were relieved on June 26th. The Carentan sector was heavily defended by crack Nazi SS, Panzer and paratroops. The initial offensive of the 83rd was launched July 4th and the final objective, the high ground in the vicinity of Periers, was reached a few weeks later. Hedgerow fighting has probably been the most difficult of the war. The Germans had four years to prepare defenses against a possible invasion and employed every known defense to stop the American advance. Hedgerows were zeroed in by enemy artillery, paths of machine gun cross-fire were set up and entrenchments were constructed not only behind but also under the hedgerows. Connecting trenches gave the enemy escape routes when their positions were overrun by the doughboys. During this campaign, the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division was given a decisive beating by the 83rd. When the Normandy breakthrough came on July 25th, the 83rd smashed remnants of enemy resistance to cut the St. Lo-Periers Highway and come to rest astride the St. Lo-Coutances Highway.



Brittany

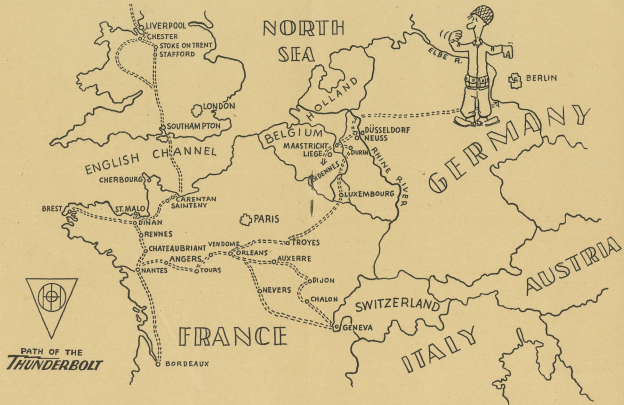
On August 2nd, the Division entrucked for Brittany and launched a two-week campaign aimed at the capture of the garrisons of St. Malo and Dinard. From the so-called impregnable Citadel of St. Malo, Colonel von Aulock declared, "I am a German soldier, and German soldiers do not surrender!" But on August 17th he surrendered himself and his entire garrison after a heavy pounding by aerial bombardment and artillery. While the reduction of the Citadel was taking place, a part of the Division went west of the Rance River estuary to push on Dinard, opposite St. Malo. The towns of Dinard, St. Lunaire and St. Brieuc fell in rapid succession. Off-shore, the strongly defended Isle de Cezembre held out under terrific air and heavy artillery bombardment but finally surrendered on September 3rd. During the operations in Brittany, the Division was credited with the capture of 13,000 prisoners. While this operation was in process, the 3rd Battalion, 330th Infantry and C Battery, 323rd Field Artillery Battalion were detached and became a part of Task Force A that smashed across the Brittany Peninsula to Brest. The Division was at this time in the Third Army.



Loire Valley

Following the successful conclusion of the St. Malo-Dinard campaign, the 83rd moved to the Loire Valley to protect the entire right flank of the Third Army in its dash across France. The mission began on August 22nd and concluded September 20th. The zone of responsibility assigned to the Division extended from the vicinity of St. Nazaire eastward along the Loire through Nantes, Angers, Tours and Orleans to Auxerre. This is a distance of more than 200 miles – the longest line of responsibility given any division in this war. An 83rd Reconnaissance Troop patrol went south to Bordeaux without mishap. Another went south from Orleans and near Geneva contacted elements of General Patch's Seventh Army moving north from the Mediterranean. During the month on the Loire approximately 20,000 Germans, including Brigadier General Botho Elster, were captured. This surrender included all vehicles, arms and other equipment of the March Group which Elster commanded. Formal surrender ceremonies were held at Beaugency Bridge on September 17th. General Elster turned his pistol over to General Macon and then his 20,000 men marched to a prisoner of war enclosure. This was the largest mass surrender of the war. The 83rd transferred from the Third to the new Ninth Army during this operation.





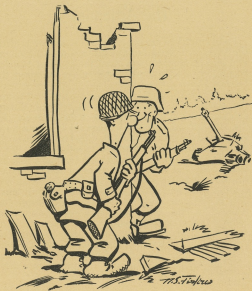
Luxembourg

On September 24th the Division moved across France, into Luxembourg to take up positions along the Moselle and Sauer Rivers and relieve elements of the 5th Armored and 28th Infantry Divisions. Enemy pockets on the Luxembourg side of the Moselle and Sauer were eliminated and patrols sent across into Germany. From positions on the Luxembourg side of the rivers, 83rd artillery units smashed at enemy rail movements and knocked out several enemy troop and supply trains. While in Luxembourg, the Division was in the Third, Ninth and First Armies at various times and prior to leaving for Germany was on the extreme south flank of the First Army. In Luxembourg, large scale entertainment programs were set up, including movies, USO shows and Red Cross doughnut wagons. During the German occupation of the country, many entertainment restrictions had been imposed by the Nazis. When the 83rd took over the capital city, GI dance bands provided music in some of the night spots and many lasting acquaintances were built up between the liberated and the liberators.



