

THE ATTACK WILL GO ON  
THE 317<sup>TH</sup> INFANTRY REGIMENT IN WORLD WAR II

A Thesis

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## INTRODUCTION

The 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of today is an Army reserve unit that conducts initial entry training in Virginia, but it has not always been that way. The regiment had its beginnings in World War I when it fought as a subordinate unit of the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry “Blue Ridge” Division.<sup>1</sup> The War Department ranked the 80<sup>th</sup> first among all National Army Divisions before its demobilization on June 2, 1919.<sup>2</sup> The shoulder patch consists of three ridges symbolic of the “Blue Ridge” states represented in World War I: Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. The motto of the 317<sup>th</sup>, *Armis et Animis* (By Arms and Courage), would prove an accurate maxim.<sup>3</sup> Currently, only one book exists that covers the regimental accomplishments during World War II. The book, *317<sup>th</sup> Infantry History, European Theater of Operations*, is a compilation of the daily reports and only covers the unit’s combat details. Although not much was written about the unit, it accomplished a great deal during its year in combat. The valiant men who fought in its ranks compiled an outstanding record of achievements.

The remarkable trek of the 317<sup>th</sup> through World War II did not begin until a full seven months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The regiment trained for two years before it would see actual combat. Two months after D-Day, the unit joined

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<sup>1</sup> 80<sup>th</sup> Division, Institutional Training HomePage, <http://www.usarc.army.mil/80thDiv/>

<sup>2</sup> Edgar E. Bredbenner, Jr., *80th “Blue Ridge” Infantry Division*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Murrell, *317th Infantry History, European Theater of Operations*, p. 1.

General George S. Patton, Jr. in France and became an instrumental part of the Allied success. The infantrymen assisted in closing the gap at Falaise and spearheaded Third Army's attack on Nancy, which resulted in what many consider Patton's first "bloody nose" at the Moselle. The soldiers sat through the logistics shortfall that stopped the Third Army's advance during the "October Pause" in the fall of 1944. During November, the men suffered through the mud, muck, and mire as they moved through the Maginot Line and prepared to attack Hitler's West Wall.

In mid-December, German forces attacked in the Ardennes forest with twenty-five divisions, and eventually surrounded the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division at the crucial crossroads town of Bastogne. Although the paratroopers felt they did not need to be saved, the 317<sup>th</sup> was one of the first units to begin the movement north to the Battle of the Bulge. Many veterans recall the harsh coldness of this Christmas as the worst time in their life. The regiment continued fighting through January 1945 until some units became "defunct."

When Third Army resumed the offensive in February, so did the regiment. On Valentine's Day, 1945, it entered the Fatherland, moved rapidly through the Eifel and Palatinate regions, and crossed the Rhine River. The infantrymen literally cut Germany in half. During this time, they overran the horrible concentration camps that were Hitler's answer to the "Jewish question." They moved rapidly, sometimes straight down the autobahn, through Nürnberg, and into Austria.

It was in Austria, as the 317<sup>th</sup> was on the verge of a ferocious battle that the war ended and the regiment fell into the role of occupation force, charged with disarming the Germans while maintaining law and order. In January 1946, the unit officially

deactivated, three and a half years after reactivation. Retired Colonel James Hayes, the regiment's senior surviving member, and one of the few who joined at its very beginning in 1942, has summarized well the 317<sup>th</sup> experience:

The history books do not say a great deal about the 317th Infantry. However, it was a regiment that accomplished rather startling results: first bridgehead across the Moselle, cleared out La Grande Couronne de Nancy, participated in the capture of Metz -- the first time in history that the fort had ever fallen to an assault, and, of course, participated in the Battle of the Bulge as one of the first regiments to arrive in the area after the German assault had broken the line. It suffered extremely severe casualties and contained some of the best men I have ever known.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Colonel James Hayes, e-mail to author (December 19, 2001).

## CHAPTER 1

### TRAINING FOR WAR: JULY 15, 1942 – JULY 26, 1944

“All I can do is pray to beat Hell. The attack will go on”  
General George S. Patton Jr.

At dawn on September 1, 1939, Germany’s invasion of Poland started World War II. Over the next few months Hitler’s Blitzkrieg crushed Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland and Belgium. It then took a mere six weeks to flatten France. By autumn of 1940, 300 divisions of the Nazi Army stood along the English Channel ready for battle. At this time, the American ground fighting forces consisted of twenty-eight poorly equipped and partially organized divisions, of which only ten were regular army.<sup>1</sup> By the time America joined the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Germany had conquered most of Europe and stunned the world.

America attempted to expand its poorly equipped and trained armed forces. In March 1942, the War Department created the Army Ground Forces and gave it the responsibility for training the new divisions. America fielded thirty-five new divisions in 1942, of which twenty-six were infantry. The Army Ground Forces developed an effective program to organize and train new recruits and prepare them for war. The first step was to assign a cadre of veteran officers and enlisted men before the division’s activation. The training cycle commenced on the first day of activation. New infantry divisions activated before November 1942, such as the 80<sup>th</sup>, followed a basic model

consisting of forty-four weeks conducted in three phases – individual, unit, and then combined arms training.<sup>2</sup> The overall preparation of a division lasted a year and followed six basic guidelines:

1. That a unit should be trained as a unit rather than as a group of separate individuals. This fosters teamwork.
2. That the troop commander himself was responsible for training rather than the specialist who might actually conduct it. This to foster the idea of personal leadership.
3. Emphasis on general military proficiency. This to make the soldier first, the technician later.
4. Rigid performance tests on successive training phases. These to ensure uniformity, early adjustment to exacting standards, and the earliest efficient completion of the training mission.
5. Free maneuvers of large units of the combined arms, with realistic umpiring, and under conditions as closely as possible approaching battle.
6. Realism. The use of more than 687,365 tons of live ammunition, and life-sized maneuver areas were concrete expressions of this fundamental requirement.<sup>3</sup>

Upon completion, the division participated in large-scale training. Overall, the Army Ground Forces conducted twenty-seven separate maneuvers in several areas throughout the United States and upon their completion, higher headquarters deemed the division ready for combat.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> General Jacob L. Devers, *Report of Activities, Army Ground Forces, World War II*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Robert R. Palmer, Bell I. Wiley, and William R. Keast, *The Army Ground Forces: The Procurement of Ground Combat Troops*, p. 432-433.

<sup>3</sup> Kent R. Greenfield, Robert R. Palmer, and Bell I. Riley, *The Army Ground Forces: The Organization of Ground Combat Troops*, p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> Palmer et al, *AGF: The Procurement of Ground Combat Troops* p. 443.



In July 1942, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel attempted to break through the British Eighth Army in Egypt. British General Claude Auchinleck eventually stopped Rommel's forces at the first Battle of El Alamein. The conflict marked a turning point for the Allies in the North African campaign. As the battle raged, the 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, along with its parent unit, the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, rejoined the Army's active units on July 15, 1942 to begin its preparation for World War II. Major General Joseph D. Patch, the division commander, signed General Order Number 1 at one-minute past noon to reactivate the division.

The 317<sup>th</sup> immediately began receiving recruits at Camp Forrest, Tennessee. The mission was to mold recruits and draftees into a skilled fighting force capable of outperforming the Wehrmacht in Europe. Very few veterans were in the regiment and new citizen-soldiers packed its ranks. The troops were a representation of most of America - farmers, coal-miners, and blue-collar workers. Men who had never picked up a weapon now learned how to shoot-to-kill. The War Department designed the training to be as tough and realistic as possible and hence it was sometimes dangerous. "Well, somebody's going to get hurt," remarked Ira Miller, one of the original officers in the 317<sup>th</sup>.<sup>5</sup> Miller later died fighting the Germans in Kehman.

On April 18, 1943 the soldiers training at Camp Forrest received a pleasant surprise. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt arrived to participate in the review of the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Richard Radock remembered that day well:

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<sup>5</sup> Colonel James Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss). Colonel Hayes wrote an autobiography for his family, which included several detailed chapters on the war. The author received one of only five copies in existence. The pages are not numbered.

Before the inspection, the secret service agents checked all the weapons and artillery pieces, mortars, etc. to make sure they were not loaded. After the parade and inspection, the President said that he was very proud of us and wished us well. It was a great honor for me to participate in this event and one of the most memorable experiences of my life.<sup>6</sup>

In mid-June, the 317<sup>th</sup> finished its year-long training at Camp Forrest and departed for large-scale maneuvers designed to sharpen its battle-axes. The troops trained alongside thousands of others during the Tennessee Maneuvers near Murfreesboro.<sup>7</sup> The geography of the maneuver area gave the infantrymen a chance to practice the art of war in an environment similar to the European terrain on which they would one day fight.<sup>8</sup> The exercise was a grueling challenge in command and control, which pushed the soldiers to their mental and physical limits. The training turned men into regiments and regiments into divisions prepared to defeat the enemy. The maneuvers began as a series of marches and counter-marches while commanders gained experience in moving units around the battlefield. Leaders and soldiers learned how to work as a unit and live in the field, and, by the time it was over, the men felt ready to wage war with the enemy. As Lieutenant James H. Hayes, the G Company commander, recalled,

Maneuvers, we soon found out, require the expenditure of tremendous amounts of energy . . . . During one of the Tennessee Maneuvers, my company had marched and fought without rest for 72 hours. We had marched incessantly, had always taken the initiative against the "enemy" . . . . We

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<sup>6</sup> Edgar E. Bredbenner, Jr., *80th "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division*, p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> *The Story of the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*. The author received this pamphlet without a cover or copyright information.

<sup>8</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 13.

were tired, bedraggled and thoroughly exhausted. Moreover, we had not eaten for about twenty-four hours because of a breakdown in the battalion supply system . . . [W]e had captured many of the enemy, seized an important hill for artillery observation, and had acquitted ourselves in an outstanding manner.<sup>9</sup>

Hayes was the only graduate of the West Point class of 1942 assigned to the regiment.

He had volunteered to join the 80<sup>th</sup> Division because the rumor was that it was going to Europe. He eventually commanded two of the three battalions before departing Europe.

Upon completion of the Tennessee Maneuvers in August 1943, the 317<sup>th</sup> moved to the cold, windswept plains of Camp Phillips, Kansas for more training. The rolling landscape was unlike any terrain the infantrymen would face in Europe; however, the bitter cold and lack of proper cold-weather equipment foreshadowed difficulties in Europe. Newly promoted to captain, Hayes summed up the Camp Phillips experience:

Winds blew across the camp at what seemed to us to be hurricane force and the camp appeared to us to be a huge icebox specifically constructed by the War Department to haze us. We did not have the proper equipment for the temperatures we had to endure so we simply suffered in silence. Had we but known, the situation we encountered at Camp Phillips came to haunt us in December of 1944 when we first entered the Battle of the Bulge.<sup>10</sup>

In mid-November, the 317<sup>th</sup> traded the frigid Kansas landscape for the blazing inferno of the California-Arizona Maneuver Area. The War Department converted this area to a model theater of operations that permitted divisions to devote thirteen weeks to

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<sup>9</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once*, (mss).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

“post-graduate” training in the most realistic scenario outside of actual combat.<sup>11</sup> The desert environment gave the soldiers a sample of what the British “Desert Rats” faced against Rommel’s Afrika Corps. The heat reached 125 degrees and the sand infiltrated everything. As expected, the training was grueling and many soldiers believed it more intense than combat itself.<sup>12</sup> The increased need for units overseas resulted in the closure of the California-Arizona Maneuver Area in April 1944. The 80<sup>th</sup> was one of only twenty divisions trained at that site.<sup>13</sup>

Judged ready for combat, the Blue Ridge Division, including the 317<sup>th</sup>, said goodbye to the grueling heat of the desert and headed east, eventually to war in Europe. The soldiers initially deployed to Fort Dix on April 5, and then to Camp Kilmer, both in New Jersey. As they waited, news spread about the Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, D-Day in Europe. After midnight on July 1, the soldiers boarded a troop train and moved to the Queen Mary for the ocean voyage to Europe. Six days later, the 317<sup>th</sup> was in Greenock, Scotland. As the soldiers stepped off the boat, the extraordinary melody of a performing group of bagpipers and the advance party from the 80<sup>th</sup> greeted them. It was now D-Day plus 32.

The 317<sup>th</sup> immediately boarded trains for travel to Aston, where the lack of training space surprised many.<sup>14</sup> England was a repository for all types of equipment headed to France, which left very little room for the large-scale maneuvers to which the soldiers were accustomed. The soldiers began final preparations for the impending

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<sup>11</sup> Palmer et al, *AGF: The Procurement of Ground Combat Troops*, p. 450.

<sup>12</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Palmer et al. *AGF: The Procurement of Ground Combat Troops*, p. 470.

<sup>14</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 15.

combat in France. One day, wounded soldiers from a nearby hospital addressed the regiment on fighting conditions. “Most of us did not appreciate the impact of what these men told us until, of course, we ourselves entered into combat,” noted Hayes, now a major and regimental intelligence officer. “Then we realized that intuition, luck and a constant effort to reconnoiter and gather information were indispensable ingredients for victory and survival.”<sup>15</sup>

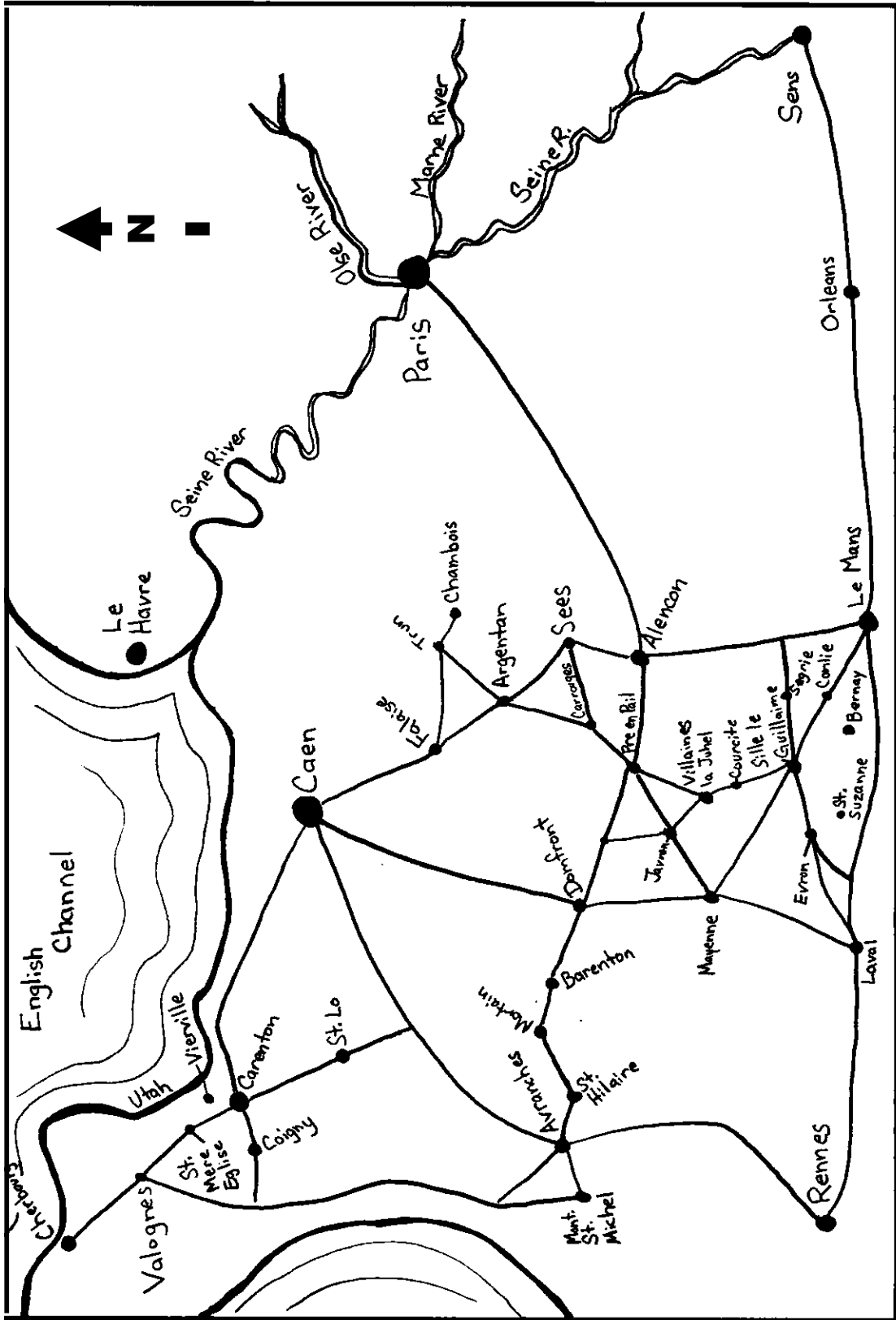
On July 14, 1944, Major General Horace L. McBride marked the division's second anniversary of reactivation with General Order Number 14. McBride, a West Point graduate from the class of 1916, had been a field artillery battalion commander in World War I and was the division artillery commander before his promotion to commanding general in March 1943.<sup>16</sup> This day, he told the men they were standing on the threshold of combat as a mature, well-trained fighting force and that the Germans would soon test the effectiveness of their training. Meanwhile, the training went on.<sup>17</sup>

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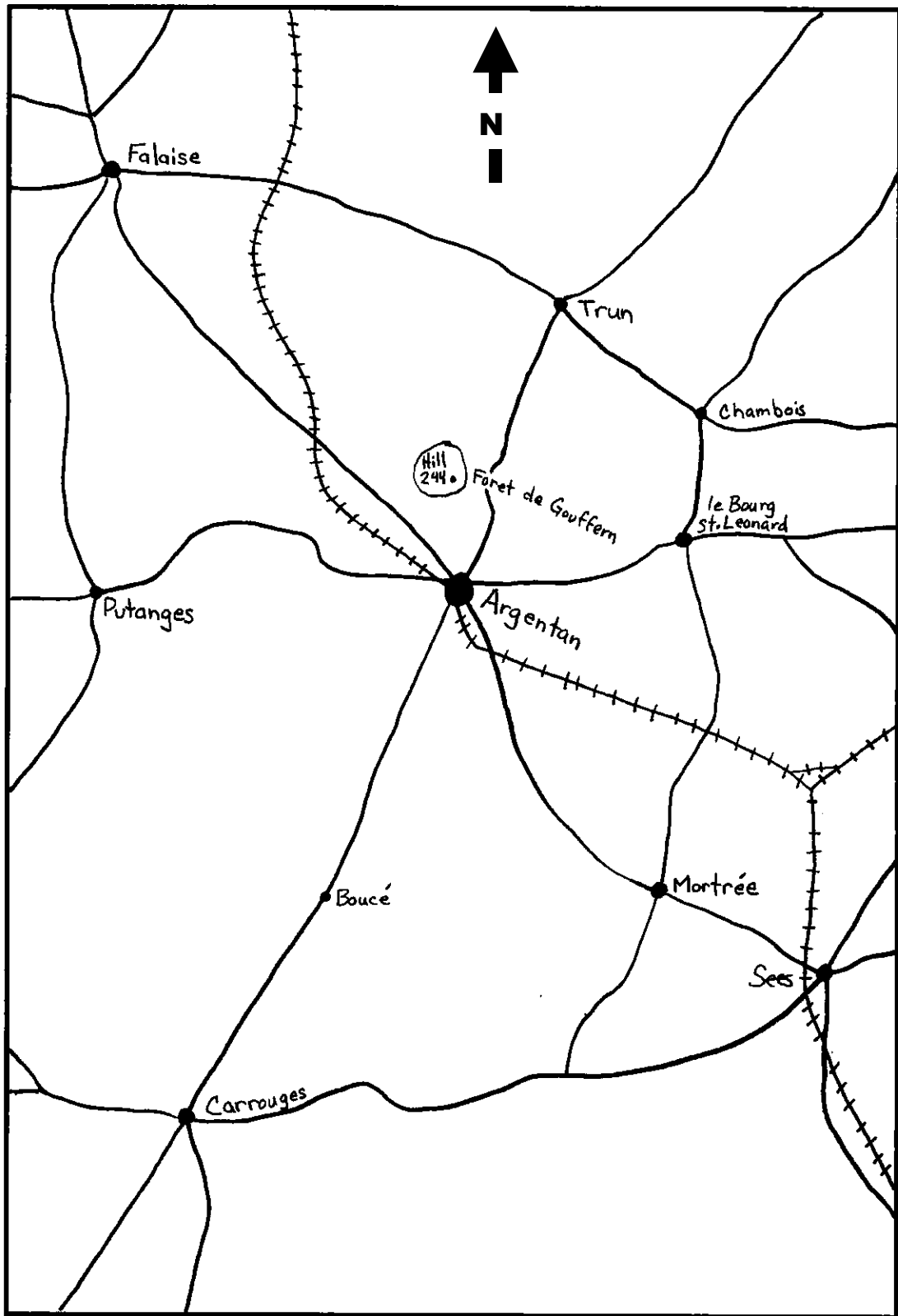
<sup>15</sup>Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once*, (mss).

