



AACHEN

'44

by Dirk Blennemann

The Allied pursuit of the German army across France and Belgium reached its zenith from 1 to 11 September 1944. During those 11 days, the British advanced approximately 250 miles, and the US *1st Army* covered about 200. As the first Allied soldiers crossed the German border on the 11th, they reached the line D-Day planners had originally expected they wouldn't gain until May 1945. The advance was thus 233 days ahead of schedule.

But fatigue, stretched supply lines, increasingly difficult terrain, stiffening German resistance, worsening weather and the (at least seemingly) fearsome Westwall were all working to apply the brakes to what had been a glorious and dizzying race. In the north, British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery was preparing for Operation Market-Garden, while in the south Patton was fuming about his army's lack of supplies. But Lt. Gen. Courtney H. Hodges, *1st Army's* commander, was still hoping his forces could break through the fortified line in the center and drive on at least to the Roer River. Perhaps the Roer could even be crossed and the advance pushed clear to the Rhine. Then, who could say, maybe home by Christmas?

As noted by Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, the German commander in chief in the west, during the first week of September, most of his units along the front actually existed only on paper. The German army had lost about 27 divisions (67 regiments) on the western front

during the previous three months. While Allied units were operating at about 80 percent of their authorized strengths, hardly a single German division was anywhere near that level. Most had incurred severe losses in both men and equipment, and many of their soldiers were badly demoralized. Von Rundstedt estimated his forces were equivalent to about half their number in Allied units. Allied superiority in artillery was at least 4:1, and in armored fighting vehicles it was about 50:1. Most importantly, the attackers' aircraft had total control of the daytime skies.

Allied Plans

The Allied planners at SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) looked on Berlin as their ultimate objective. But on the way to that capital they wanted to seize an intermediary objective, the loss of which, according to their main planning document, "would rapidly starve Germany of the means to continue the war" — the Ruhr industrial area.

Before the D-Day landing, the Allied supreme commander, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, had agreed with his planners the main advance into Germany should be directed toward the northeast, with the idea of entering the Ruhr along a route north of the Ardennes. But he also wanted a subsidiary drive south of the forest to provide a threat coming through Metz and the Saar area. That decision actually called for a broad — rather than a narrow — front advance,

and meant the Allied forces had to spread out as they neared the German border early in September.

At the same time, SHAEF had to face the fact there was going to have to be some kind of deviation from the original concept of the broad front advance because there were neither the vehicles nor the road net needed to continue the pace of the late summer along such lines. In addition, equipment that had been worn out during the summer fighting and pursuit had to be replaced, and the men equipped with heavier uniforms because winter was fast approaching.

Montgomery continued to push his own idea the advance should be consolidated into "one powerful, full-blooded thrust across the Rhine and into the heart of Germany, backed by the whole of the resources of the Allied armies."

That would have meant relegating the units across large sectors of the Allied front to purely static roles. Though Eisenhower rejected that notion in general, he did agree to a temporary pause across much of the front while Montgomery pushed ahead with his northern front to gain a bridgehead across the lower Rhine in the Netherlands (Operation Market-Garden). To support that offensive, parts of the US 1st Army were directed to swing northeast to more closely parallel the British moves.

That turn resulted in the 1st Army swinging through Liege. There J. Lawton Collins concentrated the three divisions of his 7th Corps into a compact formation covering about 15 miles of front. The 1st Infantry Division was less than 10 miles from Aachen; the 3rd Armored Division was in Eupen in the border area Germany had ceded to Belgium in 1919; and the 9th Infantry Division was moved into assembly areas at Verviers, halfway between Liege and the German frontier.

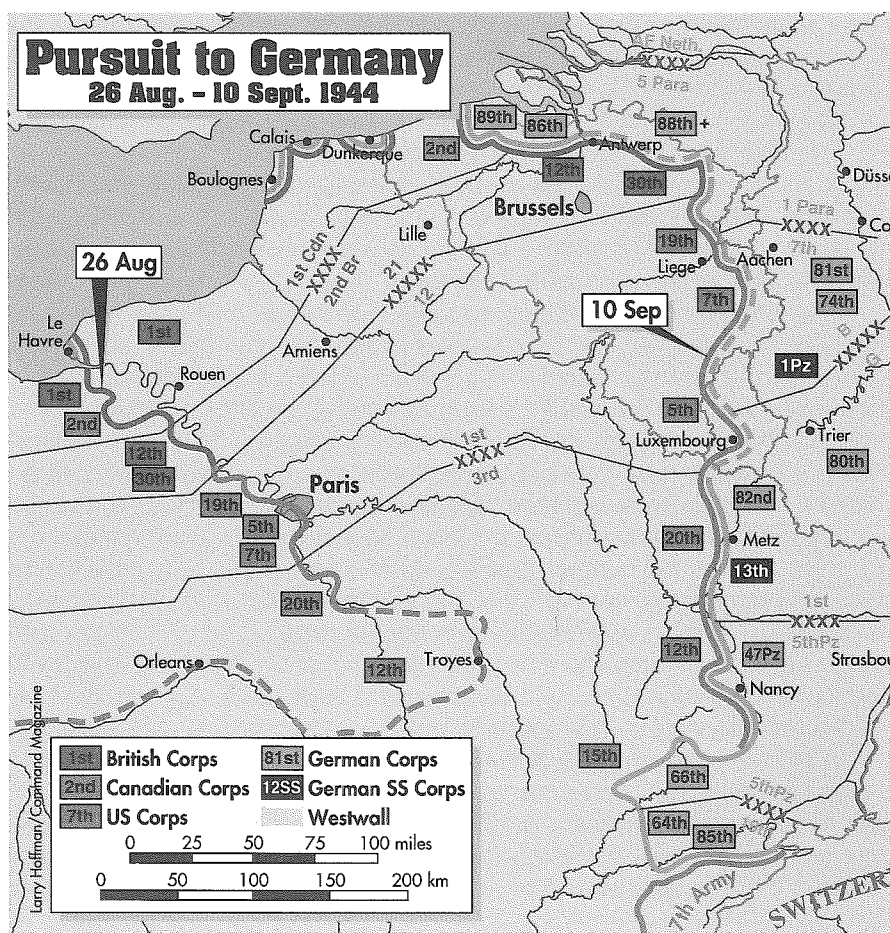
Having obtained permission to "reconnoiter the Westwall in force" on 12 September, Collins wanted to launch a strong surprise attack that might breach the fortified line in one push, before the Germans could man it adequately. The 1st was to move through the Westwall in front of Aachen, taking that place on the move, while the 3rd was to drive into the Stolberg Corridor by moving around Aachen on the south. If the armored division was able to easily

cross the Westwall, it would circle around Aachen to Eschweiler, while the 9th would sweep through and secure the forests on the extreme right. Even if 7th Corps then had to pause to regroup and resupply, the Westwall would already be behind it when it resumed its attack.

German Plans

The German army had been forced onto the general defensive, and its operations had degenerated into nothing more than large-scale delaying actions. The front was too fluid for von Rundstedt to accomplish much toward actually forming one of the new lines Hitler kept designating on maps with feverish frequency. But on 11 September the high command ordered the Westwall be used as the prepared position along which the battered remnants of the armies in the west would make their stand, and to which arriving reinforcements would be sent to join their effort. The line was to be held "under any conditions," and von Rundstedt and his staff made honest efforts to do so.

The field marshal's most urgent problems came first from the threat posed by the Allied



advance toward the Ruhr via the Aachen Gap, and second from the enemy's still uncommitted airborne reserves. At that moment, the only German reserves available for use were the reforming *9th Panzer Division*, along with one heavy tank and two assault gun battalions. All those units were understrength, but were already on their way to the Aachen area.

The German commander directly responsible for defending the Aachen area was Gen. Friedrich August Schack, whose *81st Corps* was part of Gen. Erich Brandenberger's *7th Army*. On paper at least, it seemed Schack could base his hopes for blocking the Aachen Gap on six divi-

sions. But northeast of Aachen, two of those divisions (the *49th* and *275th Infantry Divisions*) were so occupied resisting the approach of the *US 19th Corps* that neither would be able to contribute to the fight against *US 7th Corps*.

South of Aachen, Schack had the *526th Infantry Division*, backed by various local defense forces and *ad hoc* emergency units. In Aachen itself, and to the east of the city, was what was left of the *116th Panzer Division*. Schack's fifth formation was the *9th Panzer Division*, already earmarked by higher command to hold the front of the Stolberg Corridor, but it was still in transit on 11 September. The sixth division, the *353rd*

Aachen's History & Geography

Aachen was the capital city of the legendary Emperor Charlemagne ("Karl der Grosse" in German) and of his Carolingian Empire. Formerly the site of the Roman spa of Aquisgranum, it lies at the point where the German, Belgian and Dutch borders meet, about 50 miles west of the Rhine River. Charlemagne ruled in Aachen from 794 to his death in 814, and was buried in the cathedral where from 936 to 1531 most of the various rulers of Germany were crowned. Because of its insecure position near the French border, Aachen began to decline in importance, and in 1562 coronations were transferred further east to Frankfurt am Main.

The French in fact occupied Aachen in 1794 (its Gallic name being Aix-La-Chapelle), annexing it to France in 1801. When the Congress of Vienna redrew the map of Europe in 1815, after the downfall of Napoleon, the city was ceded to Prussia.

Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire — the complete German language term translates as the "Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation" — lasted a thousand years. Thus it can be seen that when Hitler promised his Third Reich would last a millennium, he hadn't selected a number at random. Aachen represented a heritage precious to National Socialist ideology, even though it never became a Nazi shrine with the status of Nuremberg or Munich. Nevertheless, given its important history and the fact it became the first major German city threatened with capture, Joseph Göbbels insisted there be a fanatical, house by house, defense of Aachen. He threatened: "Aachen will become the Allied Stalingrad!"

In 1939, Aachen's population was around 165,000. Beyond being a crossroads town, there was little to give it extraordinary military significance in 20th century terms. Lying in a saucer-like depression surrounded by hills, Aachen did not constitute a natural

fortress even though it lay between twin bands of the Westwall, which split just north of the city.

During the war, Aachen served as a secondary target for the Allied bombers flying over it on their way to hit Cologne and the Ruhr. It wasn't until April 1944 Aachen was first given primary target status by the Royal Air Force. These larger raids were continued through late May, until most of the city had been hit. By mid-September, much of Aachen had already been turned into rubble, with what was left being destroyed by the US Army shelling from 12 September to 21 October. When the fighting finally ended, about 80 percent of Aachen lay in complete ruin.

The Aachen Gap & Stolberg Corridor

Aachen has served as a main east-west route into northern Germany since Roman times, when a main road ran just north of the place on the line Brussels-Maastricht-Cologne. Situated at the head of a narrow corridor flanked by rolling hills, this natural pathway is called the "Aachen Gap" and "Stolberg Corridor," and extends to the Roer River plain near the town of Düren, 19 miles east of Aachen. (Stolberg is an industrial town lying within the corridor.)

In the autumn of 1944, the Aachen Gap and Stolberg Corridor took on considerable importance because it presented a route of advance for the Allies leading directly to the all-important Ruhr industrial area. In addition, it presents some of the only good "tank country" in the area, particularly to the east of Aachen, the Cologne Plain.

To the south of Aachen lies the northern fringe of the Schnee-Eifel, a dense jungle of pine forest that forms a major obstacle capable of canalizing any east-west advances to its north. Communications and transport lines were virtually nonexistent through that forest in 1944.



Infantry, was in reality no more than a weak regiment. Schack assigned it to the secondary band of the Westwall east of Aachen.

Schack anticipated the 7th Corps' main effort would be made against Aachen itself. He therefore turned over command of the city to the 116th's experienced commander, Lt. Gen. Gerhard Graf von Schwerin. In addition, Schack attached his corps artillery to von Schwerin's division. Beyond that, the corps commander could do nothing but wish Godspeed to the reinforcements the high command was promising were on the way.

US 7th Corps Penetrates the Westwall, 12-16 September

The US 1st Infantry Division spent the greater part of 12 September deploying for combat adjacent to the Westwall in front of Aachen. A battalion of its 16th Infantry Regiment worked its way into the fortified line south of there, but a counterattack by the engineer battalion of the German 526th Infantry Division, supported by four assault guns, threw them back, discouraging further efforts that day.

After losing three tanks to the guns of a well concealed German anti-tank strongpoint, the left flank of the US 3rd Armored Division stopped for the night 1,000 yards short of the Westwall. The 3rd's right flank reached Rötgen, also just short of the Westwall. In the center, a task force formed around the engineer battalion reached

Members of an Aachen Hitler Youth unit receive instruction on Panzerfaust rocket-propelled anti-tank grenades, September 1944.

the pillboxes south of Schmidthof, but too late to make an attack that day.

Thus 7th Corps failed to accomplish Collins' goals. Road blocks, difficult terrain and unexpected German resistance had held both his armor and infantry outside the Westwall. In addition, the execution by the various American units had been slow, particularly in the 1st Infantry Division's sector, and most actions had been lacking in coordination and command control.