Hurtgen Forest

In early December, the Division moved north to the Hurtgen Forest in Germany to relieve elements of the 4th Infantry Division which was fighting within the Siegfried Line. Despite ankle-deep mud, heavy enemy artillery barrages and fanatical Nazi resistance, the 83rd slugged its way out of the dense forest and seized the western bank of the Roer River in the vicinity of Duren. Seven key villages guarding the approaches to the Roer fell to the 83rd as the enemy retreated. Stiffest resistance was met in the villages of Gey, Gurzenich and Strass. The 331st Infantry broke the backbone of the resistance at Gey, while in Strass the 3rd Battalion of the 330th Infantry was cut off for three days and subjected to heavy enemy counterattacks. Despite their precarious position, the men of the battalion fought off the Germans and took more than 150 prisoners during the siege. Finally the 3rd Battalion of the 329th hammered its way into the village and routed the Germans. Patrols from the 329th Infantry entered Duren after the regiment took the village of Gurzenich directly opposite the city. This was the deepest penetration of German soil made by any American force during 1944.



The Ardennes

Fully entrucked on the night of December 26-27th, the Division moved out of Germany across Holland and into Belgium to help blunt the point of Marshal von Rundstedt's counter-offensive. At Rochefort, the Germans were pushed back. Taking up a position on the northern shoulder of the Salient, the 83rd seized the towns of Otter, Jouveval, Hebronval, Bihain, Langlir, and Petite Langlir. This cleared the way for the 3rd Armored Division to pass safely through the woods and cut the important St. Vith-Houffalize Highway over which the Germans were withdrawing to the East. Proving a worse foe than the Germans was the bitter cold and waist-high snow of the Ardennes which hampered operations considerably. Morphine syrettes froze and automatic weapons failed to function in the zero weather. When the Division was relieved in mid-January, it had accomplished its mission of completely routing the German attackers and forcing them into a headlong retreat toward the Reich. For this achievement the Commanding General of the VII Corps gave the officers and men of the 83rd high praise for their major contribution in driving the Germans out of the Ardennes.



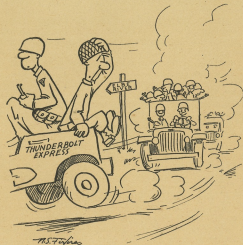
First on the Rhine

During the last week of February, the Ninth Army smashed across the Roer toward the Rhine and industrial Germany. Originally in XIX Corps reserve, the 83rd was committed when the retreat of the enemy turned into a dash to the east bank of the Rhine. Jumping off in the vicinity of Rodkrath, west of the Eft Canal, the doughboys plowed northeast toward the German industrial city of Dusseldorf. The outskirts of Neuss, directly across the Rhine from Dusseldorf, were reached late in the afternoon of March 1st and by midnight the center of the city had been taken. Having a normal population of 56,000, Neuss was the largest German city to fall to the 83rd. Infantry patrols were sent across the river and brought back much useful information and 83rd artillery units blasted away at enemy rail and troop movements from their dug-in emplacements in the vicinity of Neuss. The 83rd was the first American Division to reach the lower Rhine and received a high commendation from Lt. Gen. William H. Simpson, Ninth Army Commander, for "characterizing as it does the splendid record of the 83rd Infantry Division since it began operations on the Continent".



Elbe Bridgehead

Crossing the Rhine on March 30th, the 83rd struck swiftly to clean out pockets of resistance which had been by-passed by the Second Armored Division. After eliminating these enemy strongpoints, the doughboys crossed the Lippe River at Hamm to aid in the encirclement of the Nazis hopelessly trapped in the Ruhr pocket. On being relieved by other units, the Thunderbolts again smashed eastward in pursuit of the fleeing Wehrmacht and toward the Russians advancing from the east. Utilizing tanks, tank destroyers, motorbikes, captured German vehicles, buses and trailers, the doughboys rode herd against the disorganized Nazis for 215 miles to the Elbe River. In accomplishing this feat, the 83rd wrote a new chapter in infantry history as they liberated over 75,000 Allied prisoners of war, took some 24,000 Germans captive in a 14-day assault that carried them across four rivers into the very heart of Germany and gave the Allies the only permanent bridgehead across the Elbe. Assault-boat crossings of the river were first made by elements of the 329th Infantry after winning the bitter battle of Barby on the west bank of the river, where German civilians fought side by side with Wehrmacht and SS troops in a futile effort to stem the 83rd advance. After establishing the bridgehead, the 83rd successfully fought off several vicious enemy counter-attacks and defended the bridge itself against air attacks and floating mines.



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