<sup>16</sup> Hugh M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup>Murrell, *317th History*, p. 2.



Map 1 - Utah Beach to Sens, France



Map 2 - The Falaise Gap

## CHAPTER 2

### VIVE LA FRANCE! JULY 26 - AUGUST 22, 1944

By the third week in July 1944, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, judged the Allied forces ready to launch an all-out attack to break through and destroy the enemy in France. “By throwing all our weight into an offensive at this stage,” Eisenhower wrote, “I felt confident that we should not only achieve our objectives but that, in the long run, the cost of our victory would be the less.”<sup>1</sup> The 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment deployed to France just as General George S. Patton’s Third Army broke out of the Normandy area. The soldiers experienced combat for the first time as they assisted in closing the German escape route at Falaise.

On July 26, the 317<sup>th</sup> received orders to move to Southampton for a twenty-one hour voyage to Utah Beach in Normandy: the advance party departed the next day. Third Army became operational with four corps under its command on August 1, and Eisenhower gave Patton the mission to secure the peninsula and its ports.<sup>2</sup> The next day, D-Day plus 57, the lead elements of the 317<sup>th</sup> landed on the coast and bivouacked in the area of Vareville. Over the next four days, the remainder of the regiment’s 147 officers, five warrant officers, and 3,036 enlisted men arrived in France.<sup>3</sup> They landed on one of

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<sup>1</sup> General Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Report by Supreme Commander on Operations in Europe*, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Mary H. Williams, *Special Studies: Chronology 1941-1945*, p. 240.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Murrell, *History of the 317th Infantry, E.T.O.*, p. 2.



the causeways constructed after the invasion and then moved to an area near Coigny, where they encountered some of war's grim reminders. As Major Hayes recalled:

All of us immediately noticed that the assembly area into which the 317<sup>th</sup> moved had a peculiar and unforgettable odor: dead men who had begun to decay. Once smelled, the stench of a decaying body is never forgotten. In the next ten months that stench stayed in my nostrils as if it would never go away. Those first dead bodies reminded me of something odd. Dead men's eyes are open, unlike Hollywood where the dead die gracefully.<sup>4</sup>

Donald R. Smith of Alliance, Ohio reflected on the mortality of war. "I thought everything up until then was a big game," the G Company jeep driver remembered, "but when I saw three dead men all swelled up and stinking, that was when I realized that the war was for real."<sup>5</sup> Lester Kuhnert of Enhaut, Pennsylvania had a similar reaction. "I can still see the long line of single-file troops going up to the hill to Saint Mère-Eglise," he later remembered. "The sight of unburied decomposing German soldiers is a reoccurring vision in my memory. I can still see our broken gliders and seeing hundreds of poles in the ground which the Germans seemed to erect overnight by Rommel's defense."<sup>6</sup>

On August 7, General Patton received reports that several Panzer divisions would attack towards Avranches. "Personally I thought this a German bluff to cover a withdrawal," he wrote. "However, I stopped the 80<sup>th</sup> . . . in the vicinity of Saint Hilaire in

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<sup>4</sup> Colonel James Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once*, (mss).

<sup>5</sup> Edgar E. Bredbenner, Jr., *80<sup>th</sup> "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division*, p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 143.

case something should happen.”<sup>7</sup> Division received its first battle orders that day directing it to stop the Germans from encircling Third Army and cutting off its supply lines. In preparation, the 317<sup>th</sup> moved north of Avranches. Hayes felt that the 317<sup>th</sup> had a rendezvous with fate and death. As he moved through the town, he reflected on what the killing meant:

I noticed a dead German in the middle of the road. Vehicle after vehicle had passed over this poor soldier until he became shapeless and flat. I remember ordering my driver to try to avoid him. The memory of this flattened German infantryman remains as one of the vignettes of the war. I had, oddly, no feeling for him as a human being. He was an enemy.<sup>8</sup>

The 317<sup>th</sup> reached Saint Hilaire on August 8 and found the town in shambles. Remnants of houses stood as simple piles of rubble with only jagged remnants of walls remaining. The roads were shell-pocked and the dead, animals and humans alike, littered the fields. During the drive south, Hayes found the destruction almost elegiac:

[F]lashes of light from thousands of artillery pieces illuminated the sky as if huge lightning bolts were striking the battle area. We continued south through the countryside and through many small, demolished, and deserted towns. Fingers of bricks grasped for the darkened sky as if praying for the right to continue to allow their town to continue to exist. The smell of death reached into our nostrils. Dead horses, dead men, and ruined equipment littered the roadside. We could occasionally see a dead man grinning in the moonlight. I felt like I had entered into a part of Dante's Inferno.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> General George S. Patton Jr., *War As I Knew It*, p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once*, (mss).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

The next evening, division headquarters ordered the 317<sup>th</sup> to attack and seize Evron in order to protect the left and rear flanks of Patton's XV Corps as it moved rapidly across France.<sup>10</sup> The weather was pleasant as the regiment moved to an assembly area south of town in preparation for the battle. Fortunately for the infantrymen, the enemy evacuated the town without a fight.<sup>11</sup> The soldiers would have to wait for their first combat experience, but not long.

As the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion held Evron, the remainder of the combat team (Company A, 702<sup>nd</sup> Tank Battalion, and C Company, 710<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion) loaded trucks and moved twenty-five miles to the southeast to attack Conlie, a small town astride the main highway linking Mayenne and Le Mans. This would be the regiment's first true test in combat. The soldiers unloaded at Bernay, moved northeast and, by 10:00 p.m., Conlie was in their hands.<sup>12</sup> The attack on Conlie resulted in 317<sup>th</sup>'s first casualties, a result mainly of misunderstood passwords and nervous sentries, and the loss of comrades made a deep impression on the soldiers. The next day, as they walked by a dead German sniper, each fired one or more rounds into the body.<sup>13</sup>

On August 11, the regiment received the order to seize Sille-le-Guillaume.<sup>14</sup> Company C held Conlie while the remainder of the regiment attacked the high ground southeast of "Silly William." The infantrymen took their objective in the rain, captured numerous prisoners, and smashed a German radio station. By nightfall, the 317<sup>th</sup> held a

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, p. 497.

<sup>11</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once*, (mss).

<sup>14</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 16.

line from Evron, through Saint Suzanne to Segrie, then south to Conlie.<sup>15</sup> The skirmishes quickly turned the infantrymen into seasoned combat veterans.

As the 317<sup>th</sup> assaulted Sille-le-Guillaume, Third Army ordered XX Corps to assemble on the Mayenne-Le Mans line for an attack to the northeast to secure the Sées-Carrouges line, an objective previously assigned to the XV Corps. Third Army believed that German reinforcements were moving into the area around Le Mans, Alencón, and Sées, and corps headquarters assigned the task to the 80<sup>th</sup> and ordered the operation to begin on the morning of August 13. Division Field Order Number 4 listed the Argentan-Sées railroad as its objective.<sup>16</sup>

The 317<sup>th</sup> concentrated at Evron and moved by truck to Alencón with instructions to destroy enemy en route. The convoy moved through Courcite to the outskirts of Villaines-la-Juhel before running into a roadblock and a minefield. The soldiers mounted tanks and then rode into Pré-en-Pail. The awaiting Germans opened fire and knocked five soldiers off the tanks. The G.I.'s immediately dismounted and moved forward into a German artillery barrage, proceeding methodically from house to house until, by mid-afternoon, they had control of Pré-en-Pail. A German counterattack that evening failed to dislodge the Americans.<sup>17</sup>

While the regiment fought for Pré-en-Pail, the 318<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment became entangled with the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division due to the fluid situation on the battlefield. Major General Horace McBride, commander of the 80<sup>th</sup>, radioed both regiments and told them to “halt in place, clear road, bivouac present position for night . . . , and await

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<sup>15</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, p. 514.

further orders.”<sup>18</sup> On August 14, he personally directed both regiments back to Evron. The 317<sup>th</sup> shuttled twenty-eight miles from Pré-en-Pail to the Evron area and remained there for two days.<sup>19</sup>

Near Falaise, an escape route existed between the British and American forces known as the “Falaise Gap.”<sup>20</sup> The Germans were fighting a desperate rear-guard action to save their Seventh Army from envelopment.<sup>21</sup> On August 12, Hitler consented to Field Marshall Günther von Kluge’s request to withdraw to the east. General Omar Bradley was wary of closing the gap because he feared it would endanger his “Argentan shoulder.” Originally, he wanted Patton to make a run east for the Seine River, but based on the advice of British General Bernard Montgomery, he decided to close the gap at Chambois instead.<sup>22</sup> Later, Patton explained that the plan to close the Falaise Gap was an unexpected extemporization by Bradley. “I thought we were going east,” Patton wrote, “and he told me to move north.”<sup>23</sup>

On August 16, Bradley directed Patton to capture the town of Trun in order to close the gap and trap the Germans.<sup>24</sup> Corps headquarters released the 317<sup>th</sup> from

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<sup>17</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, p. 514.

<sup>19</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> *Story of the 80<sup>th</sup> Division*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> General Omar Bradley, *A Soldier’s Story*, p. 376.

<sup>23</sup> Patton, quoted in General Omar N. Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General’s Life*, p. 295.

<sup>24</sup> Patton, *War as I Knew It*, p. 109.

reserve<sup>25</sup> and the regiment moved to Alencón in preparation for the attack. Late the following night, the 317<sup>th</sup> helped seize the high ground northeast of Argentan, then swung southwest to take the city. Hitler ordered Field Marshall Walther Model, Kluge's replacement, to fight to the last man to keep the Allies from crossing the Seine River.<sup>26</sup> The 116<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division defended Argentan and General Heinz Guderian, the German Army High Command chief of staff, wrote:

Fortunately, from August 15-17, the opponent was inactive near the nucleus of the defensive position, Argentan. The town, however, was constantly under artillery fire . . . . Mostly beautiful summer weather assisted the [Allied] pilots in their work. Shocking scenes of destruction could be seen along the two miserable roads that were still available for the German troops' use.<sup>27</sup>

On the morning of August 18, the 318<sup>th</sup> spearheaded the division's assault on Argentan, but unfortunately the attack failed. "The attacking regiment suffered heavy losses," according to Guderian.<sup>28</sup> The 318<sup>th</sup> tried again the next morning after a massive artillery barrage. As the rain stopped and the sun rose, a seven-battalion artillery barrage attempted to reduce the German lines.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately for the 318<sup>th</sup>, the Germans were prepared and the assault again stalled. Later in the afternoon, the 317<sup>th</sup> attacked with the support of C Company, 610<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyers. The German combined-arms defense

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<sup>25</sup> Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, p. 541.

<sup>26</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Heinz G. Guiderian, *From Normandy to the Ruhr with the 116th Panzer Division in World War II*, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 84.

<sup>29</sup> Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, p. 534.

held the 317<sup>th</sup> back until the tank destroyers, artillery, and anti-tank company zeroed in on the enemy locations.<sup>30</sup>

Private First Class Hoyt T. Rowell, a medic from E Company, won the division's first World War II Distinguished Service Cross in the bloody battle. Under a hail of enemy bullets and artillery, Rowell, a native of Buchanan, Georgia, went to the aid of two companies. Friendly artillery fire began dropping too close, so he raced across an open field to an artillery observer who shifted the incoming fire away from the injured soldiers. Rowell then returned across the open field to render aid to the wounded.<sup>31</sup>

By the end of the day, the Foret de Gouffern, northeast of Argentan, remained in enemy hands. The 317<sup>th</sup> dug in for the night on the south and east sides of the town. Suddenly, around midnight, the town erupted to over seven battalions of American artillery firing five volleys each. The incoming rounds set the town ablaze and the shell-shocked Germans hastily evacuated through the forest.<sup>32</sup>

The next morning, the 317<sup>th</sup>, along with A Company, 702<sup>nd</sup> Tank Battalion, resumed the offensive. The regiment attacked Hill 244 overlooking the Argentan-Trun Highway in the Foret de Gouffern. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's assault ended across the western slope of Hill 244. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion struck directly from the south, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion attacked Argentan from the northeast after following the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion towards Hill 244. Enemy resistance on the hill was daunting. Both E and G Companies eventually reached the top, but not before taking heavy casualties. Private First Class Earl Goins of E Company earned the Distinguished Service Cross during the battle by sprinting through

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<sup>30</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 20.

heavy enemy fire to single-handedly silence a machinegun that had halted E Company's advance.<sup>33</sup> Hayes described the combat and its effects:

At Argentan, the battle turned into a nighttime affair. Night became snapshots of horrors as shells exploded and guns flashed. By the time the morning came, the battlefield contained the grisly results of numerous individual hand-to-hand combats. One German halftrack, I remember, had tried to escape down a road that the 317<sup>th</sup> controlled. As the halftrack passed one of the squads of G Company several grenades were thrown into it. The half dozen or so Germans in the vehicle were blown, literally, into bits and pieces. Arms, legs and parts of torsos filled the halftrack and blood drenched its sides and floor . . . . We immediately saw that the flow of combat induced adrenaline did strange things to the body. Some men were exhilarated (as I was); other men simply fell apart from fear; a few men became "shell-shocked" or more euphemistically "battle fatigued." Whatever the reactions, things did not work as well as they had in maneuvers. Officers had to be relieved because they could not cope. Communications did not work because shellfire and tank movements ruined telephone wires (we still communicated by phone in those days rather than by radio). Men got lost or killed and the dead did not return to duty the following morning as they did on maneuvers. Those who got lost ended up, more often than not, as prisoners and they, too, did not return the following morning.<sup>34</sup>

The 317<sup>th</sup> mopped up the area and took large numbers of prisoners. Edward F. Kott of Detroit, Michigan, was in A Company and claimed he captured one thousand prisoners that day.<sup>35</sup> Hayes professed a similar experience:

On the second or third day of this battle I captured an entire German regiment single-handed. I confess to no great feat of arms in this capture

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<sup>32</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>35</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 142.



because the Germans who had managed to stay alive or get out of the gap acted like zombies. The regiment I captured lost so many men that its ranking officer was a captain who surrendered to me. He and his men could barely stand and they had not eaten for several days. They had only a few rounds of ammunition. Some of the men had clearly lost their senses and simply stared into a distant horizon, which only they could see. I accepted the surrender and told him to stay in his assembly area and I would arrange to have him collected and marched back to a prisoner of war concentration area.<sup>36</sup>

Captain Harold Rendor, commander of L Company, captured the last German soldier in the battle of Argentan, an SS Colonel dressed in civilian clothes who surrendered during a training attack on a hill near the town.<sup>37</sup> Hayes later reflected on the effort to cut off the enemy's retreat:

The Falaise Gap resembled the worst pictures of hell, an inferno transferred to a bucolic but now hellish area. Bodies and parts of bodies of men and horses littered the area. Destroyed vehicles, abandoned aid stations full of dead bodies, and overturned artillery and anti-aircraft guns blocked the roads and trails. A few German medics awaiting capture tried futilely to treat some of the wounded. Over the entire area the stench of death permeated into the smallest places because August had turned warm and the sun beat upon the dead bodies causing them to putrefy even more rapidly . . . . Some men had hideous grins. Others looked sad and bewildered. None of the dead looked peaceful. Worst of all were those who had been blown in half so that only the upper or lower portion of their body still remained.<sup>38</sup>

After the battle which had cost the 317<sup>th</sup> a significant number of casualties, the regiment converged on an area southwest of Argentan on August 22 for some much needed rest

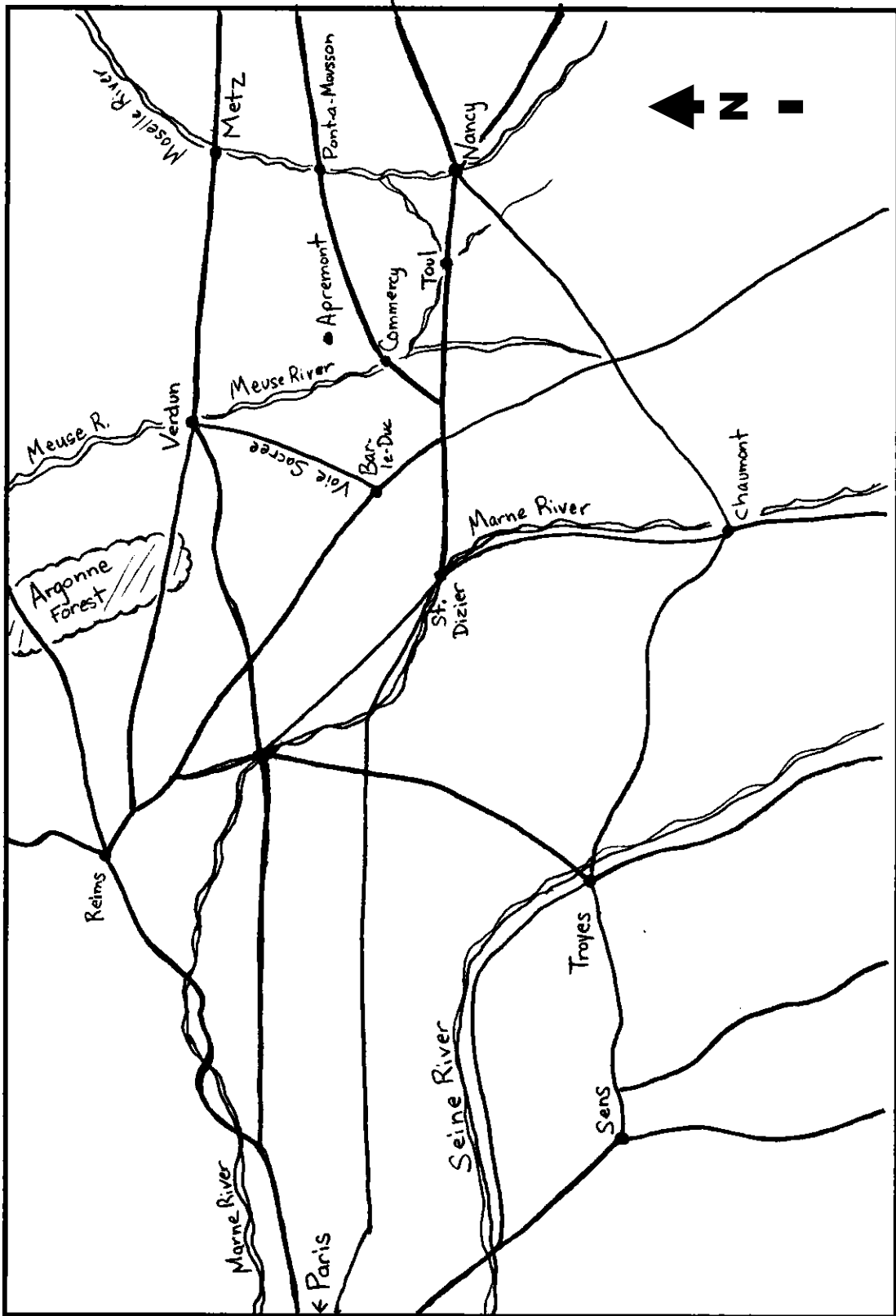
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<sup>36</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>37</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 8.