The next day Collins changed his plans, deciding to try to bypass Aachen. The 7th Corps scheme of maneuver was changed into what was basically a frontal attack into the Westwall south of the city, with the armored division flanked on both sides by the infantry. Collins ordered the 1st to avoid entering Aachen, instead surrounding it on three sides while giving direct support to the armored division with one of its regiments. The 3rd Armored was to proceed as before to penetrate both bands of the Westwall, take Eschweiler, then turn east toward the Roer River. The 9th Infantry Division would protect the right flank of the armored drive, also lending the 3rd one of its regiments.

The new attack began at dawn on 13 September, when the 3rd Armored Division's Combat Command B (CCB) blasted a path through the dragon's teeth north of Rötgen, then moved into the town of Rott. Effective German resistance

failed to materialize, and CCB thus penetrated the first band of the Westwall with one quick blow. But the picture at Rott suddenly changed when an SS sharpshooter unit of about 30 men opened fire. During the next few moments, CCB's lead tanks and halftracks lost a dozen crew members who'd been advancing with their hatches open. The advance came to a standstill for the night.

In the meantime, the attempt by the 3rd's CCA to breach the Westwall northeast of Oberforstbach failed due to German artillery fire and a 60-man counterattack backed by three assault guns and a Panther tank.

The Westwall was also penetrated farther south in a small sector attacked by a battle group built around the division's reserve and backed by an attached infantry battalion from

The Westwall

Construction of the Westwall (a.k.a. the "Siegfried Line" in Anglo-Allied usage) began in 1936, after Hitler sent German troops back into the previously demilitarized Rhineland. The original plans called for the new defense line to be completed around 1950, but work was accelerated during 1938. By the end of September of that year, more than 500,000 workers were laboring on the Westwall, with approximately a third of Germany's total production of cement being used in the construction.

Unlike both the French Maginot Line and the later German Atlanticwall, the Westwall was never intended to be a relatively thin line of elaborate, self-contained fortresses, but a thick band of many small pillboxes backed up with trenches, regular fieldworks and a great variety of other defensive positions. In many places the Westwall utilized natural obstacles, such as rivers, lakes, defiles and forests, to form its anti-tank obstacles. In other areas, engineers constructed chains of "dragon's teeth," strange concrete objects that looked like nothing so much as canted headstones in a huge cemetery. (In some places dragon's teeth were also formed by simply embedding steel beams into the ground.)

The second-strongest portion of the Westwall was the double band of defenses shielding the Aachen Gap. The defenses split at a point north of Aachen about halfway between the city limits and the town of Geilenkirchen, merging again just north of the Schnee-Eifel to the south of Aachen. To the west of Aachen lay the Scharnhorst Line (also termed "Forward Position Aachen"), well supported by dragon's teeth, while about five miles to the east ran the Schill Line.

German army planners never intended the Westwall to halt an attack by itself, merely to delay it until counterattacks by mobile reserves could eliminate the penetration. Drawing on their western front experience from World War I, the engineers set up the greater part of the pillboxes as troop quarters and ammunition storage facilities. All were made with reinforced concrete to resist drumfire barrages, and were also gas proof. A normal pillbox complement

was seven to nine men. Most had just two firing embrasures for self-defense, since the main fighting was to be conducted outside, from trenches and regular fieldworks.

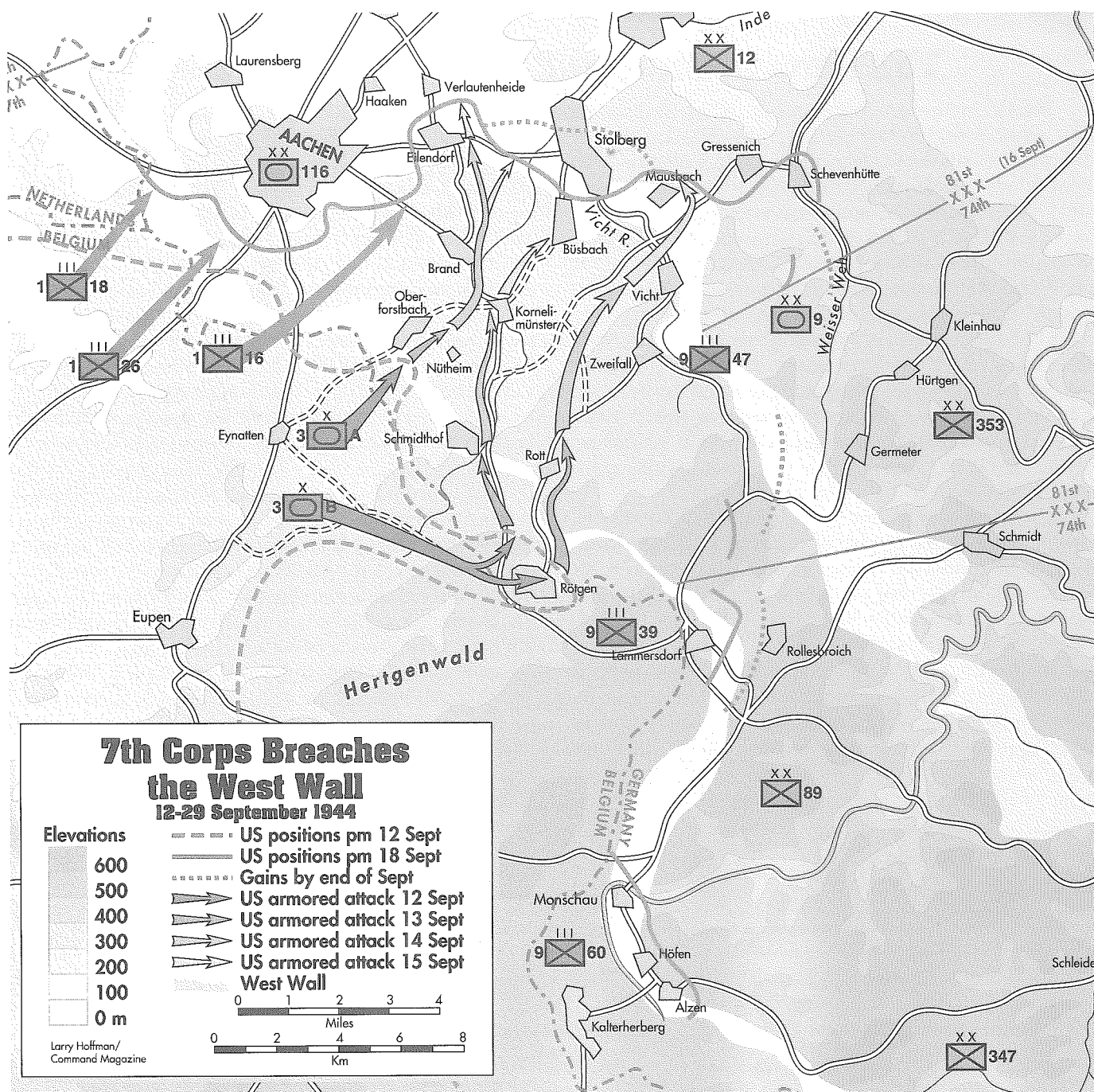
Due to an immense German propaganda effort, the Westwall came to be portrayed as impregnable. Its existence contributed to Hitler's success in bluffing France and England at Munich, and during the "Phony War" period from late 1939 through April 1940. Germany's quick victory in the west in 1940 brought further elaboration of the defenses to a halt. Starting in 1941, virtually all of the Westwall's movable equipment and installations were transferred to the new Atlanticwall.

Thus by 1944 the Westwall had declined into something of a "Potemkin Village" in that it had been virtually neglected for almost four years. There were no mines, no barbed wire, no electricity, few communications lines and even fewer heavy weapons. Fieldworks were hastily begun only at the last minute by well intentioned but uncoordinated civilians.

Guns of 75mm and larger size could only be mounted in a few of the pillboxes because their weapon ports had been constructed to the military standards of the late 1930s, when the much smaller 37mm gun was the usual anti-tank weapon. Likewise, the smaller sites couldn't accommodate the then standard MG42 machinegun, having been designed to accept the smaller MG34 model. Of course, the most glaring deficiency was the almost complete lack of troops to man the line and form the counterattack reserves.

In fact, only one small advantage came from the period of neglect: in many places natural vegetation had grown up, adding excellent camouflage to many of the sites.

Without doubt, in 1944 the Westwall added to the defensive strength of the terrain along the German border. But its state of general disrepair, coupled with the relatively low caliber of troops available to man it, reduced its defensive value, and it could in no sense be considered impregnable.



the 1st Infantry Division. But because the hour was late, that column stopped for the night.

To the northwest, the 1st Infantry Division was frustrated in its attempts to advance along the flank of the armored drive. Its 16th Infantry Regiment had to fight its way past road blocks and delaying detachments, while absorbing dozens of small-scale counterattacks from the German 536th Reserve Grenadier Regiment of the 526th Infantry Division. A full-blooded attack by the 16th into the Westwall therefore had to wait one more day, after parts of the 26th Infantry Regiment took over an area on the 16th's left, and the 18th Regiment moved up even farther left.

Despite the various delays, 7th Corps had created two ruptures of the Westwall's first band. That both were achieved along the face of the Stolberg Corridor, rather than farther south of Aachen, helped convince the German corps commander he had erred in his earlier estimate of US intentions. Schack ordered the 116th Panzer Division to counterattack and destroy the American spearhead southeast of Oberforstbach. At the end of that counterattack, the Germans claimed they had resealed the gap south of the city. In reality, however, the 116th only succeeded in driving back US patrols.

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The German Army at Aachen, Autumn 1944

The German army lost some 75 infantry divisions (totaling 229 regiments) during 1944. The autumn of that year therefore represented a period of transition from good to bad quality infantry units. German survival that autumn depended on nothing so much as improvisation, but that very characteristic was their strong suit: the German army remained proficient at small unit tactics and rapid formation of *ad hoc* battle-groups. At every unit level the German army was fully committed to the idea of "mission tactics" (*Auftragstaktik*). That is, all unit and command structures were considered to be changeable according to circumstances. All command structures and the soldiers within them had to be prepared to take the initiative in any unexpected situation — and to do so without waiting for orders from above.

Within such a system, the ideal German soldier viewed the war as a clash of national and individual wills, to be conducted with maximum ferocity. In combat, *Kampfkraft* (combat power, or fighting ability) was the sole judge of a soldier's or unit's worth.

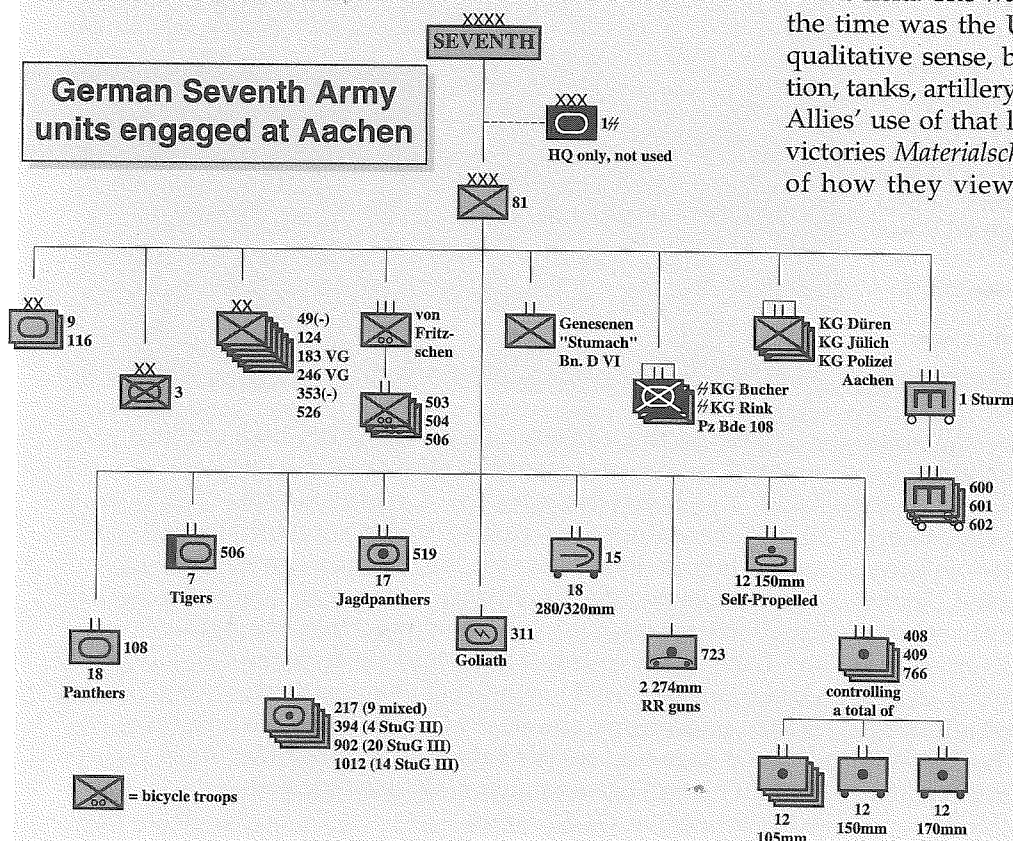
By the fall of 1944, however, the training edge that had made the crucial difference in the German army's abilities in relation to its opponents could no longer be maintained. When SS Chief Heinrich Himmler was given command of the replacement army in August

1944, a number of changes were put in place. Daily training hours were lengthened, while training periods were reduced from 12 to 16 weeks down to an average of about six. Navy, air force and labor service personnel were shifted into the army, and the *Volkssturm* (People's Force, or militia) was created.