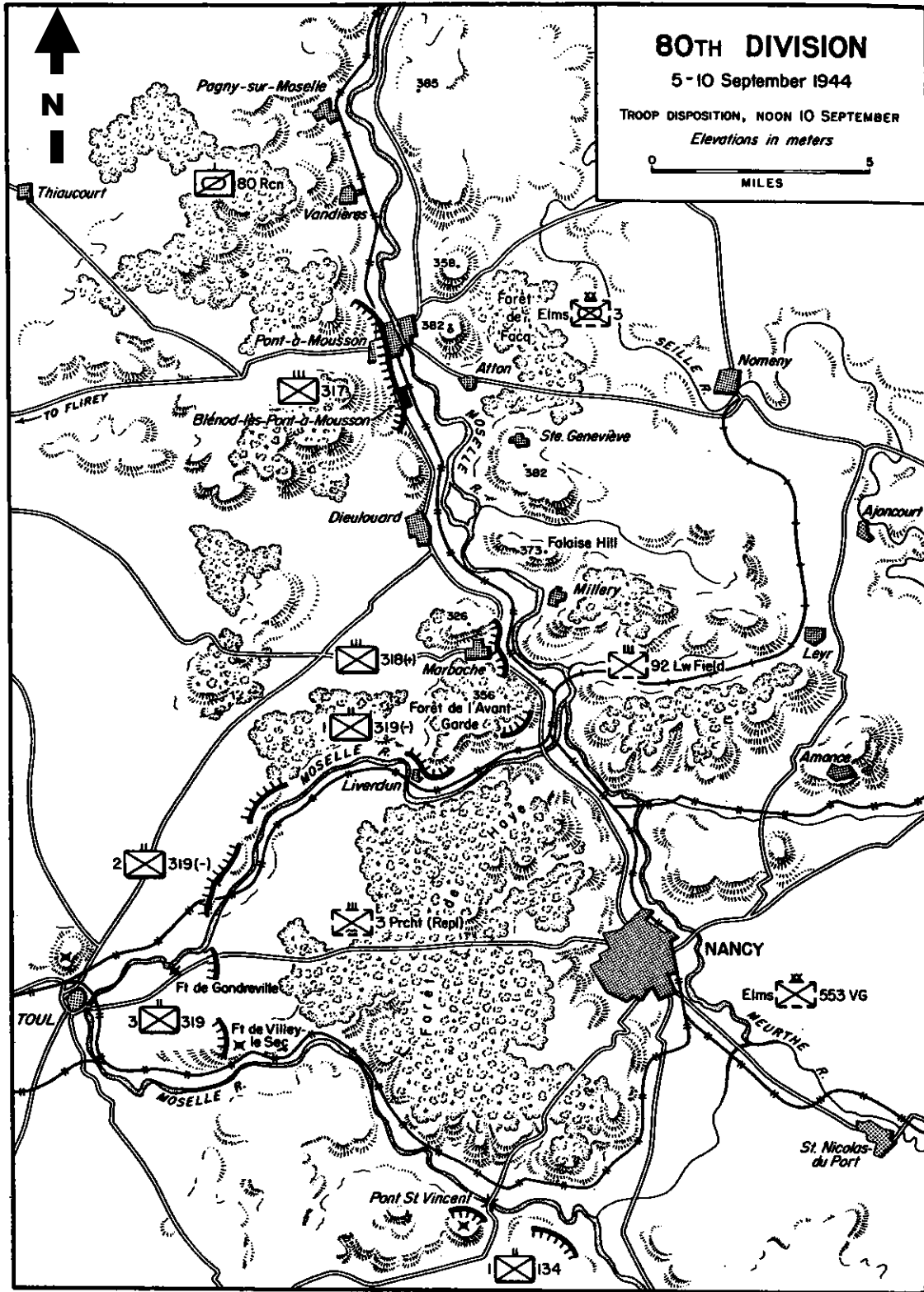
<sup>38</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

and rehabilitation. The men used the time to prepare for the upcoming offensive, one that would prove costly.



Map 3 – Sens to Pont-à-Mousson





MAP NO. 2.

E. Hanson

Map 5 - Pont-à-Mousson

## CHAPTER 3

### THE MOSELLE RIVER BRIDGEHEAD: AUGUST 23 - NOVEMBER 1, 1944

In August 1944, General Dwight Eisenhower determined that, after the Allied forces crossed the Seine River, the offensive main effort would be an attack to the northeast in the greatest strength possible. Not only was the great bulk of the German Army located there, but Berlin was using the area to launch Hitler's "vengeance weapons," the V-1 and V-2 rockets, against England. Allied planners also wanted to capture Antwerp, which seemed essential to the logistics of a deep penetration into Germany, and to capture the airfields of Belgium. Most importantly, General Bernard Montgomery persuaded him that the lower Rhine River in Belgium offered the best avenue of advance into Germany. Eisenhower thus gave General George Patton's Third Army a secondary mission to push east along the Verdun-Metz axis, which, Eisenhower thought, would enhance the opportunity for surprise and maneuver. He wanted to force the Germans to disperse their assets and speculate on the direction of the main thrust.<sup>1</sup> This secondary mission would ultimately cost the 317<sup>th</sup> over 3,000 casualties in a single month. It was one of the most difficult times for the regiment.

On August 23, Lieutenant General Alphonse Juin, French Ministry of National Defense chief of staff, suggested to Patton that the easiest way through the Siegfried Line was the Nancy Gap. "I had come to this same conclusion from a study of the map,"

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<sup>1</sup> General Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Report by Supreme Commander on Operations in Europe*, p. 62.

Patton wrote, “because, if you find a large number of big roads leading through a place, that is the place to go regardless of enemy resistance.”<sup>2</sup> Two days later, the 317<sup>th</sup> began movement to the vicinity of Sens. The regiment used all available vehicles, enemy and civilian, to complete the 210-mile trek by midnight of August 26.<sup>3</sup> The movement around the German army took the soldiers through such places as Le Mans, where shellfire revealed Roman ruins under the streets; Orleans, with its beautiful cathedral;<sup>4</sup> and finally Châlons, where the Roman general, Aetius, had turned back Attila the Hun in 451 AD.<sup>5</sup> The soldiers reached the outskirts of Châlons by midnight on August 28, having traveled 335 miles in less than three days.<sup>6</sup> Hours later they received orders to attack Ecury sur Marne, the ancient city straddling the Marne River. The enemy immediately assailed the infantrymen as they exited their trucks at the outskirts of town. Fortunately, the fighting was brief and ninety-eight Germans surrendered. The remnants retreated north and destroyed railroad guns, railcars of ammunition, and the bridge along the way. The Germans continued to burn supplies and equipment throughout the night.<sup>7</sup>

The next morning, 317<sup>th</sup> attacked Châlons from the south. Using overturned flat-bottom boats and log rafts to negotiate the river, K and L Companies met only light resistance, except in the northeast section of town. The commander of L Company earned the Distinguished Service Cross that day by killing several Germans and capturing

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<sup>2</sup> General George S Patton, *War As I Knew It*, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Murrell, *History of the 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, E.T.O.*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Colonel James Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>5</sup> The Battle of Châlons, <http://members.gcronline.com/attila/chalons.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Edgar E. Bredbenner, Jr., *80<sup>th</sup> “Blue Ridge” Infantry Division*, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 10.

a key bridge intact, which made the pursuit of the fleeing Germans easier.<sup>8</sup> The infantrymen liberated approximately sixty wounded American prisoners from the town hospital and turned them over to A Company, 305<sup>th</sup> Medical Battalion, for treatment. Although the 317<sup>th</sup> liberated Châlons before noon, the celebrating did not quiet down until after nightfall.<sup>9</sup> The French were overjoyed and showered the American liberators with wine, flowers, and kisses. “As we liberated French town after town, the people welcomed us,” K Company’s Marshall Wohlert of Alamogordo, New Mexico stated. “We could hear the church bells ringing in the next town. The sad thing was that we took casualties on each town we liberated.”<sup>10</sup>

Eisenhower now believed that Montgomery had more important objectives than Third Army did, so on August 28 he reallocated the priorities of supplies to First Army in support of British General Bernard Montgomery. In response, Patton wrote:

It was evident at this time that there was no real threat against us . . . . Everything seemed rosy, when suddenly it was reported to me that the 140,000 gallons of gas we were to get that day had not arrived . . . . I later found that . . . the delay was due to a change of plan by the High Command, implemented, in my opinion, by General Montgomery . . . . I presented my case for a rapid advance to the east for the purpose of cutting the Siegfried Line before it could be manned . . . . It was my opinion then that this was the momentous error of the war . . . . I was sure it was a terrible mistake to halt even at the Meuse.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>9</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall Wohlert, letter to author (September 1, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Patton, *War As I Knew It*, p. 120.



Additionally, Eisenhower directed Bradley to supply Paris with over 3,000 tons of supplies a day, which further limited Patton's capabilities. "At the present time, my chief difficulty is not the Germans but gasoline," Patton wrote to his son. "If they would give me enough gas, I could go anywhere I want."<sup>12</sup>

Despite the shortages, the 317<sup>th</sup> continued its drive east. On August 31, the regiment rode to Villiers, marched eight miles to Saint Dizier, and then resumed its advance in the morning against little enemy contact. The soldiers crossed the Meuse River four miles south of Saint Mihiel at Sampigny without opposition. By nightfall, the 317<sup>th</sup> occupied a line from Saint Mihiel through Montsec to Rambaucourt.<sup>13</sup> On September 2, the regiment moved into the town of Apremont and witnessed German brutality firsthand. Hayes recalled the atrocities:

At Apremont, a small village a short distance from Saint Mihiel (where the 80th had fought in World War I) the Germans had rounded up all the male inhabitants including children and babies and had executed them. When we drove up, the town was burning and the town square reverberated with the deep sobs of the women of the town. I never could understand why the Germans executed the men. I could understand executing the men who might have sniped at them but to kill the male children of all ages demonstrated barbarism of the worst sort. The men of the village posed no threat to the retreating Germans. Apremont impressed me, for the first time, with the total senselessness of war.<sup>14</sup>

It was at Apremont that the 317<sup>th</sup> ran out of fuel. "As soon as I get sufficient gasoline," Patton remarked, "I have permission to secure crossings over the Moselle and prepare to

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 530.

<sup>13</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

attack the Siegfried Line.”<sup>15</sup> Until such time, the 317<sup>th</sup>, along with the rest of Third Army, came to a screeching halt.

By September 3, the gasoline shortage had stalled most of Third Army. “It seemed as if the entire invasion force ran out of gasoline,” Hayes noted. “We became foot infantry once more and began the slow march to the Moselle.”<sup>16</sup> That same day Patton assembled his corps commanders for a meeting with Bradley. Unsettled that Eisenhower had made Montgomery the Allied main effort, Bradley told the group that he would give Third Army half of the total supplies he received. In addition, he gave Patton four additional divisions, authorization to cross the Moselle, cut through the Siegfried Line, and travel as far as the Rhine River.<sup>17</sup>

Patton, in turn, gave General Manton Eddy, the XII Corps Commander, permission to move towards a crossing of the Moselle north of Nancy.<sup>18</sup> Eddy’s strategy was to have one regiment of the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division secure a bridgehead at Pont-à-Mousson and then have the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division pass through and attack Nancy from the north as part of Patton’s plan to envelop the city.<sup>19</sup> The 317<sup>th</sup> immediately began a reconnaissance-in-force to establish a bridgehead at Pont-à-Mousson.<sup>20</sup>

The Germans used the respite created by the gasoline shortage to establish a formidable defense on the high ground east of the Moselle. The composition and

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<sup>15</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 537.

<sup>16</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>17</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 539.

<sup>18</sup> Hugh M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Harry Balish, “The Battle of Nancy, A Double Envelopment,” p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 60.

disposition of the German forces across the Moselle was ambiguous to the Americans, which led the XII Corps intelligence officer to conclude that there would not be much opposition. In addition, cavalry patrols operating on the west side of the Moselle reported that the enemy was not capable of making a stand. The Germans, however, realized that the amplified cavalry presence in the area of Pont-à-Mousson meant that it was a likely crossing site and deployed a division-size force from Pagny to Dieulouard. They took advantage of the superior observation and fields of fire offered by the high ground on the east side of the Moselle. In short, the Germans were prepared to stop the Allies at the Moselle.

Because of time constraints, the 317<sup>th</sup> regimental commander, Colonel A. Donald Cameron, immediately dispatched his troops to the Moselle without a daytime reconnaissance. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Paul Roberts, led the way, preceded only by the reconnaissance platoon. Hayes, the regimental intelligence officer, cautioned them that the Germans had blown the bridge and established a defense on the east side of the Moselle, but he was unable to determine the enemy's actual strength. When the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion reached the Moselle, a skirmish ensued and the Germans engaged the Americans for most of the day. The reconnaissance platoon set up observation points on the west side of the river in an effort to gain intelligence on the enemy.<sup>21</sup>

Hayes returned to the command post to update Cameron on the situation. When Eddy arrived, Hayes briefed him as well. The general doubted that the 317<sup>th</sup> had come

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<sup>21</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

under such heavy fire and decided to visit one of the observation points. Unfortunately, a lull in the battle occurred during the command reconnaissance, as Hayes later wrote:

In this case, the cessation of fire turned out to be a disaster for the 317<sup>th</sup>. As General Eddy looked out from the observation point, the Moselle had become as smooth as glass, birds twittered in the trees and the scene became one of idyllic calm. He clearly thought I had exaggerated the intensity of fire. He turned to Colonel Cameron and said something like, "There aren't any Germans out there." He ordered Colonel Cameron to immediately execute a hasty crossing of the Moselle River at Pont-à-Mousson. A few hours after receiving orders to cross the river, Lieutenant Colonel Roberts initiated a hasty crossing and immediately came under intense and well-directed artillery, mortar and small arms fire. Two companies managed to cross the river and immediately had to fight off a determined German counterattack. Ultimately, the rest of the regiment could not support the force across the river and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion lost several hundred men in killed, wounded and captured. General Eddy had not heeded one of the first precepts of combat -- he underestimated the enemy and the 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry suffered severely for that error.<sup>22</sup>

The infantrymen prepared for another hasty crossing on the morning of September 5. This time, all three battalions would attempt separate crossings and exploit success wherever it occurred: The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion attacked at Dieulouard to the south; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion attacked to the north at Vandieres; and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion would again try its luck at Pont-à-Mousson. The assault began in the early morning light. The Germans controlled the hills overlooking the river valley and used this advantage to pour intense artillery and mortar fire down on the crossing sites.

Cameron decided to accompany the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on its attack. Lieutenant Colonel Norman commanded the battalion and, before joining the 317<sup>th</sup>, had been an instructor on river crossings at Fort Benning, Georgia. His battalion attempted to cross the wide-open

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<sup>22</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

river valley and immediately came under intense artillery and small arms fire. The infantrymen with their heavy pontoon boats made excellent targets for the Germans: most were wounded or killed.<sup>23</sup> The anti-tank platoon pulled its 57-millimeter guns into a coal factory and attempted to dispatch them, but could not because of the narrow passages. The Germans forced the infantrymen to retreat under heavy artillery fire. Many soldiers remained in the coal factory.<sup>24</sup>

Cameron soon received word that the two other battalions had failed in crossing the river and heavy casualties were mounting. He decided to visit the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in an attempt to determine why the attacks were unsuccessful. German artillery and numerous casualties from F Company awaited him. After ascertaining the dire situation, he returned to his command post to inform McBride that the attack had faltered and that the enemy had indeed fortified the Moselle. Other units from the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had met the same determined resistance to the south. It was obvious that a hasty river crossing would not work against such a well-established defense, so the 317<sup>th</sup> prepared for a full-scale river crossing.

That night, the regiment received violent artillery barrages and the command post lost all communications. Cameron became increasingly concerned when he did not receive any reports from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. He sent Hayes to Dieulouard to investigate. After contacting the battalion, Hayes and the battalion executive officer, Major Sterling “Curly” Burnett, agreed that Norman was suffering from exhaustion and had lost control of his companies. That was the somber assessment that Hayes carried back to Cameron.

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<sup>23</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>24</sup> Murrell, *317th Infantry*, p. 12.

The colonel wanted to see for himself and insisted on inspecting the battalion despite the extremely heavy fire. When Cameron arrived at the coal factory, he understood immediately that Norman was too fatigued to exercise effective command and replaced him with Burnett, whose bald head earned him the nickname Curly.<sup>25</sup>

In the very early hours, soldiers from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion attempted another crossing under the cover of darkness, but again were unable to overcome the heavy enemy fire and fell back across the Moselle. The Germans hit L Company especially hard and Auzie Johnston was one of those taken prisoner along “with quite a large number of men.”<sup>26</sup> In the morning, all three battalions pulled back and established defensive positions: the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion dug in on the high ground of Jezainville, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion relocated at Vandieres, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion stayed on the high ground west of Pont-à-Mousson.<sup>27</sup>

As the 317<sup>th</sup> prepared defensive positions west of the Moselle, McBride summoned his commanders and asked for suggestions on how to best cross the river. This seemed out of character for him and a rumor had been floating around that Patton gave him an ultimatum to cross the river or face being relieved. Lieutenant Colonel Murray, the commander of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, argued that the regiment had tried to cross on too broad of a front without proper planning and support. The attack, he suggested, should occur on a narrow front with concentrated support. McBride agreed.<sup>28</sup>

As part of the plan, Cameron wanted to locate a ford to make the crossing less difficult. He delegated the task to Hayes, who went to the town of Limey, west of Pont-

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<sup>25</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>26</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 140.

<sup>27</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>28</sup> Robert Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80th Infantry Regiment in World War II*, p. 87.

à-Mousson, where he met with local French resistance fighters. They informed him of a priest who was very knowledgeable about the history of the Romans and their trek into Gaul. The cleric told Hayes that the Romans had used a ford located north of the Isle de Scarpone near Dieulouard and Hayes found the ford exactly where the priest had described it. He also located another crossing spot between two German units and discovered that no enemy outposts were at the site. When he reported the potential crossing locations to Cameron, the colonel immediately approved them.<sup>29</sup> For the next two days, the 317<sup>th</sup> continued to reconnoiter the two crossing sites. While B and K Companies maintained patrols along the river, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions moved into the Le Petre forest to prepare for the attack.<sup>30</sup> Soldiers organized for the crossing by conducting maintenance on their weapons and studying maps of the bridgehead.

On September 11, the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division received the corps order to cross the Moselle the next day. That afternoon, fighter bombers from the XIX Tactical Air Command bombed Mousson Hill, the dominant terrain feature on the east side of the river from which the Germans observed the 317<sup>th</sup>. Soldiers moved into position under the cover of darkness in preparation for the crossing.

The attack began early the next morning with the 610<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion and the 702<sup>nd</sup> Tank Battalion providing smoke cover. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion crossed the ford located on the northern end of the Isle de Scarpone. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion went over at the site located between the German units. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion followed 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion with orders to pass through and attack Landremont. Unlike the preceding attempts, no

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<sup>29</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>30</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 28.

casualties occurred during the crossing and it was not until the infantrymen began to assault the high ground east of the Moselle that they suffered any casualties. By 8:30 a.m., the 317<sup>th</sup> had become the first Allied unit across the Moselle. Construction immediately began on the pontoon and footbridges as a bright, sunny day began to emerge.<sup>31</sup> The regiment spent the remainder of the day consolidating around the bridgehead. The 317<sup>th</sup> command post remained on the west side of the river awaiting authorization to use the bridge as the soldiers prepared for the German counterattack: it would come the next day.

The crossing at the ford especially surprised the Germans because they did not know of its existence.<sup>32</sup> But they did understand the significance of the bridgehead emerging at Dieulouard and were determined to destroy it and push the Americans back. Early the next morning, the German 29<sup>th</sup> Grenadier Division, reinforced with artillery and tanks, counterattacked the bridge site. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion fought off two attacks at Landremont while the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion clashed at Saint Genevieve. Company G moved back while E and F Companies exchanged blows with the Germans.<sup>33</sup> Enemy artillery fire fell on the bridge and all routes leading to it. Some German soldiers got close enough to threaten the site, but the Americans pushed them back. According to Hayes, the east side of the river was chaotic:

Wrecked equipment, dead Germans and GIs, and aid men frantically trying to patch the wounded littered the area. The wounded had been there since early morning and could not be evacuated because ambulances and

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<sup>31</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 87.

<sup>32</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>33</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 29.



stretcher bearers could not get across the river to help them. I am sure that many of the wounded who could have survived with prompt assistance died from shock or simply bled to death. Others who had been reached by the aid men lay there in a stupor from the morphine injections given them to ease their pain.<sup>34</sup>

During the battle, regimental headquarters lost all communication with its units because the Germans had either killed or wounded the entire communications platoon on the east side of the river. Hayes led a patrol in search of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in Bezaumont. Dead and injured soldiers from the 317<sup>th</sup> were everywhere. Eventually, the patrol linked up with Captain Jim Mullen's E Company, which had fought off an intense German attack. As Mullen pointed out the location of the battalion command post, Hayes noticed that enemy bodies lay all around the company headquarters. E Company earned the Distinguished Unit Citation for its fight to hold this position.<sup>35</sup> In addition, Private First Class Charles F. Simcox of A Company earned the Distinguished Service Cross while aiding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion at Hill 382.<sup>36</sup> Upon reaching the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion command post, Roberts explained that G Company held Saint Genevieve, E Company retained Bezaumont, and F Company was located in the middle. A firefight suddenly emerged when a squadron of P-47 Thunderbolts appeared. As Hayes recalled,

Fortunately, the P-47s knocked out several of the German tanks and, I suppose, by this time the German commander decided to call off the attack for the day. Suddenly, one of the P-47s appeared to have hit an ammunition dump and a tremendous explosion took place. Unfortunately,

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<sup>34</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>35</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 102. The Department of the Army published *Unit Citation and Campaign Credit Register*, dated July 1961, which incorrectly credited the entire regiment with the citation. The Center for Military History has stated that only "E" and Cannon Company received the citation.

<sup>36</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 102.

something also seemed to hit the P-47 pilot and suddenly the plane went into a high power climb. I believe the pilot had been severely wounded and in his agony simply pulled back on the stick which, of course, sent him into the high climb. He reached the top of his climb and the plane stalled and spun out of control. I watched it through my field glasses as it spun into the ground. The plane exploded and sent a small mushroom cloud into the sky. I saw no parachute and assumed the pilot died in the crash. His good work, however, saved the lives of many 317<sup>th</sup> infantrymen because the German attack stalled and we had relative calm for the rest of the day.<sup>37</sup>

“For the last week we have had a desperate battle forcing the Moselle,” Patton wrote to his wife, “which we could have had for the asking had we not been required to stop.”<sup>38</sup> The fighting remained intense as the next two weeks saw a series of attacks and counterattacks in an effort to expand the bridgehead around Dieulouard. The 317<sup>th</sup> inflated the salient to the outskirts of Millery and by September 24, the infantrymen were mopping up resistance to the east in the Bois de la Rumont.

On September 25, McBride ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, now commanded by Hayes, to attack Moivron at first light. Moivron was located at the base of Mont Saint Jean and could not be bypassed. Because the direction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion’s movement masked the fire of the division artillery, 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division agreed to supply artillery support. The attack began at the railroad east of Moivron, and, as planned, the artillery barrage commenced at first light. Unfortunately, the observers mistook the infantrymen for Germans and rounds began falling on them, which ruined the element of surprise and

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<sup>37</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>38</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 548.

caused numerous casualties before the battle even began.<sup>39</sup> Private Albert Haley, a new replacement to H Company, remembered how his first combat action started:

As the companies at the head of the column near the edge of Moivron, our arty starts going over and I see the shell bursting in the air over the head of the column. An infantry lieutenant starts screaming at the arty officer who is along as their forward observer. I can see men dropping like flies to the ground. We are off to a bad start.<sup>40</sup>

Heavy fighting ensued and the battalion was unable to capture Moivron. The Germans defended with two parachute regiments, which gave them a three-to-one advantage over the attackers. Normally, it is the other way around and this enabled the Germans to concentrate all their efforts on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. Hayes organized a second attack that eventually faltered around dusk and McBride ordered a withdrawal to the original position.<sup>41</sup> Haley later wrote an interesting description of the remainder of the battle:

There have been heavy rains so the fields are soaked and very soft. A German prisoner is brought to the rear past our position. We can tell by the style of his helmet that he is a paratrooper. We are up against some of the best of the German army. I hear German arty being fired and their shells scream our way. I hug the ground in the shallow depression beside the road . . . . We hang fast and endure shelling for some time and I keep myself flat in shallow depression with my face down. Several tanks have bogged down and are stuck in the mud. The battalion is unable to take the village and in the middle of the afternoon we are given orders to withdraw to a small ditch or creek back toward Villers-les Moivron and to set up a defensive line . . . . In the evening we are ordered to withdraw and move

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<sup>39</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>40</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 86.

<sup>41</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

back to a road to the area we occupied the previous night. We are lined up along the road in a double column waiting on orders to move out. It is pitch black and everyone is tired, very tense and on edge. We can hear someone at the far end of the column whistling. Under their breaths several are passing the word down the column to knock off the whistling. It does not stop and is coming closer to where I stand. More emphatic demands continue to be made and when the whistler reaches our point he says, "What's the matter? There isn't a German within a mile of here." We then see that it is the battalion commander, Major Hayes (he recalled his whistling, saying he did it in an effort to calm the edgy and exhausted troops). We return to our area on a hill and during the black night the sky suddenly lights up from ammo explosions and fires from our burning, bogged down, abandoned Shermans in the field at the edge of Moivron.<sup>42</sup>

As the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion attacked Moivron, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion struck Mont Saint Jean and seized it by early evening. The soldiers immediately began preparations for an enemy counterattack. After midnight, over 200 Germans attacked the hill. They overran some of the positions, suffered heavy casualties, and then withdrew. The enemy counterattacked the next day and were repulsed again. For the remainder of the month, their activity was minimal.<sup>43</sup>

During the month of September, the 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment suffered over 3,000 casualties. In essence, the crossing of the Moselle cost the regiment the equivalent of its entire cadre of original personnel. September casualties from the regiment were equivalent to 20 percent of the 80<sup>th</sup> Division's total casualties during the entire war.

The beginning of October found the Germans again attempting to contain the bridgehead across the Moselle. They retained control of the surrounding high ground of

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<sup>42</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 86

<sup>43</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 17.

Mont Toulon and Mont Saint Jean.<sup>44</sup> In an effort to unseat the Germans, McBride directed one reinforced company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion to attack Sivry on the morning of October 3. E Company had captured an enemy patrol and determined that the Germans at Sivry were receiving supplies and support from the east at Bratte and Mont Saint Jean. Observation from G Company reinforced the intelligence. Hayes decided that, since 318<sup>th</sup> had previously attacked from the west and German supplies came from the east, the best plan would be to have G Company, under Captain Ted Ellsworth, attack through Foret de Facq and follow the Bratte-Sivry road. Early the next morning, the company moved out of its positions in Foret de Facq. Ellsworth, who had been in London in 1939 and had enlisted in the British Army before America joined the war, reported the town captured by mid-afternoon.<sup>45</sup> The soldiers reinforced their positions in the town throughout the night as enemy artillery harassed the Americans.

At 3 a.m., the Germans launched a counterattack with two battalions supported by 80 and 120-millimeter mortars. By daylight, the enemy had surrounded G Company<sup>46</sup> and captured the entire command group. Although McBride specifically ordered Hayes to use only one company for the attack, he went ahead and sent E Company forward after placing a smoke screen on Mont Saint Jean. The attack stalled when the company commander, Captain Moye, was wounded. Hayes went forward, relieved the lieutenant in charge, and placed Sergeant Frank in charge of the company. Suddenly, a German machinegun opened fire and pinned them down in the cabbage patch. Hayes stood up, fired his sub-machine gun, and then destroyed the gun and crew with a hand grenade.

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<sup>44</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p.18.

<sup>45</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

For his feat of bravery, he received the Silver Star. More importantly, his action allowed E Company to move forward.<sup>47</sup>

While continuing to take heavy enemy fire, E Company eventually linked up with G Company by mid-afternoon. A few hours later, McBride ordered the soldiers out of Sivry. Although wounded, Sergeant James L. Atkins provided covering fire for the evacuating soldiers, a feat for which he earned the Distinguished Service Cross.<sup>48</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion lost half its attacking force in this engagement. Only forty out of an authorized 193 men remained in G Company after the attack as the battalion went into division reserve. The Germans immediately seized the opportunity and reoccupied Sivry.<sup>49</sup> Colonel Warfield M. Lewis replaced Cameron as commanding officer, presumably after a dispute with McBride over the micromanagement of Cameron's units.<sup>50</sup>

On October 5, the order arrived for the 80<sup>th</sup> to attack and drive the Germans back from the Seille River in two phases. For the first phase, the objective would be Mont Saint Jean, and, during the second phase, the regiment would seize Letricourt.<sup>51</sup> The next day, division issued Field Order Number 13 that outlined the attack. As part of the preparation, a squadron of P-47 Thunderbolts bombed and strafed Mont Saint Jean. After

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<sup>46</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>48</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 285.

<sup>49</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 19.

<sup>50</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 284.

<sup>51</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 32.

midnight, German loudspeakers were heard saying, “Do not attack the hill in front of you if you want to get home. If you do you will surely die.”<sup>52</sup>

Some leaders in the division thought that General McBride was not making the most of his resources.<sup>53</sup> Patton agreed. In his judgment, McBride was reluctant to use all his troops and confirmed that on an inspection.

We drove to the observation post of the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The southernmost of the two hills in its front had been taken but the northern hill, which was heavily wooded, was apparently still occupied by the Germans. When I arrived, [McBride] seemed content to let the Germans stay there until morning. I conceived this to be dangerous and directed the hill to be taken that night; this was done.<sup>54</sup>

On October 8, the 317<sup>th</sup> launched a coordinated attack against Mont Saint Jean after more bombing and strafing by P-47 Thunderbolts. Howard Shoemaker of Avonmore, Pennsylvania remembered looking down the barrel of his .30 caliber Browning automatic rifle awaiting the order to move against Mont Saint Jean when his platoon leader crawled over. “Well, the big picture looks good,” the lieutenant told him. “I don’t care about the big picture,” replied Shoemaker, “I’m worried about the fifty yards ahead of me!”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 20.

<sup>53</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>54</sup> Patton, *War As I Knew It*, p. 148.

<sup>55</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 172.

Both the Germans and the Americans were occupying World War I trenches. The 317<sup>th</sup> used them as a line of departure, the enemy as part of their defense.<sup>56</sup> The attack began early on October 9. The 317<sup>th</sup> captured the northwest knoll and the enemy garrison surrendered before 7:30 a.m.. By early evening, the infantrymen had silenced all resistance and captured 316 prisoners. The remaining Germans escaped to Jeandelincourt.<sup>57</sup> The attack went so well that the second phase began early and the remainder of the regiment attacked Letricourt behind the tanks of General Robert Grow's 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division.<sup>58</sup> By late afternoon, Letricourt was in the 317<sup>th</sup> hands. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion moved into a convent at Pont-à-Mousson as the division reserve and used the time for training instead of rest because the battalion now consisted largely of replacements.<sup>59</sup>

In an earlier meeting on September 21, Eisenhower had ordered a halt to all major American offensive operations until the port at Antwerp, Belgium was in full operation.<sup>60</sup> Operation Market-Garden, the largest airborne operation undertaken by the Allies until this point, was in full swing in an attempt to cross the lower Rhine River and turn the German north flank. This led to the temporary delay in freeing the vital port of Antwerp, still in German hands.<sup>61</sup> Eisenhower decided that Montgomery's 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group would

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<sup>56</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>57</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 20.

<sup>58</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 32.

<sup>59</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>60</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 553.

<sup>61</sup> Eisenhower, *Report*, p. 67.



again have priority for supplies to launch an offensive.<sup>62</sup> Patton found out about the decision two days later. “The twenty-third was one of the bad days of my military career,” he wrote. “Bradley called me to say that higher authority had decided that I would have to give up the 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and also assume a defensive attitude, owing to a lack of supplies.”<sup>63</sup> This resulted in cancellation of the Seille River crossing and ushered in the “October Pause” of the Third Army. “Going on the defense and having our limited supplies cut still more is very discouraging,” Patton grouched. “Bradley and I are depressed. We would like to go to China and serve under Admiral Nimitz.”<sup>64</sup>

Patton met with his corps commanders on September 24 to arrange for the defensive front as he directed continued limited attacks. The next day he reiterated his orders in a letter of instruction. The supply situation required that the Third Army go on the defense, but he warned his commanders that they must hide the change in mission from the enemy. He ordered no digging in, stringing of wire, or placing of minefields. He also wanted limited offensive operations “in consonance with our reduced scale of supply.”<sup>65</sup> It was because of this limited maneuver that 317<sup>th</sup> was eventually able to make it to the west bank of the Seille. By October 9, the lack of supplies had halted the regiment and forced it into defensive positions. The 317<sup>th</sup> joined the October Pause.

The 317<sup>th</sup> moved into reserve and the newly arrived 26th “Yankee” Division replaced it. The regiment then relieved the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in a wooded area

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<sup>62</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 553.

<sup>63</sup> Patton, *War As I Knew It*, p. 136.

<sup>64</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 553.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, p. 556.

bordering the Seille River. The offensive intermission consisted mainly of artillery duels as the Americans and the Germans took turns harassing each other. The 317<sup>th</sup> used this time to rest and refit. By the end of the October, the regiment had only three of its original combat officers. Hayes wrote of this time:

Defense bored everyone so we utilized the time to train ourselves for the coming offensive. By this time, the 317<sup>th</sup> was really a regiment of replacements, although enough old timers remained alive or had returned from the hospital to keep the regiment together. What we lacked was the fine sense of camaraderie which the regiment had built at Camp Forrest and during the various maneuvers. We tried to design the training to recapture some of that camaraderie and also to teach the new recruits how to survive in combat.<sup>66</sup>

Because of the defensive positioning, the infantrymen did not capture any prisoners for intelligence purposes. As a result, McBride offered a case of Irish whiskey to any unit that captured a prisoner. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had created a group of ten soldiers just for special ranger-type missions. They devised a plan to isolate a German foxhole on the east side of the Seille with an artillery box and then have the patrol grab the soldier. The tactic worked and, in less than ten minutes, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had a prisoner, and eventually, a case of Irish whiskey.

During the refit, the regiment received many new replacements. Some were in their mid-forties and others scavenged from rear-area units. Some were the “sad sacks” of their units, or orderlies who lacked basic infantry skills. Hayes rejected one such set of replacements. “I recoiled at the thought of putting these men into battle because my

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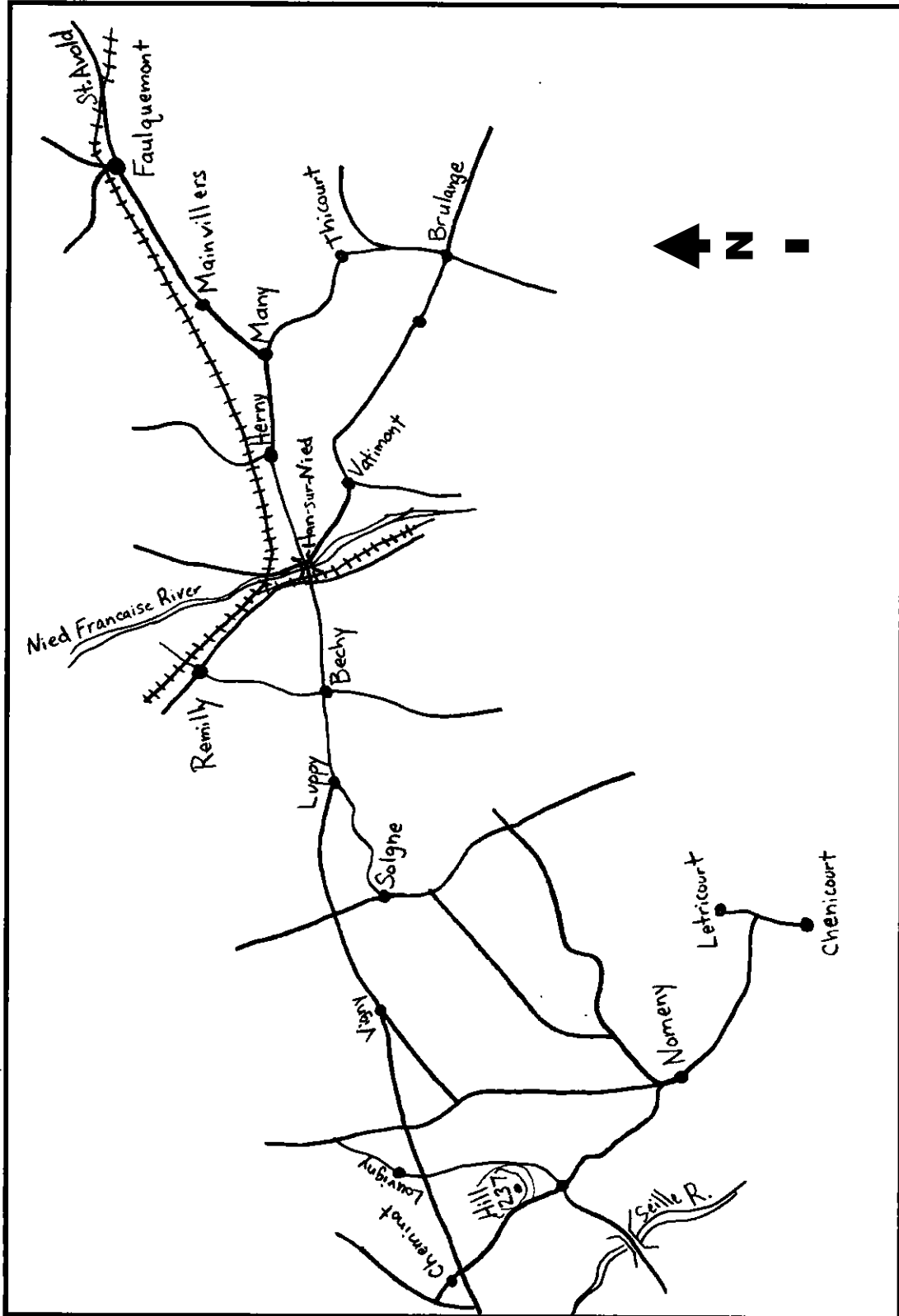
<sup>66</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

previous experience indicated that they . . . invariably got killed or severely wounded . . . .  
I would rather have no replacements than these broken down men.”

Many veterans who fought at the battle at the Moselle River recall it as one of the worst engagements of the war. It had been a hard-fought battle which, had it not been for the gasoline shortage, might not have been necessary. Regardless, the determined soldiers of the 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment had helped to win that ferocious confrontation and many realized that more deadly combat awaited them. “Many of the GI vehicles carried a sign, ‘Home Alive in ’45,’” Hayes noted, “but it seemed to all of us that this became an increasingly remote possibility.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).



Map 6 - Eply to Falquemont

## CHAPTER 4

### RESUMING THE OFFENSIVE: NOVEMBER 2 – DECEMBER 15, 1945

On November 2, 1944, General Omar Bradley decided to begin the Rhineland attack as soon as weather permitted.<sup>1</sup> In the next month and a half, the regiment would participate in the envelopment of Metz to the south. In doing so, the infantrymen would cross two well-defended rivers before stopping short of Hitler's West Wall. It was not easy because in early November, the rainy season arrived and drenched the Alsatian Plain. Mud attached to everyone and everything. The infantrymen could barely walk and vehicles were continually stuck. Many soldiers got "trench foot" as the water filled the foxholes. The only cure was to keep the feet dry, which eventually became a command emphasis.<sup>2</sup> The rains were the worst known in many years and created flood conditions along the entire Allied front.<sup>3</sup> Major James Hayes later wrote:

Military history rarely describes winter campaigns for the simple reason that most armies virtually suspend operations during the winter months because of the toll such campaigns impose on ones forces. However, the Germans had lost the initiative and General Eisenhower decided that we should keep attacking as soon as supply level became adequate for an offensive. By early November we had replenished our supplies and we received orders to attack the Fortress of Metz.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar E. Bredbenner, Jr., *80<sup>th</sup> "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division*, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>3</sup> General Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Report by Supreme Commander on Operations in Europe*, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Colonel James Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

The division published Field Order Number 14, which stated that it would be part of Patton's attempt to envelop Metz before making a dash to Germany. "Sometime ago, I told you we were going to be stopped for a while," Patton told reporters on November 6, "and I was correct. Now, we are going to start again . . . . [B]y scaring them I hope [the Germans] will have to run, in which event, there will be some very fine killing."<sup>5</sup> The division plan called for the 80<sup>th</sup> to assault across the Seille with three regiments abreast and then attack northwest towards Falquemont to relieve the 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. The 317<sup>th</sup>'s role would be to seize a bridgehead over the Seille on the morning of November 8.<sup>6</sup> Generals Eddy and Grow asked Patton to call off the attack because of the terrible weather. "The attack will go on," Patton wrote in his diary. "I know the Lord will help us again. Either He will give us good weather or the bad weather will hurt the Germans more than it does us. His Will Be Done."<sup>7</sup>

On November 8, Patton awoke at 3 a.m. to find it "raining like hell," fell back asleep, and awoke two hours later to a clear, star-filled sky.<sup>8</sup> The 317<sup>th</sup> attack began precisely an hour later. Unfortunately, the banks of the Seille River overflowed from the heavy rains. However, the Germans did not expect the Americans to attack in such dreadful weather and were unprepared. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions attacked on line with 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in reserve. The infantrymen crossed the river and gained control of the high

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 569.