Many of the new German formations that resulted from those changes lacked the basic training necessary to carry out any missions calling for more initiative than static defense. But what the new units lacked in leadership and administrative ability, they tried to make up for with *Härte* (hardness) — the determination to hold on and fight to the very end. In general, though, such methods failed to change the course of battle, only succeeding in increasing German casualties. A few of the new formations still managed to achieve the old levels of excellence because they had received a veteran cadre from whom the newer soldiers could learn — such cadres often made all the difference.

By the autumn of 1944, the German army had also been reduced to fighting a poor man's war. Sufficient allocations of ammunition and fuel to carry out missions were becoming increasingly unavailable. Five years of savage combat and the increasingly intense and effective Allied strategic bombing campaign had steadily sapped the flow of supplies to German forces in the field. The way the German infantryman saw it at the time was the US Army was inferior to his in the qualitative sense, but the GIs had more fuel, ammunition, tanks, artillery and planes. The Germans called the Allies' use of that logistical superiority to achieve their victories *Materialschlacht* (battle of attrition). Regardless of how they viewed it philosophically, all of them understood it was winning the war for the Allies.

German Seventh Army units engaged at Aachen



Abbreviations

Aus = Ausbildung (training battalions from the German Replacement Army)

Fest = Festung (Fortress troops, more heavily equipped but less mobile than regular infantry)

Luft = Luftwaffe (excess ground personnel converted to infantry, these troops rarely had the training or leadership to fight effectively)

Ers = Ersatz (replacement battalion; German replacements were formed into temporary battalions to move to a particular division)

Land = Landesschützen (German Home Guard)

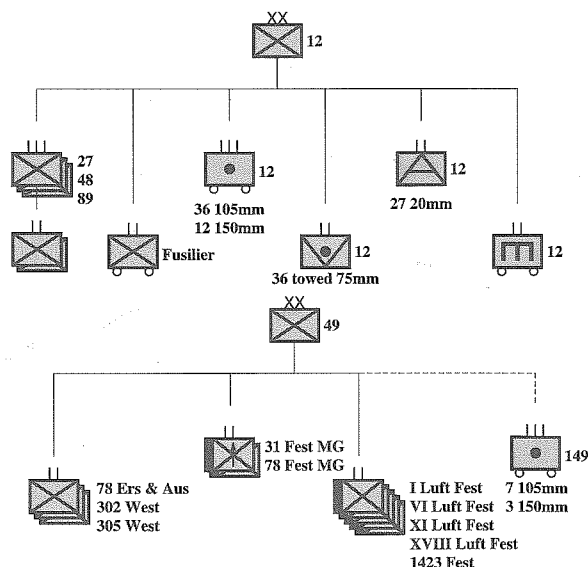
Sich = Sicherungs (security troops, more lightly armed than regular infantry) intended for rear-area operations.

The most important advantage the German army still had in 1944 lay in its leadership. The German concept of leadership and officer promotion was superior to that of all other armies. Officers were encouraged to be solicitous of their men's opinions and condition, with units and replacements deliberately set up on a territorial basis. German officers were expected to be masters of innovation and improvisation, doing much more with less than those who opposed them. Considering the supply and material difficulties under which the Germans operated, the accomplishments of the German army during the battle for Aachen are all the more remarkable.

German Units at Aachen

The 12th, 49th, 353rd and 526th Infantry Divisions were the primary German non-motorized units engaged at Aachen.

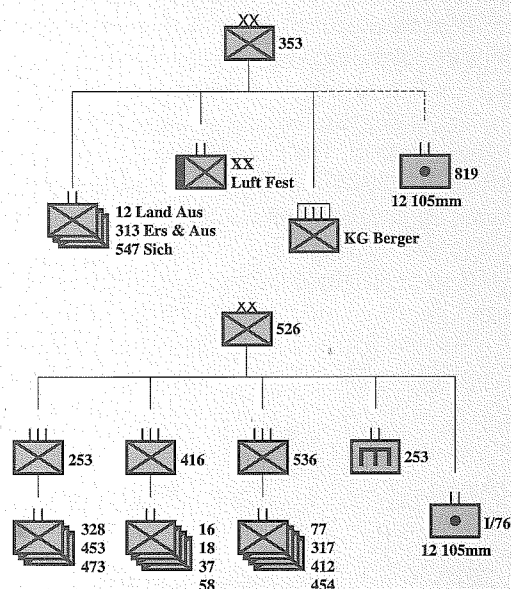
Only the 12th was at full strength (12,352 men), because it had just undergone refitting and regrouping before being sent to the city. This veteran unit was organized as a standard 1944 infantry division, with some 4,137 riflemen in 21 companies. It consisted of three infantry regiments of two battalions each, plus an independent fusilier battalion, for a total of seven infantry battalions. Artillery support included three battalions of 105mm howitzers and one of 150mm guns. Engineer, anti-tank and anti-aircraft battalions were also organic to the division, but all such units were horse drawn. Only the fusilier battalion was truck borne (or sometimes bicycle-borne), and was usually in reserve or used for pursuit. It generally received the best soldiers and equipment.



The 49th Infantry Division was nearly destroyed as it fell back in front of the US 19th Corps between the Al-

bert Canal and the Westwall. In a period of about two weeks the division absorbed 4,326 replacements in the form of 10 independent battalions (two infantry, one replacement, two fortress machinegun, one fortress infantry, four air force fortress). Two of the division's regiments simply ceased to exist, and it fought thereafter without any regimental organizations within it.

Even divisions considered completely destroyed often had a core of survivors — mainly staff, rear echelon personnel and specialist troops — and that was indeed all that was left of the 353rd Infantry Division, when to that core was added a conglomeration of five independent battalions (one training, one replacement, one security, one air force fortress, one battle group) to allow the unit to go on fighting. In reality, though, this "division" had been reduced to nothing more than a weak regiment, lacking virtually every kind of support.



The 526th Infantry Division had been a reserve formation, originally charged with handling the training of various units in the Aachen-Cologne area. But as the front reached the western German border in September, the 526th was transferred to the field army to be used as a regular combat formation. It consisted of three infantry regiments of three or four battalions each, for a total of 11 weak infantry battalions. This division had an engineer battalion, but artillery support was limited to a single battalion of 105mm guns, and nearly all heavy and signals equipment was lacking. Total strength was 8,400 on 10 September. Originally set up as an administrative formation, the 526th and its component units were inexperienced and ill-prepared to carry out front line combat duties.

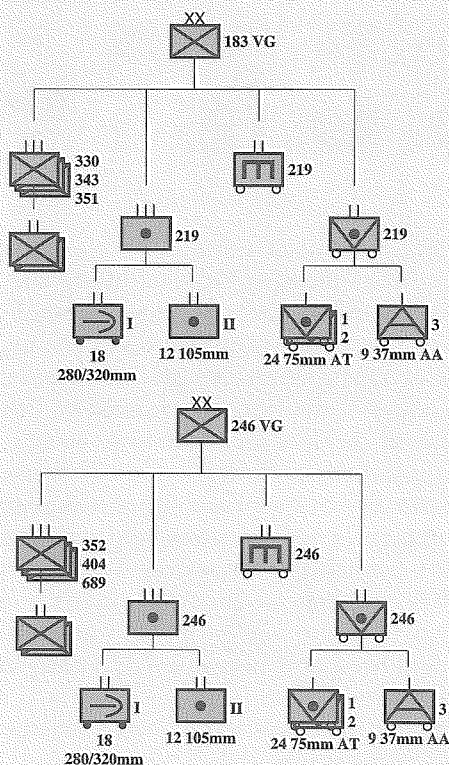
In August 1944, a new type of infantry division — called *Volksgrenadier* (People's Grenadier) — was intro-

duced by the Germans. The creation of this new type of unit stemmed from the increasing manpower shortages. With an authorized strength of 10,072 men, the *Volksgrenadier* divisions' consisted of three infantry regiments of two battalions each. Front line infantry strength was 18 companies fielding a total of 3,616 riflemen.

This reduced manpower naturally decreased the staying power of the *Volksgrenadier* divisions in combat. There was an attempt to compensate for the smaller numbers by increasing the issue of such items as sub-machineguns and assault rifles, but such additions could never completely make up for the loss in personnel, especially during mobile operations.

Artillery support in the *Volksgrenadier* divisions included a battalion of 75mm guns, two battalions of 105mm howitzers, and a battalion of 150s. An engineer and a mixed anti-tank/anti-aircraft battalion were also standard elements, but all were horse drawn, and signals equipment was lacking.

The 183rd and 246th *Volksgrenadier* Divisions belonged to the first series of this new type of infantry unit. Unlike some of the later formations, these divisions contained cadres of veterans, and therefore their performance in combat came close to those of standard German infantry divisions. The two divisions were lacking their fusilier and field replacement battalions, along with their assault gun company (14 armored fighting vehicles). In addition, their authorized battalions of 75s were replaced by rocket projector battalions

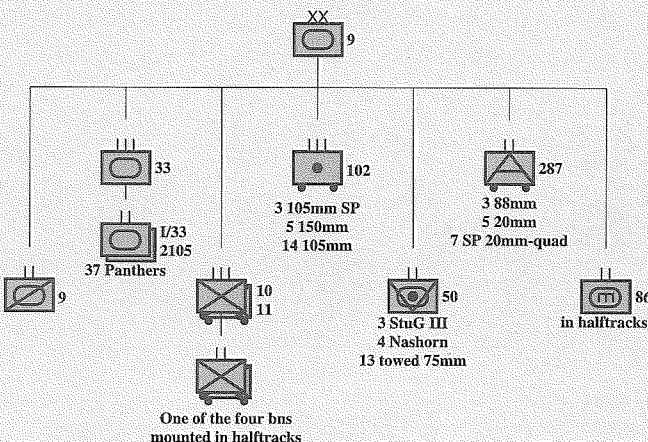


(18 launchers). Each was minus one 105mm and the 150mm battalion. (Note see *Command* no. 30, p. 8 for further details on *Volksgrenadier* divisions.)

The 1944 panzer division got a good mix of infantry and armor from its one armored and two armored infantry regiments, for a total of 13,725 men. The allotted armored strength was set up in two battalions, one each of Mark IV and Mark V (Panther) tanks. The armored infantry regiments each had two battalions for a total of four, but only one battalion in the division was actually mounted in halftracks (the others rode trucks). The artillery was usually self-propelled, and consisted of three battalions of 105mm howitzers. Reconnaissance, armored engineer, and anti-tank battalions were organic to the divisions, along with anti-aircraft and service elements. The reconnaissance and armored engineer battalions played particularly important roles because they were often used to form the core of battle groups.

The elite status of the panzer divisions within the German army meant the best trained and more motivated individuals were usually found there. These units represented the most capable forces still available to the Germans, and even after long years of war the panzer division was still a match for its armored foes.

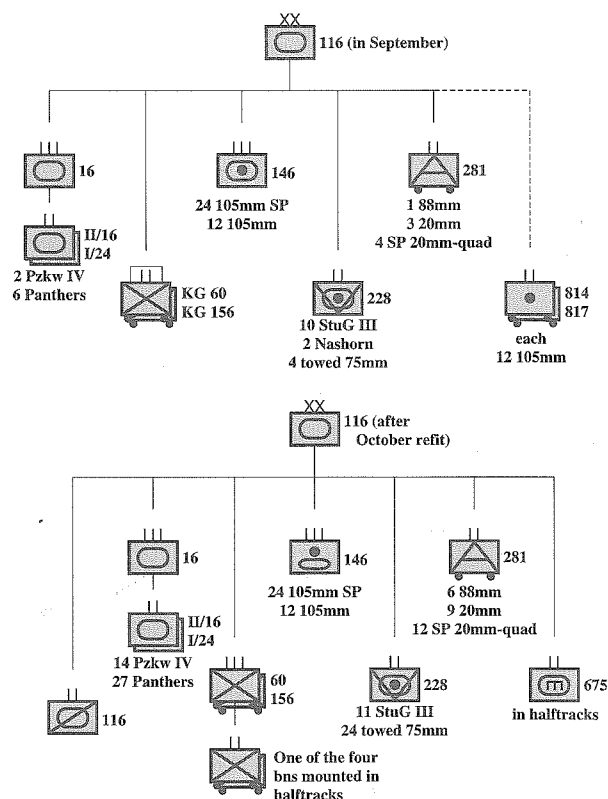
The 9th Panzer Division had been reorganizing in a rear area when von Rundstedt ordered into the Aachen Gap — at that time it was the only sizeable reserve available along the entire western front. Because the refitting and regrouping process was not yet complete, when the 9th arrived in the combat zone it was merged with the remnants of *Panzer Brigade 105* and other diverse battalion-size reinforcements. During the battle for Aachen, then, the title "9th Panzer Division" was



really only a term of convenience describing a hodgepodge of armor, infantry and artillery. The division never exceeded half its authorized strength, with a maximum of only about 50 armored fighting vehicles on hand.

The 116th Panzer Division was one of the Wehrmacht's elite formations and had an outstanding reputation based on its performance in Normandy and Russia. Due to severe losses suffered during the withdrawal from the Falaise Pocket, the 116th consisted of two small battlegroups by the time the fighting around Aachen began. These battlegroups were organized around the division's armored infantry regiments, and were supported by what was left of the armor (about 20 armored fighting vehicles of all kinds). The division's artillery units had ceased to exist, but two battalions of 105mm howitzers from the 81st Corps were attached.

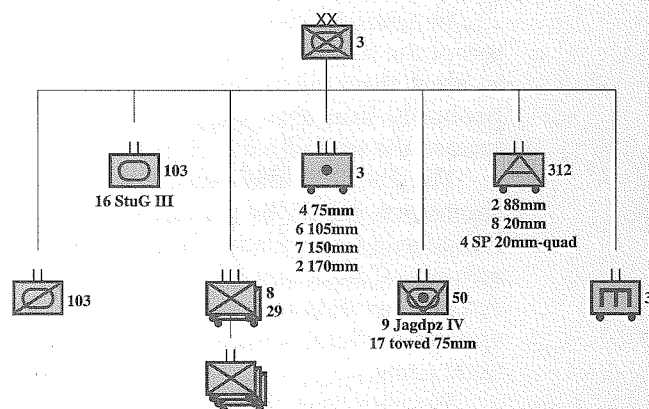
At the end of September, the 116th was passed into reserve to be brought up to strength for the German counterattack in the Ardennes that December. But events forced it to be sent back into the Aachen gap in October. In the three week interim, the division was rebuilt to a strength of 11,500 men. This amazing rebuilding was possible only because the 116th was run by experienced officers who had good personal connections to those in the German army high command, thereby getting top priority. In addition, as the reader should expect by this point, the 116th also maintained a veteran enlisted cadre, as well as its own training and replacement units and combined-arms school.



A German Panzergrenadier (armored infantry) division was more a kind of motorized infantry outfit than a true armored formation. Its two armored infantry reg-

iments were each made up of three battalions, for a total of six. Compared to a panzer division, these two additional armored infantry battalions tended to give the *panzergrenadiers* more staying power in defensive engagements while also allowing them to hold more frontage. Authorized strength was 13,876, but due to shortages of armored personnel carriers, all riflemen rode to battle on trucks. These divisions contained one armor battalion, which was usually equipped with assault guns rather than tanks. The other elements of Panzergrenadier divisions were organized similarly to those within Panzer divisions, but with fewer self-propelled and armored components.

Having recently been in combat in Italy and Lorraine, the 3rd Panzergrenadier Division was run down when it arrived in the Aachen sector in October. Its rifle strength was down by about half, and there were only 16 assault guns and nine tanks destroyers available. The artillery regiment had been reduced to two mixed battalions, both towed rather than self-propelled. The shortage of motor transport, particularly in the 3rd's support and supply services, was acute.



The Germans also committed many independent, battle group and *ad hoc* units to the fighting around Aachen. These included tank, tank destroyer, assault gun, combat engineer, infantry, bicycle infantry, and convalescent battalions, as well as several kinds of artillery units. The tank and tank destroyer battalions were understrength, with five to 20 operational vehicles.

The quality of the independent formations varied greatly. Some, like Panzer Battalion 506 (Tigers), Tank Destroyer Battalion 519 (Hunting Tiger tank destroyers), and two SS battle groups, were excellent units. Others, like Convalescent Battalion D-6, or Police Battle Group "Aachen," were little more than armed mobs. In theory all the various independent units were under command of 81st Corps, but in practice they were attached to the various divisions.

These independent and *ad hoc* units represented the beginning of the wave of cannon fodder formations

Hitler threw together during the closing months of the war. A good example here is provided by the two battle groups from the NCO training schools at Düren and Jülich, committed to help hold the line against the US 19th Corps offensive in October. Instead of using these highly motivated and experienced cadres as a core around which to rebuild other units, or as replacements for them, they were formed into a poorly equipped infantry battalion.

Also typical for the German army, a conglomeration of rare weapons could be found among the independent units. *Railroad Battery 723*, for example, was equipped with two Soviet-built 274mm railroad guns. Other units were based on crazy ideas, such as *Wireless Panzer Battalion 311*, which was equipped with radio-controlled "Goliath tanks" (actually self-propelled demolition charges). They were to be directed into enemy lines and exploded there by remote control. But the machines' poor mobility and general unreliability, as well as their vulnerability to smoke (which made it impossible for their controllers to keep track of them as they advanced), rendered them almost totally ineffective.

(Continued from page 39)

In addition, Schack directed the headquarters of the 9th Panzer and 353rd Infantry Divisions to alert their units because "the enemy will probably launch a drive bypassing Aachen toward the second band of defenses."

The 7th Corps did indeed strike again on 14 September. As on the previous day, 3rd Armored Division's CCB made the most spectacular advance. Continuing from Rott, that unit drove across more than four miles of rolling country to approach Vicht, southeast of Stolberg, just as night came.

For their part, the various German commanders in the area didn't intend to fall back on the second band of Westwall fortifications without a fight. But they were unable to generate any activity on the ground that amounted to anything more than a withdrawal. Cratered roads, road blocks and small delaying detachments were all that got in the way of the Americans. Though parts of the 9th Panzer Division were beginning to move into the eastern band of the Westwall by this time, repulsing US attacks in the area of Büsbach, the sector opposite the US 3rd Armored Division's CCB was held only by the 547th Security Battalion of the 353rd Infantry Division.

When CCB/3 attacked again around noon on 15 September, German resistance remained weak. All the firing pillboxes were silenced within an hour. Driving up the road toward Eschweiler, CCB passed the last bunkers of the Westwall's second band: they were completely through the Siegfried Line.

Elsewhere on the the 14th and 15th, the 3rd Armored Division's CCA began to exploit the penetration made in the Westwall's first band at Oberforstbach. By nightfall on the 14th, CCA had overrun a weak battle group of the 116th Panzer Division near Brand, then advanced to the fringes of Eilendorf. There CCA/3 paused to await the arrival of the 1st Infantry Division's 16th Regiment, which was to seize the ground east of Aachen to protect the tankers' left flank in the coming drive to Eschweiler.

After days of frustration among outlying obstacles, the 16th Infantry Regiment at last launched a well prepared attack against the Westwall's first band on 14 September. Though skirmishes with elements of the 526th Infantry Division's 253rd Reserve Grenadier Regiment and other local defense forces prevented them from reaching Eilendorf that day, the 16th entered the town late in the next morning. Fanning out to secure the area, the regiment's command was able to report it had completed its mission by nightfall. The US 1st Infantry Division now ringed Aachen on three sides.

Upon the arrival of the 16th Regiment, CCA/3 renewed its drive northeast toward Eschweiler. After easy going through the first pillboxes halfway between Eilendorf and Stolberg, CCA was counterattacked by the 2nd Battalion/11th Panzergrenadier Regiment and the 50th Tank Destroyer Battalion, both part of 9th Panzer Division. The Germans brought seven assault guns into action, quickly knocking out a half-dozen Shermans. The fighting was some of the fiercest in 7th Corps' five-day-old push into the Siegfried Line, but by nightfall the US tanks and infantry had penetrated almost a mile beyond the forward-edge pillboxes of the Westwall's second band. Only a few fortifications remained in front of CCA/3 before it, like CCB, would be through the entire Westwall.

At the same time, the battle for the Stolberg Corridor was broadened by the commitment of the US 9th Infantry Division's 47th Regiment close along the right flank of 3rd Armored Division. Early on 14 September the 47th moved out of Rötgen behind CCB/3. The next day the regiment started to roll up a portion of the Westwall's second band by outflanking Zweifall and Vicht. That area was defended by the weak 313th Grenadier Replacement and Training Battalion of the 353rd Infantry Division. Still, it took a full day to eliminate those Germans, primarily because of the difficult terrain they were holding.

From the German viewpoint, the advance of the 16th Infantry and CCA/3 beyond Eilendorf

was all the more distressing because it severed contact between the 116th and 9th *Panzer Divisions*. Schack was reluctant to move the former fully into the Stolberg Corridor because the continuous pounding US artillery had begun giving Aachen made him believe the city was going to be hit with an all-out assault on the 16th. Thus the German defense remained divided.

In the late afternoon of 15 September, Schack ordered the 9th *Panzer Division* to counterattack. The first effort was made by a battle group of the 1st Battalion/10th *Panzergrenadier Regiment* near Zweifall. It failed due to heavy American mortar and artillery fire. But a second, two-pronged attack by two battle groups organized from 2nd Battalion/11th *Panzergrenadier Regiment*, 9th *Armored Reconnaissance Battalion*, 1st Battalion/33rd *Panzer Regiment*, and 50th *Tank Destroyer Battalion* against CCA/3 and CCB/3 quickly knocked out over two dozen tanks and a dozen halftracks. The 3rd *Armored Division* was forced to stop for the 15th.

These events would have been encouraging to the Germans even if they hadn't been informed that night of the impending arrival of the fresh and powerful 12th *Infantry Division*. Its first contingents were scheduled to reach the combat area during the night, and the entire division would arrive over the next 30 hours.

Unaware of the enemy reinforcements, the divisions of 7th *Corps* renewed their drives on the 16th. CCA/3 tried to continue northeast through the industrial suburbs of Stolberg. To the east, CCB/3 shifted the direction of its attack to the southeastern edge of that town. Both combat commands stalled due to concentrated German machinegun and mortar fire, and the 3rd *Armored Division* made no progress that day.

The difficulties of the 3rd *Armored Division* were offset by the spectacular advance achieved by the 9th *Infantry Division's* 47th *Regiment*. With the aid of a captured map, the 47th cleared Vicht and mopped up the nearby pillboxes during the morning. Then it pressed northeast through the Wenau Forest to Schevenhütte. This late-comer to the Westwall fighting thereby penetrated deeper into Germany than any other Allied unit, and was less than 10 miles from the Roer River.

But indications were beginning to appear of stirrings on the German side of the line. The following night almost every American unit along the front reported hearing the noise of heavy vehicular traffic, and a German colonel was captured who'd been found reconnoitering — presumably for an attack — a little too close to American lines.

While events around Stolberg gave evidence of moving toward some kind of climax, on the left of 7th *Corps*, at Aachen, the 1st *Infantry Division*, supported by the 1106th *Engineer Group*, threw up a wall of defenses while awaiting the arrival of the 19th *Corps* to assist in encircling the city. By the evening of 16 September, the basic form of the wall around Aachen had been set as a half-moon arc extending from the 18th *Regiment* southwest of the city to the 16th *Regiment's* advanced position at Eilendorf. The command of the 1st *Infantry Division* had no intention of becoming embroiled in fighting through the streets and bomb-gutted buildings of Aachen, but was forced into fighting off local counterattacks from elements of the 526th *Infantry Division*.

The German command was astounded the 7th *Corps* would stop short of trying to seize the city. To add to their problems, the panic that had first struck Aachen's populace during the night of 12 September returned when US artillery began pounding their homes. By 16 September, civilian evacuation was in full swing and conditions inside Aachen became chaotic.

Positional Warfare, 17 September to 1 October

The situation changed rapidly for 7th *Corps* early on the afternoon of 17 September, when the Allies launched Operation Market-Garden

(Continued on page 48)



American armor penetrating the Westwall's "dragon's teeth" near Aachen.

The US Army at Aachen, Autumn 1944

By the autumn of 1944, the US Army had become a formidable military organization. Its soldiers were the best paid, best fed, best clothed, best equipped and individually best trained fighters in the world at the time. Even though the best training can't replace battlefield experience, and even though much of the training — up to 18 months — had nothing to do with combat, the US Army had become an increasingly skilled fighting force after winning hard battles in North Africa, the Mediterranean and Normandy. Further, the US Army had developed an ability to conduct methodical, attritional warfare that was second to none in destructive power.

Operationally US troops were competent, but tended to rely more on prodigious expenditures of artillery ammunition, close air support, and gasoline to win battles than they did on well-honed tactics. When they were without those material strengths, as they sometimes were during the battle for Aachen, their performance became more uneven, with the conduct of their operations slowing and becoming more conservative. Still, when it came to a war of materiel — which World War II had become by 1944 — the US Army could overturn the German army every time. This approach also had the advantage of minimizing American casualties at a time when the high losses suffered in the Normandy fighting had left the Americans strapped for infantry replacements.

If there was a central problem in the US Army at the time it was one of approach. That is, the GIs were not professional soldiers; they generally viewed the war they were involved in as just another lousy job they had the sorry misfortune to get involved in — as individuals — rather than a struggle of nations and ideologies to decide the fate of the world. That outlook was fed by rumors rampant through the ranks during

the late summer of 1944, such as "Home for Christmas." In addition, the US Army was tail heavy, with a prodigious number of its personnel assigned to rear area and communication zone activities, while the front line units suffered from a lack of infantry replacements.

Compared to his German foe, the typical GI was not as determined to fight the war through to the end, and also lacked knowledge of his own nation's military culture and history. As a result, combat tended to have intense psychological effects on US soldiers. The US Army had a far higher proportion of psychological casualties than any other army in the war.