<sup>6</sup> Edgar E. Bredbenner, Jr., 80<sup>th</sup> "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 570.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 571.

ground north of Eply an hour and a half later. Around noon, the order arrived for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion to seize the town.<sup>9</sup>

As the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion moved towards Eply, the Germans began shelling the approaches to the river where engineers had built small footbridges. Along the banks, the enemy emplaced hundreds of small wooden mines, called shoe-mines, which contained enough explosives to blow off a foot. Usually, the unlucky soldier would fall on another one, which would then destroy the upper torso. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion decided to walk down the road, which received less shelling than the approaches to the river. In addition, by using the road, it allowed the soldiers to bypass most of the freezing water en route to the footbridges. On the far side of the river, the infantrymen followed the trail of dead and wounded through the minefields. Once the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion reached the top of the valley, E Company veered to the south to capture Eply, which it did by noon. Unfortunately, the commander, Captain Landis, was killed in the attack.<sup>10</sup> Sergeant Coleman S. Rogers was a medic attached to the 317<sup>th</sup>. Although wounded by artillery fire, he crawled through the mud to a wounded soldier, and then tried to carry the soldier out on his back. He collapsed due to blood loss and was found later in the day. Rogers earned the Distinguished Service Cross for his selfless service that day.<sup>11</sup>

The weather worsened. The snow and sleet began to fall while the soldiers prepared for a German counterattack.<sup>12</sup> An enemy artillery barrage caught a company of the 317<sup>th</sup> digging in on the forward slope of Hill 237 and killed all the company officers, along

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Murrell, *History of the 317th Infantry Regiment, E.T.O.*, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once*, (mss).

<sup>11</sup> Hugh M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 353.

<sup>12</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

with many others. In a twist of fate, a German infantry company wandered in front of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion that night and the infantrymen decimated it.<sup>13</sup> The next morning, November 9, the 317<sup>th</sup> continued the offensive to the northeast. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion advanced to Luppy and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion reached Hill 254.<sup>14</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion received heavy fire and by the next morning, three companies were down to an average of fifty-five men. A full-strength infantry company consisted of 193 men. The enemy hit the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion hard as well, but, the regiment won all of its objectives that day.<sup>15</sup>

On November 11, division headquarters ordered the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion to seize the bridge over the river at Han-sur-Nied. The German 128<sup>th</sup> Regiment defended on the east bank of the Nied River even though it was in a scattered withdrawal. Nonetheless, the enemy regiment had the support of ten Tiger tanks and quadruple mounted 20-millimeter anti-aircraft flak guns, known to the GIs as “ack ack.” The Germans also had the advantage of occupying the high ground, but, for whatever reason, they had not blown the bridge. Company A followed five halftracks of the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion and reached the bridge by mid-afternoon.<sup>16</sup> Frederick Sonnenfeld of Rutherford, New Jersey remembered that the A Company commander, Captain James Craig, had led him in a charge to seize the bridge. Although the Germans raked the infantrymen with heavy enemy fire, the commander and eighteen soldiers entered the town. For almost four hours, the small group withstood the German efforts to destroy the bridge.<sup>17</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> and

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<sup>13</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 353.

<sup>14</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 354.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 359.

<sup>17</sup> *Story of the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*, p. 25.



3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions moved across the bridge to secure the high ground on the northeast and northwest of the town. It was the first bridgehead across the Nied River and it allowed the 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division to cross and continue the attack.<sup>18</sup> Craig received the Distinguished Service Cross and the other eighteen soldiers received Bronze Stars for valor during their efforts to seize the bridge. More important to Sonnenfeld, “It helped the 80<sup>th</sup> bring the war closer to an end.”<sup>19</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion’s commander, Lieutenant Colonel “Curly” Burnett, led the advance on the bridge and received wounds to the chest and abdomen from the 20-millimeter guns. Strangely, he had predicted his death days earlier. “So long Jim, I won’t be seeing you again,” he had told Hayes, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion commander, after receiving the attack orders. “I’ll be killed tomorrow.” He died a day later than predicted while being evacuated for his wounds. Burnett received the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously for his outstanding bravery in leading the assault over the bridge. “I lost a treasured friend who died a hero’s death,” Hayes later wrote. After the battle, Hayes succumbed to pneumonia and had to be evacuated. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Roberts, received a wound to the arm. All three battalion commanders were thus now casualties.<sup>20</sup>

The next day, the regiment continued to expand the Nied River bridgehead while the Germans tried unsuccessfully to destroy it with artillery and mortar fire. Eddy visited the regimental command post in Han-sur-Nied for the express purpose of congratulating

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<sup>18</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 174.

<sup>20</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

the commander and his men on their superb performance.<sup>21</sup> During that meeting, Patton casually asked McBride why the 80<sup>th</sup> had not taken Falquemont. McBride took the hint and requested that the 80<sup>th</sup> be allowed to attack the town. General Eddy gave his consent.<sup>22</sup>

On November 13, a captured German officer established that the 36<sup>th</sup> Volks Grenadier Division, recently reorganized in Baumholder Training Area after a crushing defeat to the Soviets in 1943,<sup>23</sup> was concentrating near Falquemont.<sup>24</sup> The next day, the 80<sup>th</sup> received the order to clear the high ground south of Falquemont.<sup>25</sup> On November 15, the 317<sup>th</sup> attacked to protect the left flank of XII Corps and secure a main line of resistance. The Germans struck from the southwest of Landremont and were repulsed. The Americans captured over 130 prisoners.<sup>26</sup> The bad weather continued as the 317<sup>th</sup> maintained its blocking positions on the left flank. “It has rained every day since the first and we are having a hell of a time with ‘immersion’ feet, about as many as from enemy fire,” Patton wrote in a letter to his wife. “However, the enemy must be suffering more, so it’s a question of mutual crucifixion till he cracks.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, on November 17, the skies began to clear and the mud began to dry, if only temporarily.

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<sup>21</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 481.

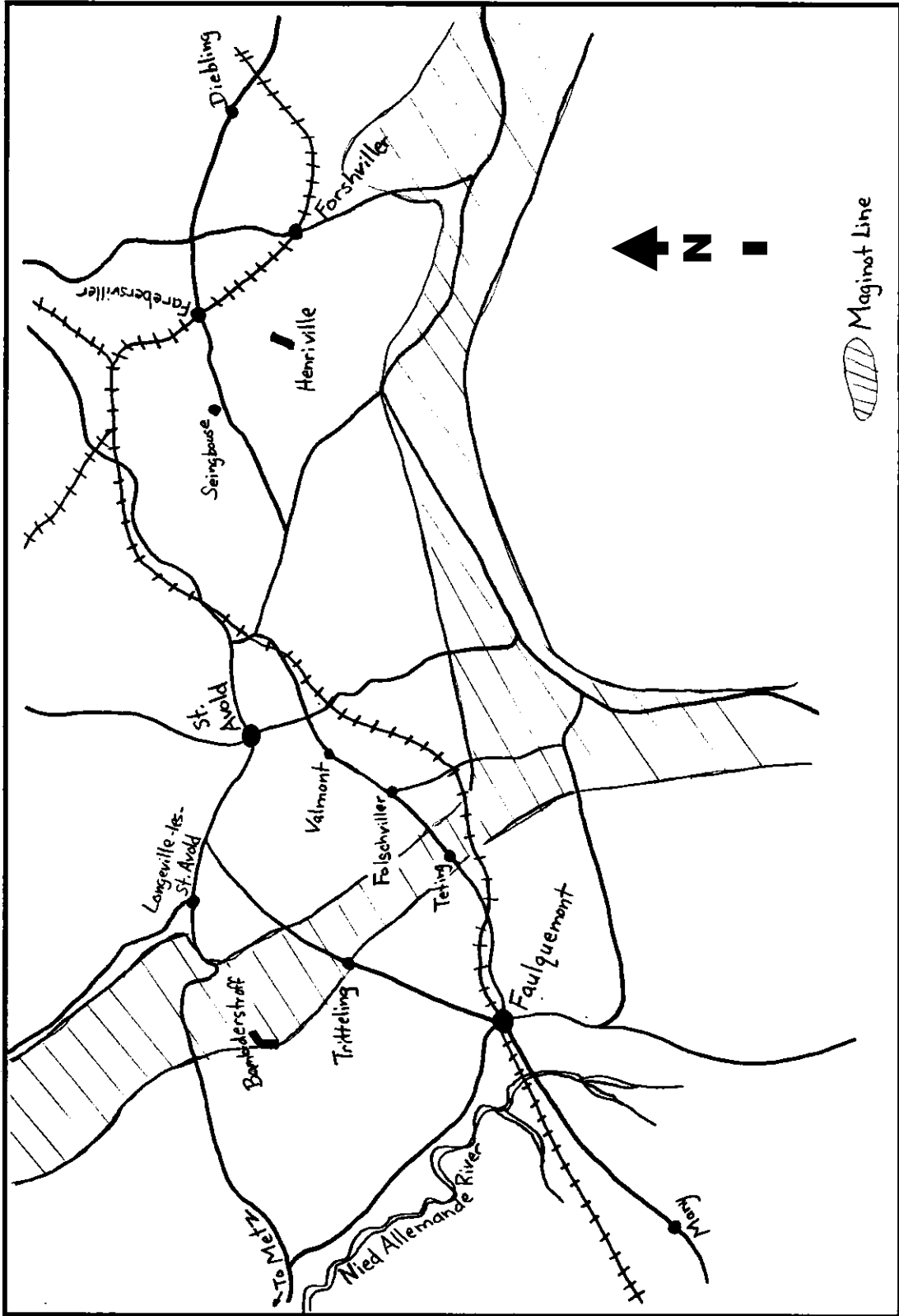
<sup>23</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 74.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 75.

<sup>26</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 574.



Map 7 – Faulquemont to Farebersviller

On November 19, the 317<sup>th</sup> sent out patrols to the river to ascertain the enemy's location. They discovered that the Germans had destroyed all the bridges in the regimental sector as they prepared to make a stand on the west bank of the Nied Allemande River. The Germans even destroyed the culverts and made numerous craters in the road, which made vehicular traffic difficult. In addition, they mined the roads north from Mainfillers. The next day, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions, followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup>, pushed forward without opposition and reached the river by mid-afternoon. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion remained in Falquemont and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion in Cremange. Each unit established outposts across the river. German patrols proved to be poorly trained and unmotivated; all were either killed, captured, or ran away when they made contact with the American patrols. The river rose during the day and the weather continued to be wet. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion established a roadblock near Hemly and Guinglance.<sup>28</sup> However, headquarters ordered the infantrymen into division reserve before they could attempt the river crossing.

On November 22, the 80<sup>th</sup> Division received orders to break through the Maginot Line in three days.<sup>29</sup> The French had built it after World War I as protection from Germany and to defend the traditional invasion routes across the eastern frontier. The design allowed time for the French army to mobilize and provide a place behind which they could defend.<sup>30</sup> During this time, the Germans based most of their defense on the fortifications in the area; however, the line was in a poor state of repair, and they did little

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<sup>28</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> Dan McKenzie, Brief History of the Maginot Line  
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/1491/pagetwo.html>.

to improve it, with the exception of wire and a few entrenchments. For the upcoming offensive, the 317<sup>th</sup> remained in division reserve. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion moved to Mainvillers, the 2<sup>nd</sup> to Many, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> to Herry.<sup>31</sup>

One day on the way back from the front lines for a much-needed shower, William “Bill” Myers of I Company passed a soldier guarding some prisoners working on the roadway. “I thought I recognized the soldier, he turned around and I saw that he was my brother whom I had not seen in two years,” the Akron, Ohio native recalled. “I called to the driver to stop, but he couldn’t hear me. When we got to our destination, I told my commanding officer the story and he gave me permission to go back to see him. I had Thanksgiving with him and his outfit.”<sup>32</sup>

In the afternoon of November 22, patrols succeeded in cutting underground cables for the Maginot Line near Guinglance and Bionville Sur Nied.<sup>33</sup> Two days later, they found a footbridge southeast of Fort Bambiderstroff still intact, but the enemy had destroyed the bridges at Basse-Vigneulles and cratered the road.<sup>34</sup> The next day, the 317<sup>th</sup> moved out as the division reserve. The Germans had mined heavily the roads and ditches approaching Fort Bambiderstroff. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion attacked from Cremange to the northeast and reached Tritteling before noon. The infantrymen gained the high ground northeast of Laundrefang four hours later. They encountered very little small arms fire and a moderate amount of mortar and artillery fire en route. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion

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<sup>31</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 156.

<sup>33</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

attacked from its position northeast of Falquemont. It moved toward the northeast and encountered small pockets of enemy resistance, that included and heavy mortar and artillery fire, before reaching the high ground northwest of Foschviller by late afternoon. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion followed the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion and halted between Tritteling and Laundrefang.<sup>35</sup>

The next day, the 80<sup>th</sup> Division smashed through the Maginot Line and approached Saint Avold against heavy enemy rear-guard resistance with the regiment still in reserve.<sup>36</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion encountered light, small-arms fire as it attacked to the east and cleared Altviller by nightfall. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion sent G Company to clear Forschviller. They met sniper fire and heavy artillery and mortar fire, but by late afternoon, the town was clear and the remainder of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion moved in. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion advanced to the vicinity of Valmont.<sup>37</sup>

On November 27, the division entered Saint Avold, forcing the German defenders to fall back across the Maderback River, and pursued them for some six miles to the vicinity of Seingbouse.<sup>38</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion then moved to the high ground east of Altviller, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion took up positions near Ebersviller, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion set up near Lachambre.<sup>39</sup> One German commander in the area later reported that the collapse of the 36<sup>th</sup> Volks Grenadier Division in the regimental area of operations was due to the

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<sup>35</sup> Murrell, *317<sup>th</sup> History*, p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 75.

<sup>37</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 33.

<sup>38</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 75.

<sup>39</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 33.

American infantrymen who advanced through heavy fire, “with their weapons at the ready and cigarettes dangling from their lips.”<sup>40</sup>

After the capture of Saint Avold, McBride ordered the 317<sup>th</sup> to pursue the retreating Germans. The 38<sup>th</sup> SS Regiment of the 17<sup>th</sup> SS Division prepared for the American attack at Farebersviller.<sup>41</sup> A patrol determined that a bridge near the town was intact and relatively wide at twenty-four feet. It also reported that Tiger tanks were in Farebersviller. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion advanced to the high ground south of town. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion moved to the high ground north of Farebersviller and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion prepared to enter it.<sup>42</sup> The mud was so thick the infantrymen had to leave trucks and half-tracks behind. “Only the infantry could surely get through,” reported the regimental commander.<sup>43</sup> As the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion reached the outskirts of town, the Germans let loose with small arms fire and 20 millimeter anti-aircraft guns. The Americans drove them out of town after a strong fight.<sup>44</sup> As Major E. S. Barszaz, the battalion executive officer remembered:

We got into town at 1030 and by dark we had driven the Germans out. But they returned. I was in my command post when it happened. The tanks came through the fog that had sprung up like a suddenly recruited German ally. The infantry followed spraying fire like insane gardeners with deadly hoses. Colonel Borston (3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Commander) did not have a runner, so he dashed off for the regiment and returned with tanks. In the streets of Farebersviller, German soldiers shouted, “Colonel Smith

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<sup>40</sup> General August Wellm, quoted in Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 482.

<sup>41</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 75.

<sup>42</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 34.

<sup>43</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 483.

<sup>44</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 37.

says it's OK to surrender, Yanks." Borston came back riding on a tank. He shot the first three Germans he saw with his Tommy gun.<sup>45</sup>

That evening, the Germans mounted a fierce counterattack and managed to take back the eastern portion of Farebersviller.<sup>46</sup> They took Clay Patton Junior of Mebane, North Carolina prisoner when they overran L Company's position. The 7th Mechanized British Army liberated him from Stalag XI B five months later: he weighed a mere eighty-six pounds.<sup>47</sup> Private First Class Weisman was a courier for K Company. He was delivering a message during the counterattack and returned to the command post to find it occupied by Germans. When he walked through the door, he spotted a six-foot tall German inside. He quickly departed the scene and later rounded up sixty members of his unit who had been scattered by the vicious counterattack.<sup>48</sup>

The Germans hit the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion position with small arms fire, but it held its position. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion repulsed two counterattacks of infantry with the support of five tanks. "I guess all hell let go," wrote William "Bill" Robinson of Manchester, New Hampshire. "I got hit with shrapnel and remember being in a cellar with other wounded GIs and that night, the Germans picked us up."<sup>49</sup>

On the 29<sup>th</sup> the Germans counterattacked twice and the infantrymen repulsed both attacks with the help of artillery fire. Corporal Thomas W. Pettengill, an aid man, earned

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<sup>45</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 160.

<sup>48</sup> Thundering Herd, "Untried Riflemen of K Company Rout Enemy in 317<sup>th</sup>'s Bulge Drive Through Luxembourg," p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 166.



the Distinguished Service Cross for taking care of casualties under heavy fire, even though he was suffering from an extremely painful wound.<sup>50</sup> After a day of house-to-house fighting, the regiment moved into division reserve, which was complete before midnight.<sup>51</sup> That ended November operations for the regiment.

The regiment next moved south to Macheren to reorganize and rehabilitate in preparation for an attack across the Saar River and into the Siegfried Line.<sup>52</sup> Also known as Hitler's West Wall, it consisted of concrete fortifications, trenches, and tank dugouts strung out for some 940 miles. Patton knew his soldiers would be attacking the strongest part. "Because a straight line is the shortest distance between two points and also it is so strong that it is probably not too well defended," he wrote. "All I can do is pray to beat Hell. The attack will go on."<sup>53</sup>

On December 5, the 317<sup>th</sup> departed for Saint Avold and arrived the next day. The command post was located in a large home whose owner complained that the infantrymen subjected her family to undue hardship. After more questioning, she revealed that her husband was actually in the German Army.<sup>54</sup> The troops stayed in the town where the Germans had booby-trapped many of the buildings with time-delayed bombs. The first bomb detonated that afternoon and several more explosions occurred over the next four hours. Initially, the soldiers fled into the street to minimize casualties.

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<sup>50</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 485.

<sup>51</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 35.

<sup>52</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 38.

<sup>53</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 585.