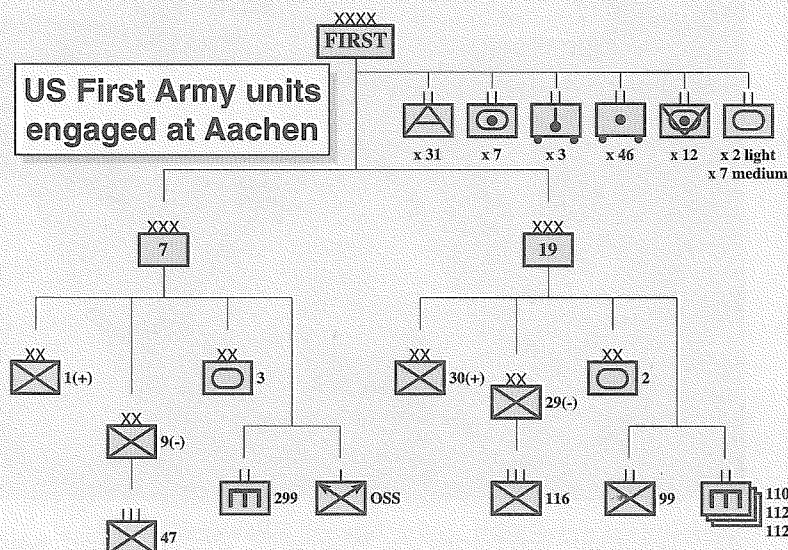
Further, the lack of an effective replacement policy led to poor maintenance of US divisional effectiveness. In most armies, formations with greater experience would be the ones counted on to be the most dependable in new combat. But US divisions were not formed as territorial units. Replacements were taken as individual warm bodies rather than as small units filled with men who knew each other well and had trained together. Heavy casualties therefore tended to quickly degrade a veteran division's effectiveness back down toward green levels.

As a result of this, the US Army still often showed shortcomings in the execution of combined-arms operations. The US command had tried to copy the German concept of flexibility in combined-arms warfare, but found it didn't always work well for their divisions. While in the German army the units belonging to divisions were really only administrative constructs, with the real fighting always done by improvised battlegroups put together to suit particular missions, the process didn't work as smoothly for the Americans. What successful battlegroup commitment required, and what the US command was never able to dependably create throughout the American army, were units made up of officers and men who'd come to know each other well through shared training and combat experience.

US Units at Aachen

The infantry division was the workhorse of the US Army. The organization centered around three infantry regiments of three battalions each, for a total of nine infantry battalions of three rifle companies each. The 27 rifle companies contained 5,124 riflemen; the rest of the 14,235 men were assigned to numerous support and artillery elements.

The divisional artillery was powerful, with three 105mm howitzer battalions (12 guns each), and one 155mm battalion. Other



support elements included a reconnaissance troop, a combat engineer battalion and an anti-tank company. Though they were not organic, infantry divisions were seldom without attached tank, tank destroyer, and anti-aircraft battalions. Support troops and their equipment were maintained at the usual US level — that is, lavish by any other standard.

Without doubt, the *1st Infantry* was the most experienced American division in the autumn of 1944. The exploits of the "Big Red One" were as renowned as any in the US Army. But an acute shortage of riflemen had occurred as a result of the division's continuous engagement since D-Day. Therefore, during the fighting around Aachen, two combat engineer battalions were attached to the *1st*, and were primarily committed in a defensive infantry role. With combat inside the city in mind, the division was also reinforced with additional artillery battalions.

The *30th Infantry Division* had less combat experience than the *1st* and showed major shortcomings in the execution of combined-arms operations. That was especially true during the fighting for the outskirts town of Würselen. The *30th* didn't suffer from a rifleman shortage anywhere near as severe as that in the *1st*, but it too had a combat engineer battalion attached.

The *9th* and *29th Infantry Divisions* both contributed a regiment to the fighting around Aachen. The

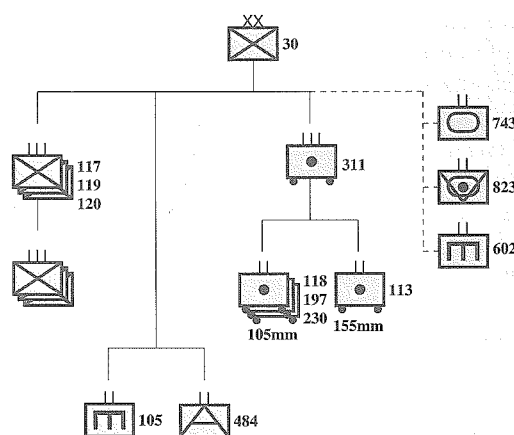
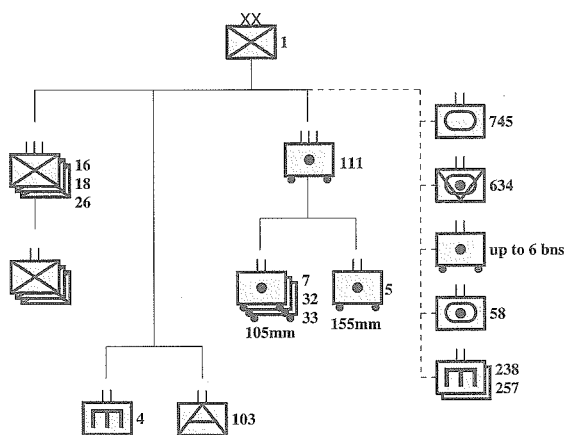
medium and 158 Stuart light tanks, but by September 1944 they were short of their authorized number of tanks and riflemen.

Even though organized officially in regiments, in practice they fought in brigade-like "Combat Commands." Again because of the general shortage of riflemen (the armored infantry regiments had only 2,600 riflemen at full strength) both the *2nd* and *3rd* formed an *ad hoc* combat command around their combat engineer battalions during the Aachen fighting.

There were also numerous independent US units engaged at Aachen, including tank and tank destroyer battalions. They were officially under control of corps headquarters, but were typically attached directly to the divisions. Independent tank battalions had an authorized strength of 53 Shermans and six self-propelled assault guns mounting 105mm howitzers. Towed tank destroyer battalions included 36 guns (75mm), whereas self-propelled tank destroyer battalions consisted of 36 M10 armored fighting vehicles (also mounting 3-inch guns). During this period the operational strength of such units usually hovered around 85 percent. Independent artillery battalions (12 guns each) were organized into field artillery "groups" of two to six battalions, or were directly attached to divisions.

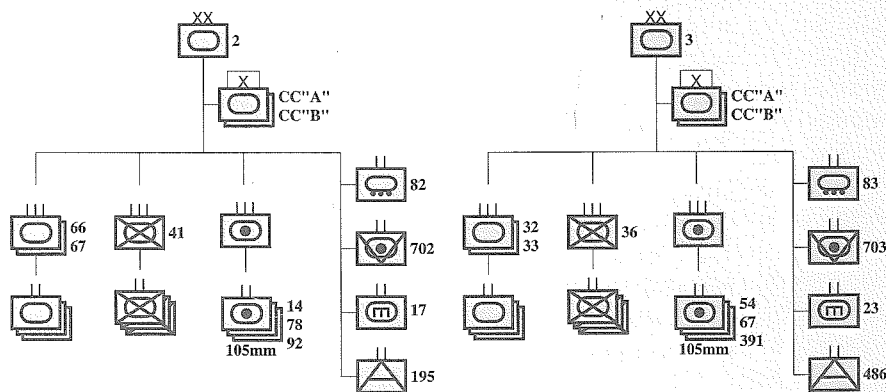
Independent combat engineer battalions were also sometimes organized into "groups." Because of the

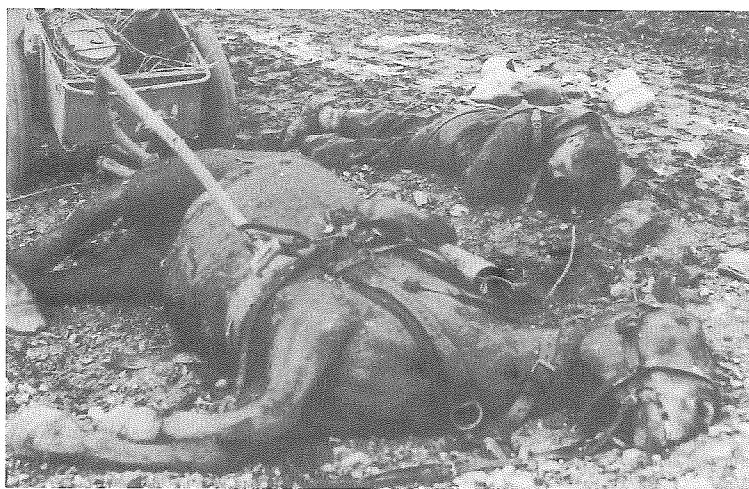
general shortage of riflemen, they often were attached to infantry divisions and — following the German example — usually drew static defensive missions for which they were not trained or equipped.



regiment from the *9th* in fact showed itself as one of the truly elite US formations in this battle.

The *2nd* and *3rd Armored Divisions* were still set up using the 1942 tables of organization, which were in turn loosely modeled after the early German panzer divisions. They consisted of two tank regiments and an armored infantry regiment. These armored divisions nominally contained 14,488 men, 232 Sherman





This photo shows what often happened to Germans caught moving in daylight by Allied aircraft. The two men (one lies directly behind the wagon) were spotted moving rations forward to a line company.

some 50 miles northwest of Aachen. The corps' supply situation deteriorated, especially in regard to fuel and artillery ammunition, and its air support simply disappeared to the north. The 7th's various formations were in the delicate situation of being through the Westwall in places, being half through in others, and at some points not having penetrated at all. The line was full of extreme zigs and zags. From an offensive standpoint, the penetrations made so far were too narrow to serve as the base for further operations toward the Roer or Rhine Rivers, and from a defensive standpoint the corps was potentially open to German infiltration and counterattack.

On the German side, the newly arriving 12th Infantry Division was used to relieve the remnant of the 353rd Infantry Division. The latter unit was then moved to the relatively quiet 74th Corps sector farther south. Gen. Brandenberger ordered Schack to use his new division in "the best Prussian military tradition," meaning an all-out counterattack. Therefore at dawn on 17 September, the 12th Infantry Division's 27th Grenadier Regiment, supported by remnants of the 9th Panzer Division's armor, attacked in the direction of Münsterbusch. Their objective was to eliminate the bulge at Stolberg.

After initial progress, the counterattack was stopped by heavy fire from nearly all of 7th Corps' artillery, then repulsed by CCB/3. The 12th Infantry Division continued its efforts to reclaim the Westwall's second band, but the result was an eruption of fierce, close-in fighting that brought no real gain for either side.

Late on 19 September, CCA/3 and CCB/3 started a methodical, costly mop up of the last

German defensive positions inside Stolberg. Fighting without air support and lavish artillery preparation was a new experience for the Americans, and the learning cost was high.

At dawn on 22 September, the 27th Grenadier Regiment, supported by the newly arrived 1012th Assault Gun Battalion, counterattacked again, this time into central Stolberg, which was occupied by CCB/3. The 3rd Armored Division's commander authorized a withdrawal, and the combat command dashed back to Münsterbusch under cover of a smoke screen. There it found sanctuary, thanks to CCA/3's efforts to hold the German counterattack inside Stolberg.

That was about all either side was able to accomplish in the Stolberg Corridor for the time being. The Germans had used terrain and small-unit maneuver to thwart 7th Corps' attacks. After 22 September the fighting died down. As the month drew to a close, 7th Corps shifted to the defense all across its front as it ran low on fuel and ammunition. In addition, the loss of air support to the Market-Garden operation had been a real blow to its combat efficiency.

Before 7th Corps could resume its attack, it had to shuffle units to release one for redeployment. The logical place for that shuffle was in the defensive arc around Aachen, for the next fight was not to be to the east or northeast, but was to be made directly against the city in conjunction with 19th Corps.

On 20 September, because of Gen. Schack's connection to von Schwerin (see sidebar) and his unsatisfactory, piecemeal commitment of 12th Infantry Division, Brandenberger relieved him of command. Gen. Friedrich Köchling took over 81st Corps.

As the fighting subsided in the Stolberg Corridor, more German reinforcements began to arrive. The first major unit was the 183rd Volksgrenadier Division, which was employed north of Aachen against 19th Corps. After shoring up the line there, Köchling pulled out the depleted 275th Infantry Division, except for its fusilier battalion, and sent it south for refitting and reorganization. The fusiliers were put into corps reserve.

On 23 September, another full strength division, the 246th Volksgrenadier, entrained in Bohemia with the mission of relieving what was left of the 9th and 116th Panzer Divisions. Those two units were put in reserve to refit and reorganize for the planned winter counterattack in the Ardennes (the Battle of the Bulge). The 246th was therefore deployed into the center of the 81st Corps' zone, where it took over the task of

defending the city of Aachen in conjunction with the remnants of the 526th Infantry Division and other local defense units. Lt. Col. Maximilian Leyherr, one of the 246th's regimental commanders, became the new commander of Aachen.

In addition to those reinforcements, 81st Corps also received a regiment of bicycle infantry, another assault gun battalion, a Tiger battalion, and a tank destroyer battalion.

The Germans had in fact become stronger than at any time since 7th Corps opened its attack on 12 September. But the fighting to date had cost them dearly. In the week from 16 to 23 September, for example, the 12th Infantry Division alone lost half its combat strength, a reduction from which it was not to recover throughout the remainder of the autumn fighting. At the same time, 9th Panzer Division lost two-thirds of its combat strength; the other divisions suffered

The Von Schwerin Affair

On 12 September 1944, Hitler ordered the Nazi Party in Aachen to organize the evacuation of the civilian populace. He wanted to turn the place into a "fortress" comparable to Stalingrad, and 100,000+ noncombatants would just get in the way of such an epic struggle and be that many more mouths to feed. Instead of following their Führer's order, however, most party officials and government bureaucrats simply fled, leaving the citizens behind to fall into a panic as they began to move out on their own.