<sup>54</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

Eventually, they all moved into houses with the locals, many of whom were German sympathizers,<sup>55</sup> and that ended the losses due to explosions.<sup>56</sup>

While in division reserve, the 317<sup>th</sup> filled its ranks once again. Patton had ordered a five-percent personnel reduction in the administrative and support personnel of the army and corps units and pushed those soldiers into fighting units.<sup>57</sup> Earlier in the month, he had privately commented on the problem of troop strength. “We are having one hell of a war, and the lack of ammunition and replacements is getting more and more serious,” he declared. “I don’t know what the young manhood of America is doing, but they are certainly not appearing over here.”<sup>58</sup>

The regiment received orders to move to Altviller on the afternoon of the December 15 in preparation for the attack on the West Wall. The 317<sup>th</sup> departed the next morning. Major Coe Kerr, the assistant division intelligence officer, was directing traffic. “The Krauts have attacked the 28<sup>th</sup> Division in the Ardennes, but everything’s under control,” he informed Hayes, now the regimental executive officer. The 317<sup>th</sup> arrived in Altviller, billeted the troops, and began preparing for the West Wall attack, which would ultimately be delayed.<sup>59</sup>

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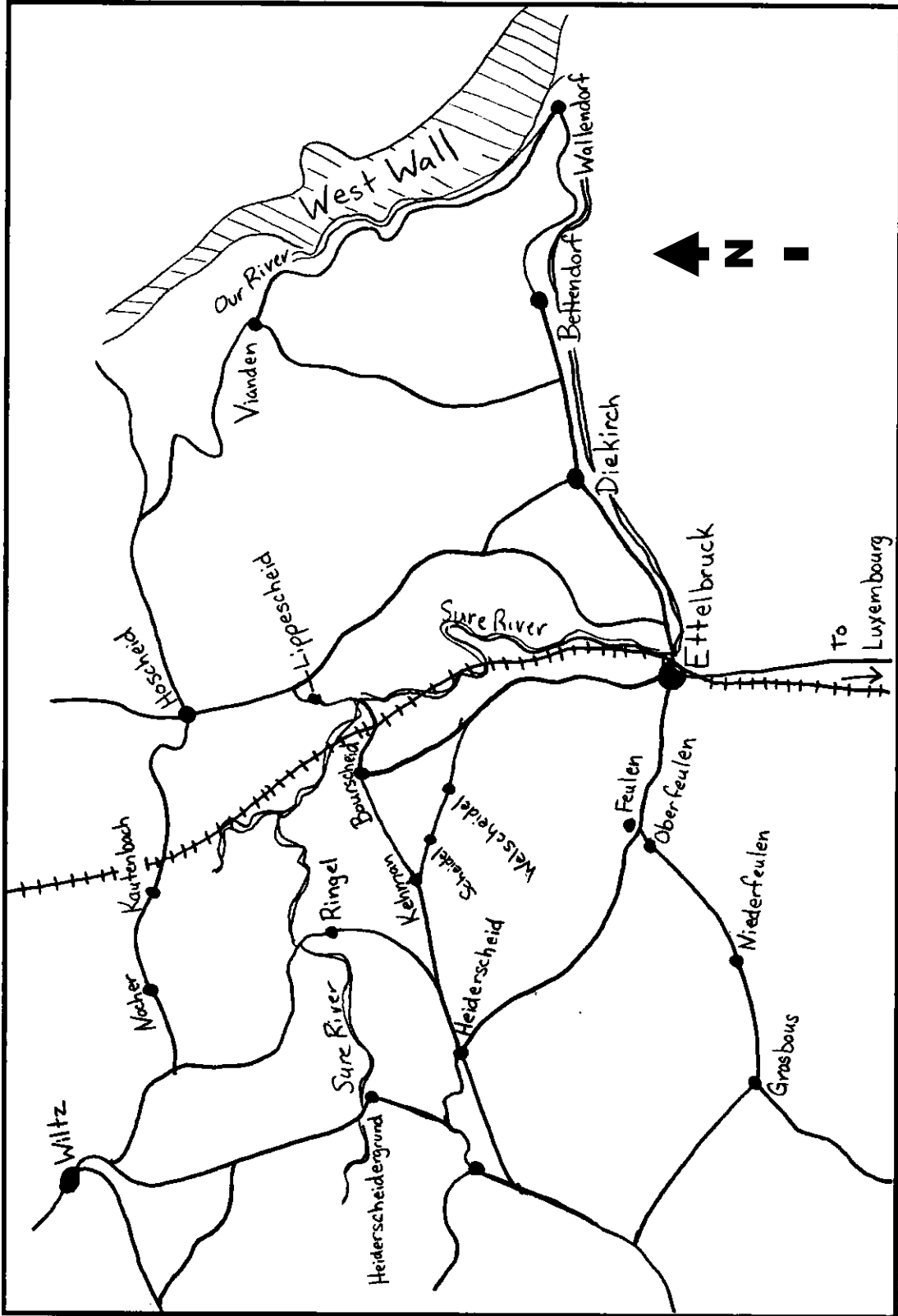
<sup>55</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 483.

<sup>56</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>57</sup> General George S. Patton, *War As I Knew It*, p. 187.

<sup>58</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 586.

<sup>59</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).



Map 8 – Ettelbruck to Wiltz



## CHAPTER 5

### BATTLE OF THE BULGE: DECEMBER 16, 1944 – JANUARY 28, 1945

On December 16, Hitler unleashed an offensive in the Ardennes forest with twenty-five divisions along a sixty-mile front. Operation Autumn Fog, as he called it, took advantage of the inclement weather to attack 80,000 American soldiers in a "quiet" sector. His goal was to seize the port of Antwerp in Belgium, almost a hundred miles away, split the Allied armies, and somehow force a political settlement in the West. The "Battle of the Bulge" was the biggest confrontation of the European war for the United States. The 317<sup>th</sup> would be one of the first regiments to arrive in the area and would assist in correcting the line during the next month and a half.

General Omar Bradley organized a conference to explain the severity of the situation on December 18. He asked Patton what, if anything, Third Army could do to stop the German penetration. "I would start the 80<sup>th</sup> in the morning to Luxembourg," was part of Patton's reply. After the meeting, Patton called his chief of staff. "Stop Hugh Gaffey [4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division commander] and [General Horace] McBride [80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division commander] from whatever they are doing," Patton said. Alert them for movement. They should make no retrograde at this time, but this is the real thing and they will undoubtedly move tomorrow . . . . Arrange to have sufficient transportation on hand to move McBride."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 598.

Colonel Max Johnson, the division chief of staff, called the 317<sup>th</sup> command post at 2 a.m. to ascertain how many trucks it would take to move the regiment. Major James Hayes concluded that ninety trucks could move the entire regiment. They arrived three hours later.<sup>2</sup> The 317<sup>th</sup> was the first regiment of the 80<sup>th</sup> to get rolling north. It was loaded and moving north on the road between Metz and Luxembourg an hour later. The weather was extremely cold and the soldiers simply wrapped blankets around their overcoats to keep them warm.<sup>3</sup> “Piled twenty-five to thirty men in open trucks, we skidded over icy and crowded roads for the entire day and night,” Kenneth Roettger of E Company recalled. “Fog, dampness, and cold added to the misery.”<sup>4</sup>

The men did not yet know their final destination, but only that someone from division would meet them en route with further orders. That someone turned out to be General Owen Sommers, the assistant division commander, who met them at the Luxembourg border and ordered them to move a few miles east of Luxembourg City.<sup>5</sup> After an overnight trip of over 150 miles in bad weather, the regiment arrived in Gonderange, Luxembourg and occupied a reserve defensive position.<sup>6</sup> On December 21, higher headquarters ordered McBride to attack the next day.<sup>7</sup> Patton was extremely optimistic about the attack and told his commanders, “Drive like hell!”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Colonel James Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>3</sup> Lee McCardell, “Doughs and Armor Halt German Advance,” p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>6</sup> Murrell, *317th Infantry*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge*, p. 512.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 515.

As the snow fell early the next morning, Patton's counterattack northward began. The 317<sup>th</sup> followed in division reserve.<sup>9</sup> The next afternoon, McBride ordered the regiment into the fight. He gave Lieutenant Colonel Henry G. Fisher, now the regimental commander, the mission to clear the ridge that ran north to Welscheid, and then turn east towards the Sure River to cutoff Ettelbruck.<sup>10</sup> During the day and evening of the December 23, the infantrymen marched through the dense woods between Ettelbruck and the towns of Niederfeulen and Kehmen. "Every day seemed the same: miles of marching, intense cold, swirling fog, mysterious woods, and general confusion," Roettger remembered. "We stumbled ten to fifteen miles each day with temperatures dropping to twenty below zero."<sup>11</sup> Hayes recalled, "As dawn broke on Christmas Eve morning we emerged from the woods. I was with the lead elements and before me a beautiful, idyllic valley scene worthy of any Christmas card. The towns of Oberfeulen and Niederfeulen lay below us."<sup>12</sup>

As the regiment bypassed Ettelbruck and entered Niederfeulen on Christmas Eve morning, the lead scout elements lost contact with the rest of the regiment during an intense artillery and mortar barrage. The incoming fire was so heavy that medical jeeps were unable to drive to the regimental aid station. The regimental surgeon had to move forward and open a makeshift aid station to treat the wounded.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, in the confusion, the lead element broke out in a panic and streamed back down the hill, which

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<sup>9</sup> Edgar E. Bredbenner, Jr., *80<sup>th</sup> "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division*, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Cole, *The Ardennes*, p. 517.

<sup>11</sup> Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80th Infantry Division*, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

only added to the chaos. Leaders in the area rounded up the panic-stricken soldiers and moved them to one side of the town to stop the alarm from spreading as Hayes recalled,

We gradually found the genesis of the panic. Apparently, the lead scout passed over a small knoll and, temporarily, lost contact with the advance party . . . . He dropped his rifle, ran to the rear, and told everyone he met that the Krauts were killing everybody . . . . I vividly remember one soldier with wide eyes and froth around his lips. I grabbed him and shook him. He looked at me with blank, unseeing eyes and said something like, “Everybody's been killed but me; the Krauts are killing everybody.” I shook him again and then said, very authoritatively, “Go back and tell the Krauts to stop it.” This simple command and the authoritarian tone seemed to snap him out of his terror and he said something like, “Yes sir, yes sir.”<sup>14</sup>

Fisher halted the advance and established the command post in Niederfeulen. He changed the plan and ordered the regiment to attack directly at Bourscheid and the Sure River.<sup>15</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion attacked the town from the west in the early afternoon. The battalion met German resistance near Kehman two hours later.<sup>16</sup> “We came to action against enemy soldiers,” John Pacolt, a K Company soldier from Elmhurst, New York remembered. “They got us in the crossfire. I heard screaming from wounded men and it got me very mad. I knew where the machineguns were, about forty feet from me. I thought, if only I could get there, but how? I ran and made it close enough to throw a grenade within inches from the foxhole. I fired from my rifle and called, ‘Hands up!’

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<sup>14</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>15</sup> Cole, *The Ardennes*, p. 517.

<sup>16</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 47.



They did.”<sup>17</sup> After two more hours of fighting, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion reorganized its positions on the high ground southwest of Kehmen.<sup>18</sup>

Captain Michael Damkowitch of G Company earned the Silver Star for volunteering to infiltrate enemy lines to locate two companies cut off by the enemy. He accomplished the mission without the loss of a single soldier under extremely difficult conditions and ended the war as 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division’s most decorated soldier.<sup>19</sup> That night incoming artillery rounds struck the regimental command post. The house caught fire and the regimental adjutant searched for a new building. The staff hastily assembled a new command post, but the artillery attack had destroyed most of the communication equipment. The barrages also destroyed the executive officer’s jeep and the regimental kitchen jeep. The good news was that the regimental post office was able to deliver several days worth of mail. That evening, soldiers opened Christmas cards from home wishing them a Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and good will towards men.<sup>20</sup>

Patton distributed his own Christmas message to every soldier in Third Army. “I wish you a Merry Christmas. I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty, and skill in battle. We march in our might to complete victory. May God’s blessing rest upon each of you on this Christmas Day.” On the reverse side was a prayer for good weather written by Chaplain James O’Neill:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we humbly beseech Thee, of Thy great goodness, to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have to contend. Grant us fair weather for battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call

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<sup>17</sup> John Pacolt, letter to author (September 10, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Archur Futch, “In Memory of Lt Col Michael Damkowitch,” *Blue Ridge*, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

upon Thee that armed with Thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies, and establish Thy justice among men and nations. Amen.<sup>21</sup>

The cold presented a difficult challenge to the soldiers of the 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. Troy Munn of K Company was a nineteen year-old farm boy from Oklahoma who was handed the job as platoon sergeant. His responsibility was to ensure that the platoon did its mission and to keep his men alive. “It was the most difficult time of my life,” he recalled. “In the winter, the weather was so bad and so cold, we barely managed to do our job and stay alive . . . . Most of my memories of the 317<sup>th</sup> are about the weather and hardships.”<sup>22</sup> Francis Rajnicek of Cleveland, Ohio was in H Company. He remembered

moving through the Ardennes at night, below zero and in eight inches of snowfall with an 81mm mortar tube. The climate conditions were just right for every time I would exhale, the water vapor would condense and freeze on my glasses. A colonel who was behind me asked why I was trying to climb a vertical hill? As I turned to answer, he saw my iced glasses, so he took the tube and told me to clean my glasses. This went on for a couple of hours.<sup>23</sup>

The next morning, Christmas, Fisher called a meeting with his battalion commanders to issue the order for an attack north. As the meeting was getting underway, an artillery shell hit the new command post and, almost simultaneously, another shell hit. None were hurt, but all were stunned. When the shelling stopped, Fisher completed issuing the order

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<sup>21</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 606.

<sup>22</sup> Troy Munn, letter to author (September 1, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 163.

for the attack to the north, which was part of the Third Army's action to liberate the encircled 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division at Bastogne.<sup>24</sup>

The next morning, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions moved toward Kehman and Scheidel in an attempt to open the road east into Bourscheid. A single platoon captured the town of Scheidel, but when the two battalions turned north on Kehman, the Germans were waiting. It was a deadly fight across open ground. When McBride intervened to end the attack, the regiment had lost almost two hundred men. Captain Robert W. Smith, the commander of K Company, made a solo patrol under enemy fire to make contact with an isolated platoon. Although badly wounded, he led his men on to Kehmen. During the battle, he was wounded a second time<sup>25</sup> and earned the Distinguished Service Cross for his bravery and leadership.<sup>26</sup> "My main effort was to see my men had adequate ammunition, food and clothing," Smith remarked, "which was a primary factor when the weather in the 'Bulge' was difficult to cope with."<sup>27</sup> "Bob Smith was my first commanding officer," stated James Allen of South Bend, Indiana. "Smith really looked after his men. We seldom spent a day without hot food. Could be 11-12 p.m., but we got it."<sup>28</sup>

Joseph Drasler of L Company had a haunting Christmas Day as well:

With little food or water remaining after maneuver over the frozen, inhospitable countryside, we encountered enemy resistance near Neiderfuellen

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<sup>24</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>25</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p.45.

<sup>26</sup> Cole, *The Ardennes*, p. 538.

<sup>27</sup> Robert W. Smith, letter to author (December 1, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> James Allen, letter to author (September 1, 2001).

on Christmas Day—a day I will never forget. It turned into one of the bloodiest battle's L Company and its supporting companies would fight during the entire war. In frigid weather, over frozen snow-covered ground, the attack began up an open hillside that stretched for miles to its top. A hill that would be remembered forever by 317<sup>th</sup> dough's as the "Bloody Knob." Withering artillery, mortar, machine gun and rifle fire greeted us from all direction . . . . It was pure hell, fought in the worst weather conditions ever experienced in those parts."<sup>29</sup>

The attack went on for several days in intense cold, and the 317<sup>th</sup> liberated the villages of Bourscheid, Heiderschei, and Heidersheiderung as the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and 318<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment rescued the besieged paratroopers of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division who had been sent to Bastogne to protect the crucial crossroads. The Germans withdrew across the river north of Kehman. As the engineers cleared the snow, they uncovered many soldiers previously listed as missing in action.<sup>30</sup>

On January 2, 1945, Patton formulated the strategy for an attack north. Luckily, the front lines remained relatively quiet until the plans were completed two weeks later. "I told the division and corps commanders that it will be necessary to continue the attack, and that I know they are tired," Patton wrote in his diary, "therefore, they should try to arrange to get one third of their forces out to rest up and warm up, because we are going to attack until the war is over."<sup>31</sup> The cold and snow once again gave way to mud, muck, and mire as the infantrymen prepared to attack Kehman on January 20. Hayes remembered the clash vividly because of the loss of two of his friends:

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<sup>29</sup> Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*, p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>31</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 626.

As usual, Colonel Fisher called a meeting of battalion commanders and issued his orders. I noticed that Bill Boydston, a usually happy and upbeat sort, seemed glum and morose. When I asked whether he was sick he told me that he was not but that he had a bad feeling about the coming attack. The following morning he was killed in action when a mortar round exploded and he received multiple wounds in the chest. We captured Kehmen after suffering heavy casualties. I, of course, lost another friend. In fact, I actually lost two friends that day. Ira Miller, the last of the battalion officers who had been at Camp Forrest received severe wounds during the attack. He died several days later from complications following surgery. Except for myself, all the original officers who had been at Camp Forrest had become casualties and were no longer with the 317<sup>th</sup>.<sup>32</sup>

Percy Smith, the first sergeant of G Company, remembered finding Boydston at his command post:

The bodies of soldiers and equipment were scattered over the ground. Parts of bodies dangled from tree limbs. Wounded members of the headquarters staff wandered around dazed and incoherent. A soldier was holding his intestines; another was looking at his arm laying on the ground. Colonel Boydston was reclining in a half sitting position at the base of a tree . . . . Colonel Boydston beckoned to Lieutenant Coupto (his aide). He spit out a mouthful of blood and told him to deliver a message to his family. Colonel Boydston's eyes grew filmy then closed. He expired in the arms of the bitterly weeping Lieutenant Coupto.<sup>33</sup>

In the successful attack on Kehman, elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion captured 106 prisoners. Meanwhile, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had moved to reoccupy positions near Ringel.<sup>34</sup> Then, the next morning, January 21, it pressed forward in an effort to gain control of the bridges over the Sure River north of Bourscheid. Heavy enemy resistance, unfavorable terrain, and deep, unmelted snow prevented the battalion from seizing the bridge.

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<sup>32</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>33</sup> Percy Smith, *January 21, 1945* (mss).

The enemy was retreating to the Siegfried Line and Patton believed that the Americans had lost contact. It was 317<sup>th</sup>'s mission to reestablish contact as the regiment headed toward the beautiful city of Wiltz.<sup>35</sup> Movement was difficult because of treacherous road conditions and several of the attached tanks failed to negotiate one of the turns and slid out of control. In any case, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion did not have to travel far before finding Germans. The infantrymen continued the assault and captured Enscherance on January 23. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion remained in Erpeldange as the regimental reserve. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion ran into stubborn enemy resistance on the high ground west of Wilwerwiltz, but eventually took the town.<sup>36</sup>

When daylight came the next morning, B Company was still inside the town of Wiltz. The remainder of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion made several unsuccessful attempts to reach the encircled troops, and it was not until that afternoon that tanks from the attached 702nd Tank Battalion moved up to assist the battalion in occupying the town and capturing fifty-six prisoners of war. That success came at a heavy price: the battalion lost its commander and all company leaders, plus the equivalent of an entire company.<sup>37</sup> Still, the G.I.s pressed eastward, moving to Enscherange to look for river crossings, protecting the regiment's flank, as they seized Hosingen.

In the early morning hours of January 25, the regiment attacked Wilderwiltz and Pintsche to establish bridgeheads across the rivers. After receiving heavy artillery and mortar fire, the infantrymen seized the town along with the bridges. In addition, they

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<sup>34</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 48.

<sup>35</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 46.

<sup>36</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 49.

captured over 140 prisoners from the 1/13 Regiment of the 5<sup>th</sup> Paratroop Division. The paratroopers suffered from low morale because they felt they were an elite unit misused as regular infantry.<sup>38</sup> Daniel Fleming of Hancock, Maryland was a “buck private” and recalled an unusual experience that happened on this day:

We had fought heavy opposition all day in zero temperatures . . . . We completed removing wounded men from the field that afternoon and were told hot chow would be available that night in the second house on the right entering town. My foxhole buddy and I went to the house without our weapons, only a flashlight. As I opened the door to the dark house, I heard a noise. I turned on my flashlight and there stood an armed German officer. I used the element of surprise and kept my light in his eyes, disarmed him, and then took him prisoner. He was captured with a flashlight!<sup>39</sup>

Major Hayes also remembered a particular vignette that stuck vividly in his mind:

My driver, Kentucky, and I were on reconnaissance and I wanted to get from one of our battalion command posts to another . . . . Suddenly, we rounded a bend in the road and I froze. My immediate reaction was that we were dead because directly in front of me was a German 88. This was an all purpose cannon which the Germans used for ground, air, or anti-tank fire. The cannon had been emplaced in the usual German manner which meant that the muzzle of the gun was only a foot or less above the ground and it covered the road. Anyone who turned the bend in the road in a vehicle would receive almost point blank fire. Death was almost a certainty. As I stared at the gun, I suddenly realized that the crew was dead and draped over the gun in various ludicrous poses . . . . As I breathed a sigh of relief, a poster on a building on the opposite side of the road from the gun caught my eye. A beautiful girl in the Varga fashion (a famous artist of the day) stared at me. She held a can of coca cola in her hand and the sign carried the bold inscription, "Buvez Coca Cola" (Drink Coca Cola). Whenever I think of this particular vignette I am struck by the incongruousness and bizarre setting.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Murrell, *317<sup>th</sup> History*, p. 50.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel R. Fleming, letter to author (September 1, 2001).

On January 26, all battalions sent patrols forward to locate the enemy's positions. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion attacked to the northeast and seized the high ground near Niederhausen before daylight. As the regiment was moving forward, it received orders to stop. The weather was not fit for an attack: the snow was falling and the wind was bitterly cold. Point men struggled through the thigh-high snow and had to be replaced often because of exhaustion. Canteens were frozen and soldiers had to eat snow for water.<sup>41</sup>

During this time, division attached 317<sup>th</sup> to Task Force Sommers. General Owen Sommers was the assistant division commander. Hayes remembered how the event transpired:

General Sommers visited our command post. Presumably, he meant to give us inspiration and moral support. He was not in command of the operation. Colonel Fisher commanded the operation and General Sommers was simply an observer . . . . General Sommers kept exhorting Fisher to push forward rapidly. Colonel Fisher kept explaining, very patiently, that he would move as fast as the situation permitted and that he wanted to avoid a flank attack by German units trying to escape to the east. The General, on the other hand, kept saying things like, "The hell with the flanks -- the Krauts can't hurt you. They're trying to escape." This kind of conversation in several different forms kept up all evening and into the early morning hours. Finally, about 0300 in the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> General McBride called and wanted to speak to General Sommers. I gave the phone to General Sommers and could hear General McBride say something like, "Sommers you're in command of Combat Team 317. Get the operation over with and rejoin the division as quickly as possible." General Sommers replaced the phone and I saw him blanch. You could literally see his thought processes: he now had the responsibility. If anything went wrong he shouldered the blame. His career was at risk. *His flanks were exposed!* He picked up the phone again, rang the division G-3 and shouted a sentence which I will never forget, "Elegar, what the hell are you doing about **MY FLANKS!**" The following day, 28 January 1945, the mopping up operation ended.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>41</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).



Military historians consider January 28 as the last official day of the “Battle of the Bulge,” which was also the day that the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division relieved the soldiers of the 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. Robert Linhart of Cleveland Ohio remembered that the 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon of B Company submitted a morning reporting the platoon “defunct.” The 317<sup>th</sup>’s offensive operations ended and the Blue Ridge soldiers prepared for a ten-day respite.<sup>43</sup> The 317<sup>th</sup> moved to Medernach, with all soldiers housed in billets as the division reserve.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 46.

<sup>44</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 52.



## CHAPTER 6

### ENTERING THE FATHERLAND: FEBRUARY 5 – MARCH 30, 1945

By the end of January, the Germans were on the last legs of their attack on the Colmar pocket, a large bridgehead on the west bank of the Rhine River located to the south of Strasbourg. One of Hitler's goals in the offensive had been to divert Patton's Third Army away from the bulge. The Germans made limited progress, broke off the engagement, and began transferring divisions to the eastern front to stop the Russians. The failure in the west dictated a withdrawal to the Rhine. The Allied plan was made to clear the Rhineland and Third Army was tasked to swing along the north bank of the Moselle River. During the next two months, the 317<sup>th</sup> would move rapidly through the Eifel and Palatinate regions and cross the Rhine River. This period was characterized by the daily disintegration of the German Army. Enemy forces facing the 317<sup>th</sup> were mainly rear-guard soldiers that only put up enough resistance to slow the Allied advance and inflict casualties.

The 317<sup>th</sup> did not engage in combat during the first week of February as the unit took time to receive replacements and train them to survive in combat.<sup>1</sup> On February 5, the regiment received a warning order that the 80<sup>th</sup> would attack at 2 a.m. on February 7, cross the Our and Sauer Rivers, and breach the Hitler's West Wall, which consisted of concrete "dragon's teeth," bunkers, and anti-tank ditches. The 317<sup>th</sup> moved to Diekirch

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<sup>1</sup> Colonel James Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

as the division reserve.<sup>2</sup> F Company, and later the entire the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, attached to the 318<sup>th</sup> for the crossing which occurred at Beaufort on February 10.<sup>3</sup> Within three days, the infantrymen established a secure bridgehead over both rivers. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion remained near Beaufort, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion patrolled near Rohrbach, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion remained the regimental reserve in Diekirch. The soldiers received orders to cross the engineer-built bridge at Dillengen on February 13. The next day, Valentine's Day, the infantrymen crossed into Germany and moved to Bollendorf. The 317<sup>th</sup> was now in the Fatherland. Hayes remembered a particularly grisly incident at the site of the new regimental command post at Bollendorf:

A small detail led by the communications officer began to set up the CP sign by the side of road. The sign consisted of a piece of cloth with a blue "CP 317" printed on it. On either end of the cloth, a sleeve held an iron rod which could be driven into the ground to anchor the sign. One of the enlisted men struck one of the spikes with a sledge hammer and a tremendous explosion took place. The communications officer, who held the rod, lost an arm, an eye, and suffered body wounds. The enlisted man wielding the sledge hammer and another man standing beside him died instantly. The man with the hammer was blown in half. The upper half of his body disintegrated into a puff of red smoke while the lower half was blown about twenty feet off the road and came to rest on a bush. It lay there steaming in the cold February air. . . . The twin brother of the man who had been blown in half had been on the other side of the house. When he came forward and learned what had happened to his brother, he went berserk. Several men seized him to keep him under control until an aid man came to give him a sedative.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Murrell, *History of the 317th Infantry Regiment, E.T.O.*, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar E. Bredbenner, Jr., *80<sup>th</sup> "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division*, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

Division published Field Order Number 31, dated February 14, 1945, which sent the 317<sup>th</sup> toward Mettendorf and Hill 408, the most commanding ground in the area, as part of Patton's Eifel Campaign. The next objective was Nusbaum and the mission was to uncover the pillboxes of the Siegfried Line along the Our River.<sup>5</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion returned to regimental control as the 317<sup>th</sup> moved to Nusbaum on the February 15. The next day the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion seized the high ground north of Bourbach. The soldiers continued north and seized the high ground overlooking Nusbaum on the following day. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions remained north of Bollendorf in reserve.<sup>6</sup> "I went four days without sleep," remembered K Company's George Mitchell. "We then moved out to attack. I then slept about four hours during artillery barrage coming at us."<sup>7</sup>

On August 19, the regiment continued toward Nusbaum against German rear-guard units and captured over 170 prisoners of war. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion reached the Enz River and moved the regimental command post to Schwarzenbruch. The following night, the 317<sup>th</sup> crossed the Enz River and captured the town of Enzen by surprise. The town was southeast of Hill 408 and had a bridge intact.<sup>8</sup> The next few days found the infantrymen clearing enemy resistance around Nusbaum.<sup>9</sup> While in the area, the troops also captured Bollendorf and Mettendorf. While on patrol in Mettendorf, K Company commander, Lieutenant Charles W. Garbutt, found himself surrounded. Garbutt was an ex-paratrooper who routinely accompanied his men on patrols. A fortuneteller once told him

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<sup>5</sup> Charles B. MacDonald, *The Last Offensive*, p. 112.

<sup>6</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> George Mitchell, letter to author (September 25, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> MacDonald, *The Last Offensive*, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 57.

that only a knife wound, and nothing else, could kill him. He picked up a German rifle, fought his way out of town, and killed six Germans along the way.<sup>10</sup>

The regimental command post moved from Nusbaum to Mettendorf on February 25. The Germans were destroying bridges and leaving mines while withdrawing troops out of the area. From February 25 to March 12, the 317<sup>th</sup> crossed the Prum River and mopped up the area west of the Kyll River area north of Bitburg. While in reserve, the 317<sup>th</sup> took the opportunity to train replacements and rehabilitate personnel and equipment.<sup>11</sup> “Here ended the campaign which will probably be referred to in history as that of the Eifel,” wrote Patton. “It had been a long, hard fight with many river crossings, much bad weather, and a great deal of good luck.”<sup>12</sup>

As proud as Patton was of the Eifel Campaign, he was even more boastful of his next operation. “The Third Army’s Palatinate Campaign,” he wrote, “was considered by many, including the Germans, to be one of the greatest campaigns of the entire war.”<sup>13</sup> On March 13, General Walton Walker, the commander of XX “Ghost” Corps, issued an attack order for the Palatinate region of Germany that sent the 317<sup>th</sup> eastward against strong enemy resistance.<sup>14</sup> Intense artillery fire fell as the regiment began its assault in the early morning hours. The offensive stalled before it could capture the hills to the east.

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<sup>10</sup> Thundering Herd, “Untried Riflemen of K Company Rout Enemy in 317<sup>th</sup>’s Bulge Drive Through Luxembourg,” p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>12</sup> General George S. Patton, *War As I Knew It*, p. 256.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 257.

<sup>14</sup> *Ghost Corps*, p. 19.

Nonetheless, it continued and by the end of the day, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion captured the town of Greimerath.

The command post once again came under intense artillery fire due to the simple mistake of an engineer officer who glanced out a window. German artillery observers spotted the glare off his goggles, and, suddenly, shells of all calibers including tank rounds, artillery, and “screaming meemies” (thirty-inch rockets) rained down on Greimerath. Fisher decided to move the command post and left Hayes to continue operations until the new site was operational. Hayes remembered what happened next:

Suddenly, the entire house disintegrated around me (it was only a small peasant home made of stone). I stood there in the open holding a phone. It might have been like a funny skit dreamed up for a later war movie. However, nothing funny passed through my mind because my little party of perhaps six had all been killed but I remained unscathed. I did, of course, receive bruises about my shoulders and arms from the flying stones and the roofing tiles. I raced to . . . our jeep and drove to our new command post where I notified the medics of the tragedy.<sup>15</sup>

Sometime after midnight, the regiment experienced an eerie silence. All enemy artillery, mortar, and screaming meemie fire ceased all at once. Suddenly, the entire town erupted. The Germans had decided to evacuate across the Rhine and expend all remaining ammunition so it would not fall into the hands of the Americans. After about an hour, the shelling stopped just as suddenly as it had begun. Nothing happened for the rest of the night.

The next day, the regiment resumed the attack. German resistance faded and the 317<sup>th</sup> continued to face rear-guard elements that inflicted as many casualties as possible

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<sup>15</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

before falling back. During one such rear-guard action, several German machine guns pinned down the front-line soldiers of the 317<sup>th</sup>. McBride called the regimental command post angrily demanding to know why the attack had halted. When Hayes explained the situation, McBride became enraged and exclaimed that the entire German front was in full retreat. “Maybe the front had collapsed, but certainly not in front of me,” Hayes later wrote. “Men were being killed and wounded around me and we simply could not march down the road in a column of two.”<sup>16</sup>

The 317<sup>th</sup> received orders to follow 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Division’s Task Force Cherry. One battalion supported the task force while the second rested and a third marched ahead on foot. The regiment followed Task Force Cherry through the Palatinate region and mopped up any bypassed resistance. While supporting an attack on Kaiserslautern, Sergeant Byron Hoover of the intelligence and reconnaissance platoon temporarily became the acting mayor on March 20. Hoover rode into town on a 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Division tank and threw a grenade through the window of a building full of Germans. Hoover captured a colonel, four majors, five captains, ten lieutenants, and eighty enlisted. “We got places to go,” he remarked. “Who wants to be mayor of Kaiserslautern? Here are the keys to the joint.”<sup>17</sup> While in Kaiserslautern, a member of the intelligence and reconnaissance platoon captured an extremely well-decorated man whom he thought was at least a field marshal. Upon questioning, it was determined that the distinguished

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<sup>16</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>17</sup> Pat Mitchell, “Grenade Elects Hoover Mayor,” *Blue Ridger*, p. 4.



prisoner was merely the railroad stationmaster. He was a Nazi and his loyalty had brought him rewards in the form of fine uniforms and many meaningless decorations.<sup>18</sup>

Patton's Palatinate Campaign ended with the 317<sup>th</sup> in Kaiserslautern as German resistance continued to deteriorate in front of the regiment. Casualties began to drop and morale soared. The next objective was the Rhine River. "I decided that we should cross at Mainz," Patton wrote in his diary, "north of the Main River and directed Walker [XX Corps Commander] to do it as soon as practical."<sup>19</sup> The 317<sup>th</sup> soldiers rejoiced when they heard that the Allies had captured the Remagen Bridge across the Rhine intact on March 7. Unfortunately, the infantrymen would have to cross in assault boats.

The 317<sup>th</sup> received the warning order to cross in the vicinity of Mainz on March 20. Patton wanted to speed his army's advance east and Mainz, with its central road and railway network, was the logical crossing site.<sup>20</sup> The Germans were now obviously attempting an organized defense on the east side of the Rhine River. Hayes reconnoitered the proposed crossing location and was convinced that the best site was between the island of Saint Peter and the confluence of the Rhine and Main Rivers to the south. He determined that a strong artillery barrage would assist against the well-established defense on the east bank. During his reconnaissance, Hayes witnessed a peculiar sight:

As I surveyed the riverbanks with my field glasses, I saw some German civilians come down to the river, probably to get some water. In what appeared to me to be a mindless act of barbarism the German soldiers on

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<sup>18</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>19</sup> Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 661.

<sup>20</sup> MacDonald, *The Last Offensive*, p. 289.

the east bank shot their own citizens on the west bank. This revealing incident had the merit of demonstrating to my satisfaction that the defenders were jittery and poorly trained. I guessed that they were home defense troops who had no prior combat experience.<sup>21</sup>

By March 27, the regiment was in Mainz preparing for a crossing the next morning. To Hayes' dismay, the field order sacrificed the preparatory artillery fire in an attempt to achieve surprise. He argued with Lieutenant Colonel August Elegar, the division operations officer, that the troops could not surprise the enemy because of the wide-open terrain and a full moon, but General McBride would not change the order.<sup>22</sup>

Late that evening, infantrymen seized Saint Peter's Aue without incident. As Hayes predicted, the moonlight made the soldiers excellent targets for the German artillery and small-arms fire zeroed in on the crossing troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. Lieutenant Frank, a platoon leader in G Company, was killed during the crossing. He was one of the original enlisted soldiers of G Company and had earned a battlefield commission due to his outstanding performance.<sup>23</sup> His death, along with many others, may well have resulted from the lack of preparatory artillery fire. Albert S. Haley Jr. of Jones, Oklahoma had just rejoined H Company as an 81-millimeter mortarman. He remembered crossing the Rhine "where many casualties (29 killed in action, and 73 wounded in action) were incurred by 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, including 4 killed in action and 7

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<sup>21</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Charles MacDonald in his book, *The Last Offensive*, incorrectly stated, "Following a half hour artillery preparation, men of the 317<sup>th</sup> pushed out in assault boats . . . . By the end of the day . . . the 317<sup>th</sup> had lost not a man killed and only five wounded." Veterans of the 317<sup>th</sup> who read this agree that it is incorrect regarding the artillery barrage and the number of casualties.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

wounded in action from H Company.”<sup>24</sup> Hayes had no doubts. “To this day,” he later said, “I remain convinced that many of these losses could have been prevented had we launched our usual pre-attack artillery barrage.”<sup>25</sup>

When the soldiers eventually landed on the east bank, enemy resistance lasted a mere fifteen minutes and then the Germans began to surrender in mass. By the time the second wave of G.I.s landed, all opposition had ceased and the soldiers moved on to Wiesbaden. “[T]he 80<sup>th</sup> Division had completed its crossings of the Rhine and the Main without much difficulty and was headed on Wiesbaden,” Patton later wrote.<sup>26</sup> By the end of the day, the 317<sup>th</sup> seized numerous towns in the area, an aircraft factory, landing field, six enemy aircraft, an ordnance repair depot, artillery pieces, 20-millimeter anti-aircraft guns, a German military hospital, approximately 900 prisoners of war, and, most notably, a champagne factory with over 4,000 cases of champagne.<sup>27</sup> Every soldier near the factory “liberated” several bottles. “It seemed, although it is probably apocryphal,” remarked Hayes, “the fighting for the next several days was marked by a devil-may-care abandonment which proved the wisdom of the British policy of giving their soldiers grog before a battle.”<sup>28</sup> Another commander had a similar recollection. “The result was more drunkenness that I can recall at any other time during the war . . . ,” he remembered. “It was a wild night . . . . I took no disciplinary action against anyone and contented myself with verifying that everyone was accounted for when we left Wiesbaden the following

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<sup>24</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 197.

<sup>25</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>26</sup> Patton, *War As I Knew It*, p. 277.

<sup>27</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 65.