Aware his 116th Panzer Division and the 526th Infantry Division were no match for the approaching Americans, Lt. Gen. Gerhard Graf von Schwerin became convinced the fall of the city was only hours away. He also believed that was the best possible solution for Aachen. Since it seemed Aachen was to be spared a ground battle, there was really no need for the civilian evacuation. Von Schwerin sent his officers and military police into the streets to halt the refugees. By daylight on 13 September, the city was again calm.

Meanwhile, von Schwerin searched the telephone exchanges until he found one man at his post. The general gave him a letter, in English, for the US commander whose forces were approaching Aachen:

I stopped the absurd evacuation of this town; therefore, I am responsible for the fate of its inhabitants and I ask you, in the case of an occupation by your troops, to take care of the unfortunate population in a humane way. I am the last German commanding officer in the sector of Aachen. Signed — von Schwerin.

Unfortunately for von Schwerin, Maj. Gen. Collins, commander of the advancing 7th Corps, was at almost the same moment deciding to try to bypass Aachen, thereby breaking directly into the Stolberg Corridor. (At any rate, no US commander ever received the message. Apparently the operator von Schwerin gave it to was more loyal to Hitler than to the idea of saving Aachen from further destruction.)

The panic that had originally struck the civilians of Aachen on 12 September, began to return on the

14th. Because none of the party officials and bureaucrats had returned, a committee of leading citizens begged von Schwerin to form a provisional city government headed by the museum director. About that time another order arrived from Hitler, this one coming through army, rather than party, channels. The order to evacuate Aachen's civilian populace was restated, and von Schwerin reluctantly had to agree.

When a few Nazi officials sheepishly returned to the city on 15 September, they found the new evacuation already in full swing. Von Schwerin's compromising letter to the US commander had meanwhile fallen into Gestapo hands. Hitler demanded the general stand trial before the Nazi "People's Court" for treason, which meant a certain death sentence. Von Schwerin, however, declined to comply, and for a time sought a way to surrender his entire panzer division to the enemy. He took refuge in a farmhouse north of the city, guarded by the reconnaissance platoon from the 116th. That force managed to keep away the various SS detachments that showed up to try to arrest their commander over the next few days, but the other officers of the division refused to lead their men in a surrender to the Americans.

After a few days, von Schwerin relented enough to present himself at the headquarters of the German 7th Army, where he offered to appear before a military court. Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, the German commander in chief in the west, interceded for him at Führer headquarters and managed to get the trial shifted from the People's Court to a military tribunal. Von Rundstedt even asked that von Schwerin be reinstated as commander of the 116th Panzer Division. Hitler refused that last request, but did agree to limit von Schwerin's punishment to nothing more than relegation to the high command's officer reserve pool, where he could do no more harm to the war effort.

Von Schwerin later reemerged as a corps commander in Italy. He survived to see peace, and in 1954 was made an honorary citizen of Aachen in recognition of his attempt to save the city from combat.

commensurately. But one needed commodity had been bought by all the sacrifice: time.

Closing the Circle, 2-16 October

During the second half of September, the US 9th Army concluded its campaign in Brittany and began moving into the Ardennes-Eifel area. As that army arrived, it allowed Courtney Hodges to regroup his 1st Army. He reduced the size of 7th Corps' front around Aachen, and sent two divisions (7th Armored and 29th Infantry) to 19th Corps. But before Hodges could renew his drive to the Rhine, he had to attend to two items of unfinished business: capture Aachen and put 19th Corps through the Westwall north of that city.

Hodges decided to work toward both tasks at the same time. He ordered 19th Corps to penetrate the Westwall north of Aachen and then move to complete 7th Corps' partial encirclement of the city. The penetration of the fortified line was to be carried out by 19th Corps' 30th Infantry Division. The hole would be exploited by 2nd Armored Division, which was to cross the Wurm River, then drive nine miles eastward to jump the Roer. Meanwhile, the infantry was to strike south to link with 7th Corps northeast of Aachen. To assist the new Westwall assault, the 29th Infantry Division was to make limited attacks along 19th Corps' northern flank. The final capture of Aachen was to be left to 7th Corps' 1st Infantry Division.

The 30th Infantry Division's commander, Maj. Gen. Leland Hobbs, chose to strike into the Westwall on a front little more than a mile wide along the Wurm River north of Aachen and southeast of Geilenkirchen. His choice of jump off sites was governed by his desire to avoid denser Westwall and urban areas to the south. In general his approach was probably best, but it was unfortunate he and his staff based their orders on map studies, without conducting any personal reconnaissance. As a result, to give one example, Hobbs ordered assault boats forward for the Wurm River crossing, only to find out from the report of a last-minute patrol the river was only two to four feet deep and 15 to 18 feet wide. Duckboard footbridges were hurriedly substituted for the boats.

The men of the 30th were organized into special pillbox assault teams equipped with flamethrowers and a variety of demolition charges. Tank destroyers and self-propelled 155mm guns were readied to pump direct fire into German positions, and an air-ground liaison officer was to accompany each infantry bat-

talion. In addition, the regiments rotated their battalions through the line, enabling all to get refresher training in fundamental, combined-arms pillbox assault tactics.

On the other side, German intelligence officers were predicting a major attack on the first clear weather day. They most feared an offensive on a broad front southeast of Aachen, with the Roer River towns of Düren and Jülich as first objectives. They also anticipated a possible large-scale Allied airborne operation between the Roer and Rhine Rivers as a corollary to the new ground drive. With all that in mind, Köchling wrongly assumed the US 1st Army would make a strong push through the Stolberg Corridor during the first days of October. As a result, he and his staff spent the end of September overseeing feverish preparations to strengthen the sector of the 12th Infantry and 246th Volksgrenadier Divisions immediately in and to the southeast of Aachen.

The US 1st Army started an elaborate preparatory artillery program on 26 September. By 29 September, the shelling and ground support activity reached such a level that all daylight troop and supply movements in the German 81st Corps sector had to be halted. Still, except for clearing away the camouflage, all the shelling, bombing and strafing was found to have little effect on the pillboxes and strong-points themselves. The attack was then set back several times due to poor flying weather, finally kicking off on 2 October with an air strike.

The Luftwaffe showed no signs of reviving, and German anti-aircraft artillery was virtually nonexistent. Yet somehow this climactic strike was a complete failure. Some observers reported the air effort had no real effect beyond providing the German infantry with new craters from which to fight. A real note of tragedy occurred when some medium bombers mistakenly struck a Belgian town 40 miles west of their assigned targets, inflicting hundreds of casualties on the civilians and Allied soldiers there.

Of course, despite the disappointing performance of the aircraft, 19th Corps remained committed to its ground attack. From the start, though, 30th Infantry Division's assault regiments (117th and 119th) met with difficulties. German resistance proved much tougher than had been expected, with one attacking company, for example, losing 87 of its men in an hour. The coordination between the attackers' infantry and armor completely failed, but the corps artillery saved the day for the US riflemen. By nightfall, the two regiments had managed to create small

That evening the men of the 30th waited for a German counterattack to materialize, but that reaction was delayed due to their surprise as to the location of the American effort. Deceived by diversionary attacks launched elsewhere by the 29th Infantry Division and the 30th's 120th Infantry Regiment, the German commanders of the 49th Infantry and 183rd Volksgrenadier Divisions failed to realize the narrow-front effort of the 117th and 119th Regiments was the real thing.

On the second day, 3 October, cooperation between the American tanks and infantry suddenly turned excellent. After clearing about a dozen pillboxes, the 119th broke through the band of fortifications, but still not fast or far enough to begin any substantial new advance. Once again the Germans brought the attackers to an abrupt halt after gains of only a few hundred yards, by launching numerous small-scale counterattacks. By the end of the second day, the depth of the 119th's bridgehead across the Wurm was still no more than 1,000 yards.

Encirclement and Capture of Aachen
2-21 October 1944

Elevations

600
500
400
300
200
100
0 m

— US positions am 2 Oct
 - - - US positions am 7 Oct
 ····· US positions pm 11 Oct
 ····· US positions pm 21 Oct
 ➡ US armored attacks
 ➡ US infantry attacks
 ➡ German attacks 11-19 Oct
 West Wall

0 1 2 3 4
Miles
0 2 4 6 8
Km

Larry Hoffman/
Command Magazine

51

By dawn on 4 October, Köchling had maneuvered five infantry, one engineer, a Tiger and two assault gun battalions into position to counterattack the 119th. Their main effort pushed into the center of that regiment, and as the US riflemen saw the Tigers they panicked and fell back. But then shortfalls from the Germans' own artillery began to throw the counterattack into disarray too. By the time the Germans had sorted things out, the 119th was again stabilized, reinforced with tanks and tank destroyers. Only one German infantry battalion actually reached Übach, where it was completely smashed, reduced to only 25 men.

The force that had been so difficult to assemble and looked so impressive to Köchling on paper had been reduced to impotence in a matter of hours. Von Rundstedt and Brandenberger, who visited Köchling's headquarters during the counterattack, both came away with the impression the forces available around Aachen were insufficient for a successful defense. They ordered Köchling to send every available unit within his corps to the threatened sector, and promised reinforcements.

Though the German counterattack had failed, it delayed US operations on the 4th, with no appreciable American advances achieved that day. Resuming the attack on 5 October, the 2nd Armored and 30th Infantry Divisions found the pattern of German resistance unchanged. But this time the advance moved more quickly, since the coordination among the various ground combat arms and supporting aircraft worked perfectly. By the end of the day, Übach was completely secured and three villages beyond it were also seized. Even if the US riflemen had paid for the advances with heavy casualties, the developments seemed encouraging.

At the same time, Köchling continued his efforts to set up a greater concentration of defending units opposite the American drive. But just like the force assembled for the 4 October counterattack, these newly arriving units were more impressive on paper than they were on the ground. Once again assembling units from various sectors of the front to execute a coordinated counterattack proved a difficult task. The Germans failed to strike on 5 October, thereby losing their chance. Köchling was forced to commit his units piecemeal, in reaction to the pattern of US attacks.

The US 19th Corps expanded the bridgehead in the directions of Waurichen, Baesweiler and Alsdorf on 6 October. The attackers repeated the combined arms techniques used so successfully

the day before and made good progress. The Germans reacted by moving tanks and anti-tank guns into position late in the day, finally stopping the US advance with dug-in infantry backed up by direct-fire heavy weapons less than a 1,000 yards short of the line Baesweiler-Alsdorf.

Also as on the day before, the Germans conducted numerous small-scale counterattacks of roughly battalion size, supported by a handful of tanks and assault guns. During those efforts, German artillery hammered the bridgehead with some of the heaviest concentrations the US troops had ever experienced. Köchling, in fact, massed all his 81st Corps guns against the bridgehead. Even the *Luftwaffe* got into the act, launching one strike with good results.

During the afternoon of 6 October, the commander of German Army Group B, Field Marshal Walter Model, visited the command post of 81st Corps to lend his weight to the effort to assemble sufficient forces for launching a decisive counterattack against the Westwall bridgehead. But Model was too late; 6 October proved to be the high water mark of the German resistance against 19th Corps. Every unit the German command had seized upon for movement into the threatened sector was simply absorbed into the defense by the unremitting pressure of the 2nd Armored and 30th Infantry Divisions.

The 19th Corps was in fact preparing to exploit through and beyond its bridgehead. The fight to breach the Westwall was ending, and the planned juncture with 7th Corps to encircle Aachen became the new goal. The weight of American armor, and clear skies that allowed for great air activity, provided the margin of success on 7 October. Baesweiler, Oidtweiler, and Alsdorf fell, and by late in the day 30th Infantry Division was only about three miles away from Würselen, the planned point of contact with 7th Corps. Further heavy losses were inflicted on the Germans when their line collapsed and numerous overruns were made by the Americans.

For their part, the Germans continued to try to assemble an effective counterattack force, this time in the vicinity of Alsdorf. The main components of the new group consisted of the *Regiment von Fritzschen*, made up of bicycle infantry, the 1st Assault Regiment, a battle group from the 108th Panzer Brigade, plus about 40 tanks, tank destroyers and assault guns drawn from various other units. Any real hope of denying Aachen to the Americans lay not with this small force, but with von Rundstedt's promise to commit his

theater reserves: the *3rd Panzergrenadier Division* and the now-refitting *116th Panzer Division*.

Attaching those two divisions to the headquarters of the *1st SS Panzer Corps*, von Rundstedt ordered a major operation to restore the situation around Aachen. But those potentially decisive reinforcements were still in transit on 7 October because Allied air attacks on the railways imposed serious delays. Köchling feared Aachen would fall before they could arrive.

Events at Alsdorf on 7 October convinced the US *1st Army* command the time had come to force the issue at Aachen. On the morning of the 8th, the *117th Regiment* moved to seize the high ground east of Würselen. The attack progressed steadily until about 9:30 a.m., when a German counterattack erupted. This was the *von Fritschen* force trying to retake Alsdorf, thereby closing the gap that had opened in the lines of the *49th Infantry Division*. After heavy fire began from the giant guns of the *723rd Railroad Artillery Battery*, panic spread among the Americans, who thought they were being hit by some new kind of secret weapon. Then the US line collapsed completely when five *Hunting Panthers* of the *519th Tank Destroyer Battalion* appeared, allowing some of the German armor and infantry to break into Alsdorf. There the German attack ran out of steam, but the *117th's* progress had again been blocked, and in such a way that it seemed possible the regiment might be surrounded southeast of Alsdorf.

While this was going on, the US *1st Infantry Division's 18th Regiment* attacked north toward Verlautenheide. In a cleverly run night attack, the place was secured with no difficulty. Again, small-scale German counterattacks began on 8 and 9 October, but since the *246th Volksgrenadier Division* was now having to absorb punishment on two fronts, from the *18th Regiment's* northward push and the southward attacks of *19th Corps*, the Germans found it almost impossible to release any troops for counterattacking.

The one strong suit the Germans showed during this period was their artillery. Because the American attacks were being delivered on a narrow front no more than five miles across, the defenders were able to concentrate their shelling to good effect. Still, the *18th Infantry Regiment* took Haaren on 10 October. (Again, the seizure was relatively easy, but with a more difficult mop up and defense against counterattacks following.) The final closing of the ring around Aachen seemed to be in sight.

On 10 October *1st Division* headquarters sent an ultimatum to the commander of the German

garrison in Aachen. He was warned if he failed to capitulate unconditionally within 24 hours US forces would pulverize the city with artillery and bombs, then seize the rubble with a ground assault. In fact, units from the US *26th Infantry Division* had already begun preparations to move into the tangle of factories lying between Aachen proper and Haaren.

The German commander in Aachen, Leyherr, dutifully rejected the ultimatum in accord with Hitler's last-stand orders. Two days later, Leyherr was relieved in deference to his division commander, Col. Gerhardt Wilck. Then on 10 October, von Rundstedt gave final authorization for commitment of the *1st SS Panzer Corps*. He attached a proviso to the authorization ordering the force not be committed piecemeal, but as a whole and concentrated corps. But the further assembly the proviso required meant delaying the new counterattack until 12 October.

The German 8 October counterattack had almost completely stalled further offensive movement by *30th Infantry Division*. Only *117th Regiment* made some gains on the 9th, when the *7th Corps'* drive northward against Verlautenheide diverted German attention. Later that same day, parts of the *120th Regiment* took the high ground near Würselen, while elements of the *119th Regiment* occupied Bardenberg. But



An American combat team moving forward through Aachen's Rothe Erde district.

both objectives had to be given up to a late-afternoon counterstroke delivered by the *108th Panzer Brigade*.

The *30th Infantry Division* renewed its efforts to secure Bardenberg soon after daylight on 10 October. But the Germans had spent the night converting the town's cellars into pillboxes, and fought back fiercely from those new positions. Concealed automatic weapons thwarted all the Americans' attempts at infiltration. At nightfall *30th Division's* headquarters ordered a complete withdrawal from Bardenberg to permit artillery to pummel the defenders without concern for hitting friendly troops.

Early the next day a fresh battalion from the *120th Infantry Regiment* again attacked into Bardenberg. This time there was hardly any resistance from the remnants of the German *49th Infantry Division* still there. By last light on the 11th, both Bardenberg and the route to Würselen were clear of Germans.

Late that same day, the first of the *116th Panzer Division's* regimental combat teams, drawn primarily from the *60th Panzergrenadier Regiment*, arrived along with two hybrid SS battle groups that in happier times had belonged to the *1st SS Panzer Division "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler."* Given the emergency situation at Bardenberg and the growing pressure on Würselen, the units of the *116th*, against von Rundstedt's proviso, were employed immediately as they arrived.

Brandenberger further reinforced *60th Panzergrenadier Regiment* with the SS battle groups, the remnants of the *108th Panzer Brigade*, and various small units drawn from all along the line during the night. This force began to attack toward Bardenberg just after dawn on 12 October. Its mission was to push back *19th Corps*, widening and then defending the German corridor leading into Aachen.

During the morning a crisis came upon the headquarters of the *US 30th Infantry Division* when its commander was told the latest German prisoners taken had been identified as belonging to the *116th* and *1st SS Panzer Divisions*. The officers at the American headquarters began talking in terms of "another Mortain," and the need to commandeer all available artillery, anti-aircraft and service troops to back up the line. The *30th's* commander claimed: "This is one of the decisive battles of the war!"

Even though anxiety was high at its headquarters, the men of the *30th* contained every German thrust made that morning. The Germans continued to look for a way in during the

afternoon, but were frustrated because the return of clear weather brought back hordes of enemy aircraft. As night came, the situation across *19th Corps* was again under control.

Despite its defensive success, however, it was becoming clear the *30th* couldn't finish the job of encircling Aachen on its own. Elements of *2nd Armored Division* and some corps engineers were rushed in as reinforcements. In addition, the *29th Infantry Division's 116th Regiment* was freed to move by placing other engineers into the line near Kerkrade.

On 13 October, the *US 116th Infantry Regiment* launched an attack through the streets and buildings of Würselen. Because coordination between the *116th's* infantry and the *2nd Armored Division's* tanks proved hard to achieve, only snail-like progress was made that day and the next. Also, by this point Würselen was being defended by the entire *60th Panzergrenadier Regiment*, along with elements of the divisional engineer and reconnaissance battalions. Tanks were dug into houses and concealed positions all through the town.

Even three dive-bombing missions and a time-on-target artillery barrage on 15 October failed to do the trick for the attackers. In three days the American attack at Würselen gained no more than 1,000 yards; a gap of more than a mile still lay between *19th* and *7th Corps*.

Soon after the surrender deadline expired in Aachen on 11 October, air strikes from fighter bombers opened the assault on the city. A huge artillery bombardment was also begun, with both efforts continuing on the 12th and 13th. But US patrols testing the defenses found no lessening of German fire. At the time about 27,000 civilians were still in the city, and their presence seemed to stiffen the soldiers' determination to hold the place. The US bombardment also generated lots of rubble that made operating motor vehicles difficult inside Aachen.

The US command wanted a quick victory at Aachen, but not if it had to be a Pyrrhic one. During the next few days the ground assault was begun with the *26th Infantry Regiment* nibbling away at the eastern suburb of Rothe Erde. Its actions there were supported by an OSS (Office of Strategic Services - the organizational ancestor of the CIA) company. That small unit was made up of US soldiers dressed in German uniforms and carrying German weapons. After some initial success, nearly the entire company was captured. (Unlike Otto Skorzeny's similar "Operation Greif" teams used by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge, the Americans of

the OSS units were not shot, but treated as regular POWs.)

The Germans missed a chance for success at this time by failing to detect the weak condition of the *18th Infantry Regiment's* defenses to the northeast of the city. Attacking to try to enlarge the corridor into Aachen early on the morning of the 15th, the Germans missed an extremely weak spot in the *18th's* lines by some 400 yards, moving instead against Verlautenheide. Forewarned by reports of the German assembly, both the *1st Infantry Division's* and the *7th Corps* artillery was ready.

The American defensive fire stopped the bulk of the attacking infantry, but a handful of Tigers got through, spreading panic among the defending riflemen. Several companies were overrun. The timely arrival of air support saved the day for the *16th*, completely collapsing the German effort. Some close-quarter fighting continued for the rest of the day, but continued heavy shelling prevented all German attempts to reinforce their effort.

To the US troops involved, this German attack appeared to be a powerful and well-prepared push; it shattered nerves among the commanders in more than one echelon of command. In reality, the thrust was a hasty compromise brought on after the capture of an American officer the night before. He was carrying several maps and other revealing documents, and Gen. Brandenberger immediately seized on them as reason enough to justify a quick effort against the *16th Regiment* before the information became stale. Thus what had been a comprehensive German plan forming for a large, coordinated counterattack became infected with the fungus of counterattack-by-installment, which soon frittered away what could have been an effective counterattacking force.

The headquarters of the *1st SS Panzer Corps*, which had just arrived on the scene on 11 October to oversee the operations of the *3rd Panzer-grenadier* and *116th Panzer Divisions*, quickly became superfluous, and was sent back on the 19th. The various German counterattacks had no common goals or coordination.

At intervals throughout 16 October, *3rd Panzer-grenadier Division's* formations continued to probe the *US 16th Infantry Regiment's* sector, but always just with small units of infantry supported by at most a handful of armor. Mounting losses then prompted the *3rd* to suspend its efforts until the division could regroup. In two days of fruitless fighting, the *3rd* had lost a third of its combat strength.

After seven frustrating days, *19th Corps* formed yet another plan for a link up attack on the *16th*. Instead of repeating the main attack with the *116th Infantry Regiment* inside Würselen, the *30th Infantry Division* launched diversionary efforts all along its front at 5:00 a.m. The Germans turned more and more of their guns and reserves against the *117th* and *120th Infantry Regiments* during the morning, while at 10:30 a.m. Köchling committed his last reserve, *SS Battle Group Bucher*, against the *117th* at Alsdorf.

But the main US effort that day was unleashed by the *119th Infantry Regiment* at Kohlscheid, then moving on to Würselen. There the attack was stopped by the *6th Luftwaffe Fortress Battalion* when the American tanks became stuck in the mud and the infantry couldn't go on alone. Again US close air support saved the American riflemen from being pushed back by a counterattack. After another afternoon of back and forth fighting, the *119th* got moving again



Delivering the US ultimatum to Aachen's garrison commander.

and at 4:15 p.m. achieved the long sought junction with *30th Division* troops, closing the German corridor into Aachen.

Assault on the City, 17-21 October

Von Rundstedt knew unless the *3rd Panzer-grenadier* and *116th Panzer Divisions* could quickly break the encirclement, Aachen was lost. Radioed cries of anguish from Wilck about the weakness of his garrison only heightened the old field marshal's concern.

Nazi propaganda broadcasts began declaring Aachen would become the "Allied Stalin-grad," but there were only 4,393 German effectives inside the pocket. Most were from Wilck's own *246th Volksgrenadier Division*, since the *526th Infantry Division* had practically ceased to exist. In addition, there were some local defense units, four tanks, eight assault guns, and *SS Battle*

Group Rink, which had been rushed into the city on 15 October to bolster the morale of the defenders by adding the presence of a few "elite" troops. Attempts by the Germans to break the encirclement on 17, 18 and 19 October again lacked coordination. Though some hard fighting occurred around Verlautenheide, no chance for a genuine breakthrough ever developed.

On the German side, losses continued to be severe during this phase. For example, one company of the *1st Infantry Division* reported counting 250 German dead in front of its positions during a single day, a daily figure previously unmatched in the division's history.

Attempts by the Aachen garrison to support the attacks from outside the ring also got nowhere. By nightfall on 19 October, von Rundstedt concluded the defenders of Aachen had to be left to their fate, and ordered the *3rd Panzer-grenadier Division*, by this time down to half-strength, to get ready to pull out.

Even the most fanatic German defenders inside the city now understood it was only a matter of time until Aachen's fall. The *US 26th Infantry Regiment* in fact conducted a slow and methodical advance, dividing its men into small assault teams, a tank or tank destroyer accompanying each platoon. The armor kept each building under heavy fire until the riflemen could move up to it and inside. Buildings strong enough to withstand tank fire were targeted with 155mm guns.

After one bitter experience in which some bypassed Germans in cellars and storm sewers emerged in the rear of a US attack team, the riflemen learned speed was less important than persistence. They no longer waited for actual targets to appear; each building, they assumed, was a nest of resistance until proved otherwise. The sewers were a special problem because each manhole had to be located, thoroughly blocked and covered. The litter and rubble made other problems, since handling vehicles inside the city became difficult, with tires on jeeps and trucks frequently going flat.

During 19 and 20 October, German resistance inside Aachen began to crumble when the central part of town was cut off from the western residential sectors. Thereafter German resistance was based only on unconnected local strongpoints, and by 12:05 p.m. on 21 October it was over. Because Wilck's communications had broken down, by that point he had definite knowledge of the whereabouts of only about 500 of his men. US troops therefore had to continue



Surrendering German troops.

to sweep back and forth through Aachen, rounding up other German defenders as they found them. The Germans admitted to 5,100 casualties of all types inside Aachen, including 3,473 taken prisoner.

Aftermath

Though the Germans were forced out of the Westwall in several places, had failed to prevent the encirclement of Aachen, and held out within the city for only five days after it was surrounded, the true measure of the battle from their standpoint came from the telling, costly delay inflicted on the American advance toward the Roer and Rhine Rivers. In so doing, the Germans lost two divisions and had eight more mauled, including three fresh infantry and one newly refitted armored divisions.

Still, the overall recovery of the Germans after the massive disasters of the summer must be rated as only a little short of miraculous. The expenditure of replacements and artillery ammunition around Aachen had worried the German high command, which was desperately trying to build up stocks for the planned Ardennes offensive. But it was worth it in that the US 1st Army was held up for a month and a half, and was made to suffer significant losses as well.

The events of the previous weeks had demonstrated to the Germans that during clear weather, large-scale ground movement, troop assembly, attack, counterattack and mobile defense operations were nearly impossible due to Allied air superiority and artillery strength. In such situations, local counterattacks proved to be the only way to stop an attacker superior in numbers and materiel.

But that reliance on local counterattacks also demonstrated how attrition had robbed the German army of its formerly outstanding field leadership. The equivalent of 20 battalions were used in counterattacks against the US 30th Infantry Division alone, yet in only one or two cases did any single effort involve more than two reinforced battalions. In addition, 81st Corps failed totally in trying to assemble and launch a single large counterattack, though at least two real opportunities occurred to do so.

A "Home for Christmas" drive to the Rhine and beyond was rendered totally impossible for the US Army during September and October 1944. But 7th Corps could have taken Aachen in mid-September, against only weak German opposition, had it gone directly in rather than trying to maneuver around it and into the Stolberg Corridor.

Besides the unexpectedly heavy losses taken at Aachen, which delayed the next planned Allied offensives and had a direct impact on the Battle of the Bulge, the fighting for that German city demonstrated to the US high command its forces still suffered from shortcomings in the execution of combined-arms operations. The overall conduct of operations was disconcertingly slow and conservative. As a result, 19th Corps' commander, Maj. Gen. Charles H. Corlett, was relieved by Hodges. The battle for Aachen clearly illustrates the problems that beset a military force weakened by lengthy pursuit, restrained by tightening supply lines, and confronted by an enemy who turns to fight inside strong natural and manmade barriers.

Aachen itself, since it was the first German city to fall to the Allies, was also the first to experience Allied military government. To assist them, they appointed an attorney, Franz Oppenhoff, as Burgermeister. He took the job even though he knew he would be considered a traitor by the Nazis until German was entirely conquered. His apprehensions proved correct, as he was found to have been murdered in his own home by a *Werwolf* commando in March 1945.

Finally, in May 1945, Aachen became part of the British zone of occupation, and so began yet another foreign occupation of Charlemagne's historic city. ☉

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Fighting for the Westwall

by Hubert Gees, as told to Dirk & Ulrich Blennemann

I was born in 1926 in Scharmede, a village in western Germany, and went through the National Socialist Youth Organization (*Jungvolk*) and the Hitler Youth (after age 14). My *Landjahr* (a year of compulsory agricultural service) began in April 1940. Then, on 1 September 1943, I began my time in the Reich Labor Service, a paramilitary organization wherein I was introduced to light infantry weapons.

When I finished my stint in the Labor Service, an official letter arrived ordering me to begin service in the army on 23 May 1944. I became a member of the *14th Company of Regiment 253* in Aachen, and was trained to become an infantry anti-tank man. In addition to being given infantry basic training, I learned to fire the 37mm, 50mm and 75mm anti-tank guns, along with panzerfausts (rocket-propelled anti-tank grenades) and bazookas, and how to lay anti-tank mines.

Our training ended on 20 August 1944, after less than three months. I was selected to attend an officers training course; however, before I had the chance to leave for that school, the alarm was sounded as the Americans approached. On 3 September, I became "Gunner No. 2" of a bazooka team in *Infantry Battalion 464*. We crossed the Dutch-German border on foot at Herzogenrath-Kerkrade. Our group of 20 soldiers, armed with *Panzerfausts*, bazookas and two light machine guns, was supposed to stop the onrushing American army!

In Belgium, at the Albert Canal near Maas-tricht, we dug in. But before we got in contact with the enemy, we were ordered to withdraw on 16 September, because on the previous day American troops had entered Maastricht from the southeast. We moved to Cas/Bunde, and there we were attacked by US tanks. Our small group suffered several casualties and simply ceased to exist. I was transferred to the *2nd Company of Fusilier Battalion Riedel* (named for its commander, Maj. Riedel), of the *275th Infantry Division*.

We again had to retreat, but on 20 September the front stabilized again near Geilen-

kirchen. Maj. Riedel got the order to withdraw his fatigued men to the rear. But we'd only just started to move away from the front when we got new orders: block the US *47th Regiment* of the *9th Infantry Division*, supported by tanks from the *3rd Armored Division*, advancing near Schevenhütte. We moved to a new wood and quickly built foxholes and trenches, but then nothing much happened.

In early October, our battalion, now often referred to as *Battle Group Riedel*, finally went back to a rest area near Gürzenich. But this rest also proved short, for on the evening of the 6th we were ordered forward again to conduct a counterattack in the Weisser Wehe Valley southwest of Hürtgen. Early the next day we were transported to Kleinhau, from where we moved on foot through Hürtgen and into the woods of the valley. There we awaited the signal announcing the beginning of our flank attack against the *39th Regiment* of the *9th Infantry Division*, which had broken through our front at Germeter the day before.

Altogether my company consisted of about 100 men, drawn from several different outfits. We had soldiers of the navy, air force and *Waffen SS*. We'd known each other for only a few days, which really decreased our effectiveness. Ages ranged from 17 to over 50. We all carried the *Gewehr 98k*, an outdated bolt-action rifle, but also had several MG34 and MG42s, some MP40s, and a few other assault rifles.

Our first objectives were some Westwall bunkers that had been captured by the Americans. When the NCOs gave the signal, we advanced. At first we encountered no opposition, but suddenly artillery, mortar and small arms fire started up. We took cover behind trees and answered with our machineguns. The Americans were well entrenched, and we couldn't go ahead any farther. Around midday the attack was called off and we carefully retreated to our starting positions. There we quickly dug in, getting ready for any US counterattacks. Luckily for us, no such attack materialized.

During the rainy night, American artillery fired some harassment rounds and I was unable to sleep much. The next day it became clear our attack had cost us 35 casualties in dead and wounded — more than a third of the company. The company commander, a Lt. Tatzel, was among the wounded.

On 8 October, two US tanks rolled into the rear of our line. One brave soldier knocked out one of them with a *Panzerfaust*, and then the crew of the other, unnerved, simply abandoned their vehicle and ran away.

Our line had no connection to that of the neighboring unit (the 3rd Battalion of Grenadier Regiment 860) on our right flank. We therefore pulled back 300 meters during the next few days. Our new position was a strong one. Trenches were strengthened by felled trees and made secure against tree bursts.

I became company runner, bringing messages and orders to and from battalion headquarters. Moving back to the battalion headquarters was dangerous because the American artillery was able to fire at parts of the trail. Our artillery fired only sporadically, on most days getting off only a single salvo around 6:00 p.m.

On 18 October we regrouped and moved to the eastern side of the Weisser Wehe. There the ground was partly solid rock, so it was difficult to dig in well. We immediately suffered casualties from artillery fire. Four days later we got 20 replacements. Unfortunately, coming from *Volksliste 3*, they spoke German only very badly. (*Volksliste 3* was made up of men from territories that had been given to Poland in 1918, and then taken over again by Germany in 1939.)

Now the Americans not only fired their artillery and mortars, but began dropping leaflets and broadcasting propaganda over loudspeakers. We were called on to desert and thereby hasten the war's end. But I'd taken my oath and didn't want to abandon my comrades. Sometimes a V-1 roaring loudly overhead would give us hope the new "wonder weapons" would change the course of the war after all. But then the replacements from *Volksliste 3* simply left their foxholes one night and disappeared.

On 30 October we regrouped again. This time the company moved to a position in front of the Wittscheidt sawmill, which had been occupied by the Americans. In the morning of 2 November, the artillery grew more and more intense until it was a full fledged bombardment. Then abruptly it stopped. Immediately we heard infantry weapons firing. The US infantry had broken through our front line and rolled up our

3rd Platoon, partly attacking us from the rear. One NCO and I got the order to go back to battalion headquarters and explain the situation. We moved out quickly.

Suddenly we saw another group of soldiers only about 20 paces in front of us. I thought they were Germans, but the NCO cried: "Amis!" Before the equally surprised Americans could shoot us down, we ran. The NCO was hit in the elbow, but we escaped. So the NCO had a nice *Heimatschuss* (go home wound), which allowed him to be taken to the rear, away from the killing.

During the next few days the Americans continued their advance, but their further attempts to break into our rear area were unsuccessful. Our engineers laid a minefield that helped us a lot. On 4 November the first counterattacks by parts of the newly arrived 116th Panzer Division began.

Three days later, the new company commander, Lt. Lengfeld, ordered me and two others to accompany him on a reconnaissance tour



Hubert Gees in 1944.



Hubert Gees recently visited one of his old haunts in the Westwall: the last command post of his unit before he was taken prisoner.

of the position we'd left on 2 November. We all got submachineguns, then we cautiously moved back to the abandoned position, where we found many dead comrades still unburied. We were also able to see Americans building an entrenchment. Then we withdrew without making contact.

Our company had only 45 men remaining. And not only the enemy was proving dangerous — particularly his snipers — but also the weather. Temperatures dropped, rain and snow poured down, and we were unable to change our clothes.

On 9 November I became a member of another four-man reconnaissance troop. Again it was our task to learn something about the doings of the American soldiers opposite our line. We advanced slowly and carefully. Suddenly a voice shouted: "Halt!" We dove down, and for a short moment there was complete silence. Then a submachinegun fired and we hastily retreated. I hadn't spotted any US soldiers, but the guy who'd led our patrol told me we'd bumped into

an American patrol that was apparently surprised by meeting us too.

Next morning everybody could hear the cries of a wounded GI: "Help me!" Lt. Lengfeld ordered me to tell our machinegun crew not to shoot at any American soldiers trying to rescue their comrade. But no such rescue team arrived and the cries continued. Lengfeld then formed a rescue team himself at about 11:00 a.m. But before we reached the wounded American, the lieutenant tripped on a mine. Badly wounded, he died the following night. I don't know what happened to the American, we never got to him.

Somewhere between 12 and 14 November, I can't remember exactly when any more, German tanks, assault guns and artillery fired at the American position opposite us for half an hour. We remained in our entrenchments to avoid being hit by our own shrapnel. After that short barrage we attacked. But the US soldiers had abandoned their line and retreated about 300 meters. We occupied their former positions without a fight and found rifles, machineguns, bazookas and lots of food and cigarettes they'd left behind. But we also found piles of dead Germans, the men killed in the American attack on the 4th.

On 17 November, together with three comrades, I carried back a dead soldier to the forester's house at Hürtgen. Another comrade went a few meters in front of us to look for the best way through the mines. Suddenly a detonation shook the earth. He'd tripped a mine and was killed immediately. Then as we got to within about 200 meters of the forester's house, strong American artillery fire began. We dropped down where we were, but when a pause came I rose long enough to jump into a shell crater, landing right on top of a dead American.

Luckily, we reached the cellar of the forester's house. When the artillery stopped, we heard infantry weapons about 300 meters to our front. A short time later, five or six captured GIs were herded into the cellar with us. One of them got his wound treated, then they were sent farther back.

This new US attack had overrun large parts of our positions. Our new company commander, Lt. Heer, got the order to counterattack after dark to retake our original line. Our company was now down to only 18 men, but our counterattack met no opposition. Apparently the Americans had withdrawn after dark. For only 18 men our armament was impressive: five machineguns, several submachineguns, and lots of grenades. Then during the night our engi-

neers placed some more mines. They only told us they were about 50 meters in front of us; we didn't know their exact placement or pattern.

The next morning I noticed two men moving at a distance of about 60 meters. I took a hand grenade and waited for a mine to go off. They were two GIs advancing slowly but directly toward my entrenchment. No mine detonated. When they were about 30 meters away, I flung the grenade, then two more quickly after it. Then my comrade opened up with our machinegun. Suddenly other German machineguns began to fire. Then our artillery started too. One artillery round fell short, only about five meters in front of us. I became deaf until evening. The US attack never broke through that day.

Two or three days later we received news the Americans had overrun the headquarters of our neighboring company. We had to retreat in order to avoid encirclement. Only a dozen men moved to our new positions where we were supposed to reinforce another company. On the way to the new position, another of us was killed by mortar fire.

The problem in the new position, about 500 meters from Vossenack, was that neither we nor the Americans seemed to know each others' exact locations. We were surprised to see a group of GIs moving only 200 meters in front of us quite carelessly. But they were lucky, because our small arms fire started up too late to catch them properly. We also had no contact with the company on our left. We could hear the sound of intense fighting back toward our former position between Wittscheidt and the forester's house. The US infantry was attacking somewhere over that way supported by Thunderbolt ground attack planes.

During the evening of 26 November, we received orders to leave our positions and march in small groups to Hürtgen. We got a hot reception there the next day when American artillery fired accurately into the town. With three comrades I moved into the cellar of the forestry department building opposite a church. The building was badly damaged, but we felt safe in its well built cellar. We lost contact with the rest of the company, but resolved not to worry about it for the time being.

After we ate, we laid down to sleep — without bothering to set up a guard schedule. We were tired and fell asleep quickly. But then one of my comrades woke me up, whispering: "Keep quiet! There are Amis in the house!"

He was right; I could hear English being spoken. I heard a lot of different voices, so there



Hubert Gees today.

must've been a lot of other Americans outside. I didn't know what we should try to do. We could try to sneak out the window, but we'd probably make too much noise. We could storm up the steps; the Americans would probably have been surprised by an attack from the cellar, but then what? There were too many of them.

I was stilling thinking when the cellar door began to slowly open. We didn't move or breath. Then the door suddenly closed again. Then it suddenly opened again a few seconds later, and this time GIs outside began shining their flashlights inside. One of them saw us and shouted: "Hands up!" We became prisoners of war. ★

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