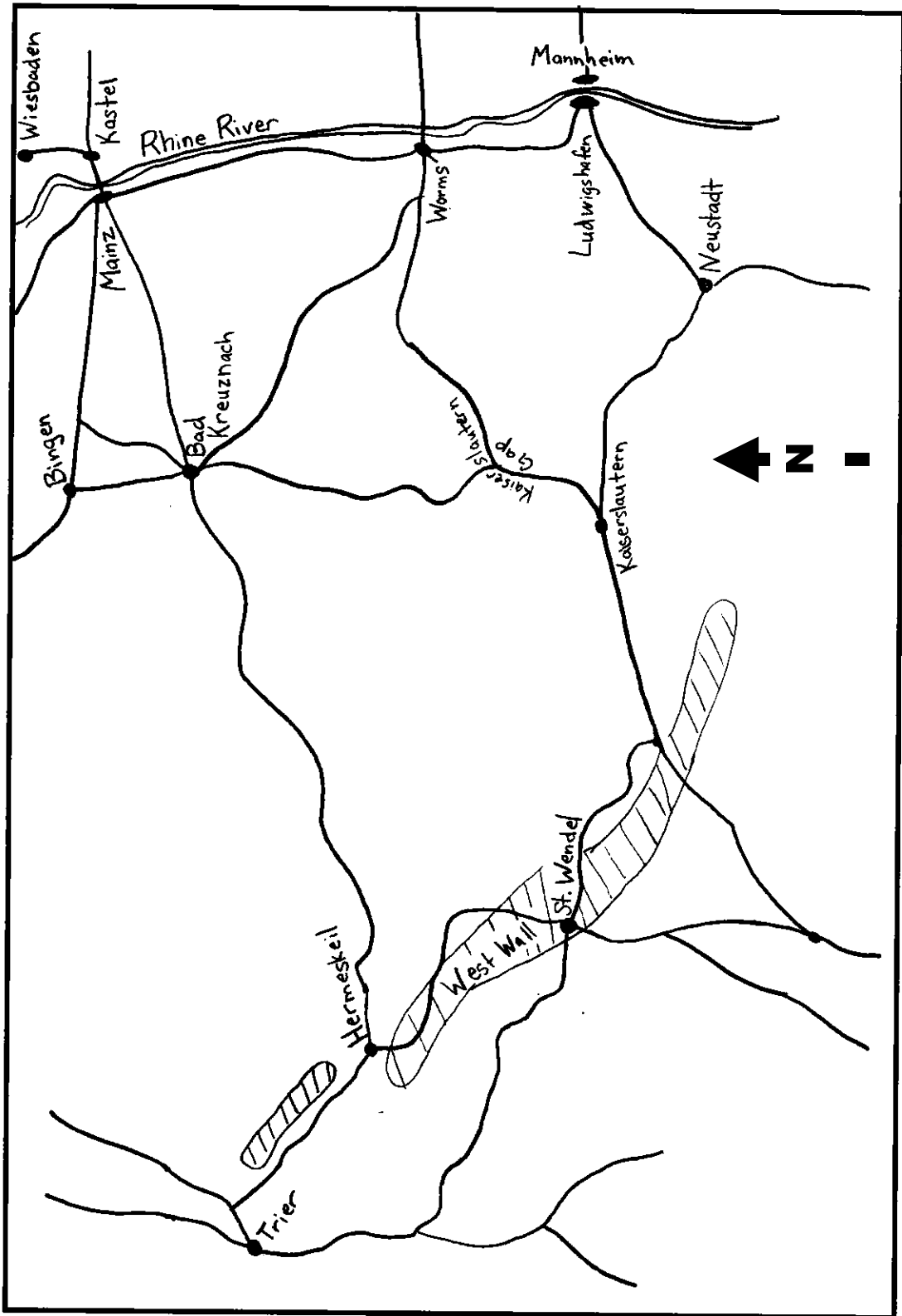
<sup>28</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

morning.”<sup>29</sup> For the remainder of March, the 317<sup>th</sup> continued to mop up German resistance in the area. The regiment accounted for over 1,000 prisoners before beginning its move on Kassel.<sup>30</sup>

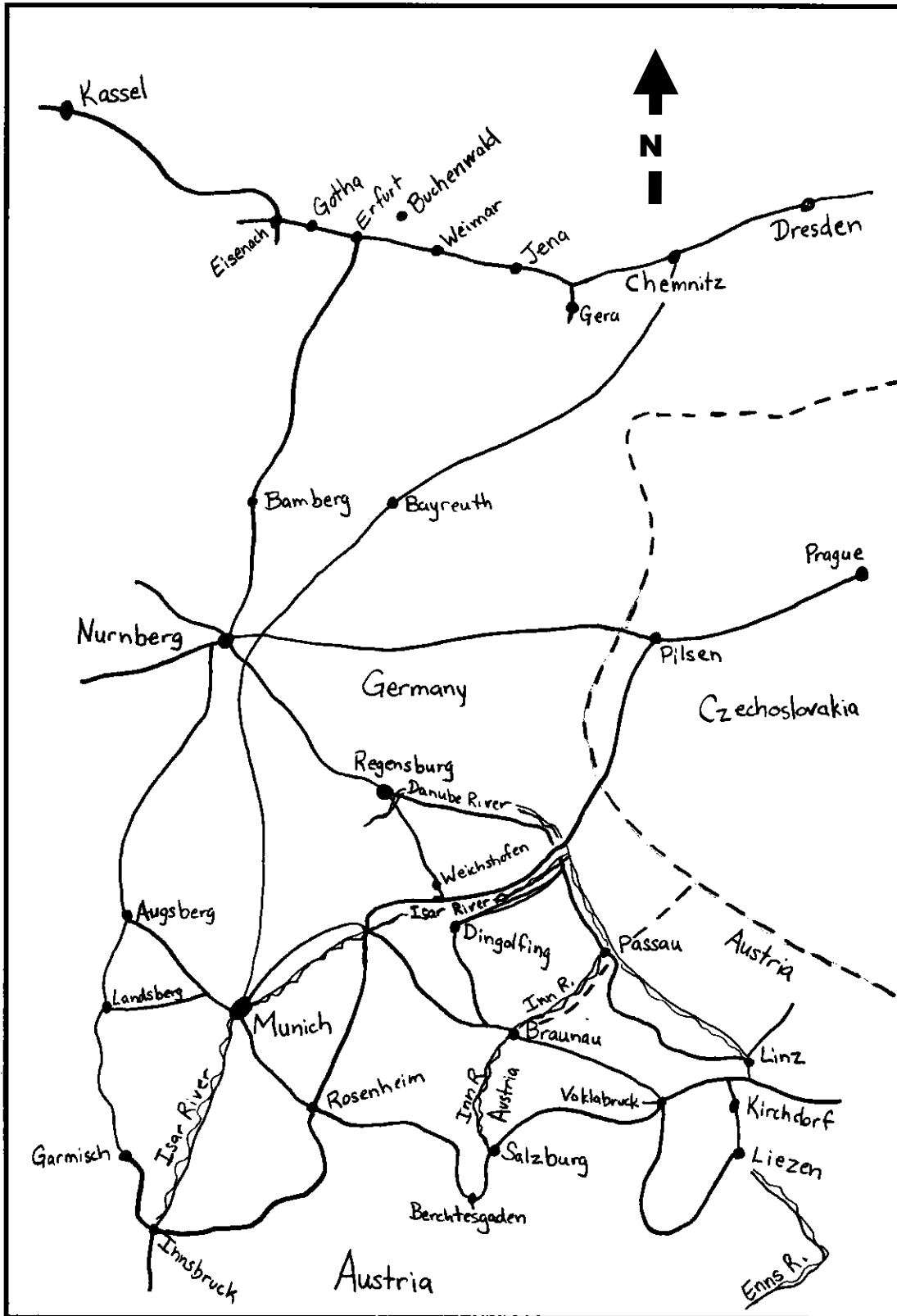
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<sup>29</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 62.

<sup>30</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 67.



Map 11 – West Wall to Wiesbaden



Map 12 – Kassel to Garmisch

## CHAPTER 7

### TO THE END OF THE WAR: APRIL 1 – MAY 9, 1945

After crossing the Rhine, the 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment played a significant role in the final Allied advance through Germany. Enemy resistance faded and the soldiers knew it was only a matter of time before Germany surrendered. Nonetheless, many short, but deadly battles remained. Throughout the next several weeks, the infantrymen would literally divide Germany and eventually face a considerable enemy force in Austria at the closure of the war.

The first of these post-Rhine battles was for the city of Kassel. The 317<sup>th</sup> traveled north on the autobahn out of Frankfurt. At this time, the Third Army front was exactly the width of the autobahn as at least three divisions moved north. The resistance was feeble, and the infantrymen simply bypassed many of the Germans they encountered along the route. On April 1, the 317<sup>th</sup> moved into an assembly area south of Kassel in preparation for the attack.<sup>1</sup> “[T]he 80<sup>th</sup> Division of the XX Corps resumed the attack on Kassel and had a rather rough time of it,” Patton wrote, “but whenever we turned the 80<sup>th</sup> Division on anything, we always knew that the objective would be attained.”<sup>2</sup>

The battle lasted for two days. One of the strange vignettes of the battle was the phoenix-like regeneration of the enemy tanks. As soon as the soldiers destroyed one,

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<sup>1</sup> Colonel James Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>2</sup> General George S. Patton, *War As I Knew It*, p. 281.

several others would appear and take its place. After the mêlée, the Americans discovered that the Germans had built an underground tank factory and the crews came from a school fifty miles away to move the new Tiger Royal tanks forward into battle.<sup>3</sup> “The effect was to create a seemingly endless supply of tanks,” remembered Hayes.<sup>4</sup>

On April 4, German General Erxleben, the Nazi commander, requested a three-hour truce to evacuate the civilians of Kassel, which the Americans denied because most of the civilians had already left the town. Instead they demanded that he surrender, which he did at noon that day.<sup>5</sup> “This general stated that he believed that Germany would still win,” Patton wrote. “His ideas seemed at variance with his action in surrendering. Furthermore, he was the first German General who had stated he thought Germany would win. All the others said Germany was defeated, but that they continued the battle because they were ordered to.”<sup>6</sup>

That same day, the 317<sup>th</sup> liberated its first concentration camp. Hayes was on a reconnaissance mission for the next day’s battle when he ran across a large building with an SS officer and a group of people dressed in black and white striped clothing. Hayes remembered this experience:

I walked into the building and the stench of death hit me with unexpected force. The building contained several rooms and each of them had tiers of wooden bunks along the walls. The tiers were four or five bunks high and most of them had an emaciated human being in them. These starving people were in every stage of dead, dying, and some were even beginning to decay.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Murrell, *History of the 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, E.T.O.*, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>5</sup> Edgar E. Bredbenner, Jr., *80<sup>th</sup> “Blue Ridge” Infantry Division*, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Patton, *War As I Knew It*, p. 284.



Most of those still alive could barely sit on the edge of their bunks. A few shuffled around on spindly legs whose muscles had seemingly wasted away to nothingness. Some of them were naked and totally disoriented. Others had defecated or urinated onto the filthy floor. A few who still remained healthy or were clearly newcomers to the facility showed the deep emotion of being freed . . . . I called the regimental CP and told Major Carey, the regimental surgeon, of the medical problem I had just uncovered. Major Carey later told me that there were about three or four hundred people in the building, many of them dead or incapable of surviving through the day. I had just liberated the first concentration camp encountered by the 317th Infantry.<sup>7</sup>

After the fall of Kassel, the regiment moved east to relieve 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in Gotha on April 7.<sup>8</sup> Upon arrival, the 317<sup>th</sup> captured an airfield with several enemy airplanes and witnessed a P-47 Thunderbolt shoot down a Messerschmidt in a dogfight the next day. Beginning April 11, the soldiers began a drive eastward toward Erfurt, where the Germans had set up a strong defense made of various units. Hayes called for a time-on-target mission of seventeen battalions of artillery to reduce the defenses. This technique resulted in 200 cannons firing sequentially so that all the rounds exploded over the target at the same time. “The effect was so overwhelming at the point we had chosen for the time on target that we easily breached the German defensive position and the Germans surrendered the city,” Hayes remembered. “We had relatively few casualties in this assault and simply convinced me, once again, of the wisdom of using our firepower to save lives.”<sup>9</sup> At the end of the day on April 12, the 317<sup>th</sup> had captured over 2,600 prisoners near Erfurt.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>8</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>10</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 74.

It was in the area between Erfurt and Weimar that the Americans discovered the infamous Buchenwald concentration camp. Because of the rapid advance of Patton's Third Army, many of the SS garrison retreated into the wood lines on the afternoon of the April 11. This gave the prisoners a chance to overpower the remaining guards and liberate themselves. The next day, Staff Sergeant Martin "Dick" Rennie, a squad leader in 3rd Platoon of A Company, became the first soldier from the 317<sup>th</sup> to enter the camp.<sup>11</sup> John Schaefer of Cranbury, New Jersey had joined the army when he was only fifteen after lying about his age. He remembered eight German guards trying to escape from Buchenwald dressed as inmates, but could not morally overcome inhibitions against killing the unarmed Germans. "If I would [sic] have shot them, I would not have been any better than they were," Schaefer recalled. "But the prisoners did."<sup>12</sup> General Patton later visited the camp. "I saw the most horrible sight I have ever seen," he commented in a letter. "It was a German slave camp . . . . We took all the soldiers we could to see it, as I believe it is one of the best arguments against fraternization that I know."<sup>13</sup>

The 317<sup>th</sup> continued to move east and by April 13 it had occupied Weimar and Jena. The next day the soldiers captured over 900 prisoners, including a brigadier general and four of his staff officers.<sup>14</sup> Percy Smith, the G Company first sergeant, wrote to his wife detailing the questioning of German prisoners:

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<sup>11</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> John Schaefer, telephone interview by author (September 12, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, p. 685.

<sup>14</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 75.

I asked the interpreter – “Ask this guy how old he is.” He was just fifteen years old. A few minutes later two more gave up and they were fourteen. A little later another gave up and he was fifteen . . . . [T]hey were pitiful to look at – they were so young . . . . They were scared stiff as they had killed some of our men and thought we were going to shoot them.<sup>15</sup>

By April 16, the 317<sup>th</sup> was nearing Chemnitz. In Gera, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion guarded a large ammunition point. There was not much enemy contact and the regiment maintained law and order while conducting training.

On April 17, XX Corps regrouped for a drive south into Austria.<sup>16</sup> The 80<sup>th</sup> became the corps reserve and moved to Nürnberg. The soldiers backtracked approximately seventy-five miles and turned south through Bamberg. While en route, some of the infantrymen glimpsed the new German jet-propelled Messerschmidt 262. A couple of P-47 Thunderbolts attempted to destroy the jet, but the German pilot applied full throttle and left them standing still.

Upon reaching Nürnberg on April 21, Hayes went to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division headquarters to arrange for relief of one of its regiments. His escort turned out to be none other than Audie Murphy -- the most highly decorated soldier of World War II. He was working in headquarters while awaiting his Medal of Honor. The 317<sup>th</sup> spent most of its time in Nürnberg clearing out snipers and Germans that simply refused to surrender.<sup>17</sup>

A week later, the regiment received orders to move south through Regensburg into Austria. The roads leading to Regensburg were in poor condition and overflowed

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<sup>15</sup> Percy Smith, letter to wife (April 16, 1945).

<sup>16</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

with military traffic.<sup>18</sup> The soldiers proceeded across the Danube River on April 29. As the 317<sup>th</sup> crossed the river, a German trailer pulled by a jeep slipped off the tracks and blocked traffic on the bridge. The wheel span on the trailer was wider than the tracks laid across the pontoon bridge. While the soldiers were working to dislodge the trailer, Patton arrived. “See that truck load of German prisoners back there, get those SBs up here and if some of them drown while getting this so and so trailer freed, so be it,” he exclaimed to the men. “Now get the hell on the ball and get this GD column on its way and leave that GD trailer here.”<sup>19</sup> The prisoners freed the trailer and the crossing continued.

The 317<sup>th</sup> continued towards Austria as the division reserve. The 179<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion set up a treadway ferry and bridgehead over the Isar River. The regiment was responsible for guarding the sector while the 13<sup>th</sup> Armored Division crossed in the cold rain and snow flurries.<sup>20</sup> Once across and assembled in Dingolfing, the 317<sup>th</sup> was alerted for movement to the vicinity of Braunau, Austria. The 80<sup>th</sup> received orders from XX Corps to move immediately to relieve the 13<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and be prepared to exploit the bridge across the Inn River. The soldiers were to keep moving forward until they made contact with the Russians. On May 3, the 317<sup>th</sup> moved to Braunau to cross the Inn River in the continuing cold with occasional snow and rain. The only bridge remaining near Braunau was a narrow, partially destroyed railroad bridge that the soldiers and equipment crossed in single file.

The next day, they continued moving to the southeast without opposition until Voklabruck. An enemy strongpoint of infantry put up a strong fight but the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

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<sup>18</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 78.

overcame the resistance. By the end of the fighting, the infantrymen had captured over 7,000 prisoners. Voklabruck was a railroad hub and the soldiers put it into use evacuating prisoners to the rear. Patrols sent out to contact the Russians were unsuccessful.<sup>21</sup> Hayes and his driver made a colossal capture that day,

As we approached the edge of a huge wooded area, a resplendent figure suddenly stepped out of the woods and waved at us to stop. I kept my tommy gun at the ready but had no need for it because the man wanted to surrender. He turned out to be a Hungarian colonel who had obviously prepared himself for this occasion by putting on his best uniform and his best pair of highly polished black boots, all topped by a fancy cap sporting a bright feather. He saluted, I saluted, then he announced in perfect English that he was “Colonel Podrofsky, commanding the 25th and 26th Hungarian Divisions.” He then formally surrendered his pistol, a P-38 Walther. I took the pistol and accepted his surrender. Just like that, I had captured something on the order of thirty to forty thousand Hungarians! Instead of making a big deal of this surrender, I told the Colonel that I would notify the proper authorities of his surrender and they would be along to give him further orders. To my mind, a bizarre part of this story is that the surrender was, in a way, invalid because unbeknownst to Colonel Podrofsky he was an ally! The facts were that a few days earlier the Hungarian Government had surrendered to the Russians who promptly replaced the government with a communist government and had it declare war on Germany. Thus at the moment that I had taken Podrofsky's surrender, he was actually supposed to be fighting on our side against the Germans! The incongruousness of this war grew by leaps and bounds.<sup>22</sup>

On May 5, McBride created Task Force Smythe composed of various units of the 80<sup>th</sup>, including A Company, C Company, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 317<sup>th</sup>. Higher headquarters charged Colonel George W. Smythe with leading the task force down the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Murrell, *317<sup>th</sup> History*, p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

Enns River valley to clear enemy resistance to the north and west of the river.<sup>23</sup> The next day Task Force Smythe learned that a large number of SS troops were located in Klaus. The soldiers attacked from Kirchdorf that afternoon and the Germans immediately offered to surrender, providing they could withdraw east to continue the fight against the Russians. The Americans rejected the proposal and the Germans requested until midnight to make a final decision on the surrender, which they ultimately declined. The American delegation sent forward to speak to the Germans noted that up to 15,000 enemy troops were in the area. The 317<sup>th</sup> had no choice but to prepare for a tough fight the next morning.

The remainder of regiment attached to Task Force Smythe as the reserve for the upcoming battle. The next morning, the task force attacked rapidly to the south. At approximately 9:30 a.m., the 317<sup>th</sup> received a field message that announced the surrender of the German High Command.<sup>24</sup> The Allies had won the war in Europe! Private First Class Edward Jacos of Hancock County, Indiana was a liaison during the last six weeks of the war and remembered receiving the message. “I drove the lieutenant that [sic] picked the message up at Third Army Headquarters that the war was over and delivered it to the 80<sup>th</sup>, 317<sup>th</sup>, and Companys L and M.”<sup>25</sup> Hayes recalled getting a phone call from the division chief of staff that he found very hard to believe: “Jim, the Germans have surrendered.” He then instructed the regiment to postpone the attack and hold its present positions. The soldiers remained on full alert and, the next day, the entire German Sixth Army formally surrendered to McBride. Hayes remembered that day well:

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<sup>23</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 82.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83.

That army, we soon learned, numbered almost 200,000 and it defended the area into which the 317<sup>th</sup> would attack. Had the Germans not surrendered, I am sure our losses would have exceeded those we suffered in the Moselle Bridgehead and during the Battle of the Bulge. The terrain was tortuous, easy to defend, and required the special skills of mountain divisions. All of these factors would have resulted in a disaster for the 317<sup>th</sup> . . . . The following day the surrender was formalized and the war in Europe had formally ended. It looked now like the GI slogan, "Home Alive in 45" might come true.<sup>26</sup>

Peace came officially on May 9<sup>th</sup>, VE (Victory in Europe) Day, and the 317<sup>th</sup> immediately began operations to disband the German Army and stabilize the war-torn country.<sup>27</sup> The Americans moved thousands of German captives to prisoner of war enclosures and collected their weapons for destruction. The Hungarian commander turned over the assets of the Hungarian National Bank, including the Crown of Saint Stefan, which the soldiers had carried with them.<sup>28</sup> Task Force Smythe recovered over \$30 million dollars in gold bullion and \$300,000 worth of foreign currency.<sup>29</sup> Lieutenant Irving Goode of K Company was in charge of an infantry detail that removed the gold from its hiding place in a church basement in Spital, Austria and then moved it by convoy to Frankfurt. The boxes were so heavy that the soldiers constructed two-man carriers to carry the gold out of the cellar.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bredbenner, *80th*, p. 146.

<sup>26</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>27</sup> Murrell, *317<sup>th</sup> History*, p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>29</sup> Murrell, *317<sup>th</sup> History*, p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> Irving Goode, letter to author (October 10, 2001).

A few weeks later, the regiment moved to Rokicani, Czechoslovakia, near Pilsen for a brief time. In July, the unit repositioned to Garmisch, Germany for occupation duty. The soldiers guarded prisoner of war camps and lived in luxury hotels in the city. Robert W. Linhart of Cleveland Ohio was a first sergeant in Garmisch and had Hitler's personal valet as his own during his time there.<sup>31</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion received the assignment to guard the Neuschwanstein castle, known to most as the Disney Palace. It contained some of the most valuable treasures looted from Europe by the Nazis. Hayes, now commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, had strict orders from Patton not to allow anyone to enter without his express permission. He did so until October when a commission responsible for returning the treasures assumed responsibility of the castle.<sup>32</sup>

In order to determine who went home and who stayed now that the war was over, the Army devised a point system. The arrangement gave points for longevity, awards, and other various reasons. Some soldiers went home while others were reassigned to units still in theater. The regiment itself officially deactivated on January 10, 1946 at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. The men of the 317<sup>th</sup> could be proud. They had fought its way from Evron, France to Kirchdorf, Austria. It had endured tough fighting at the Moselle River and during the Battle of the Bulge. The troops had seen the horrors of war and witnessed the best and worst of human nature. Now they were going home. But they would leave 312 officers and 7392 enlisted men behind<sup>33</sup> – fallen comrades in the struggle to save the world from Nazi tyranny.

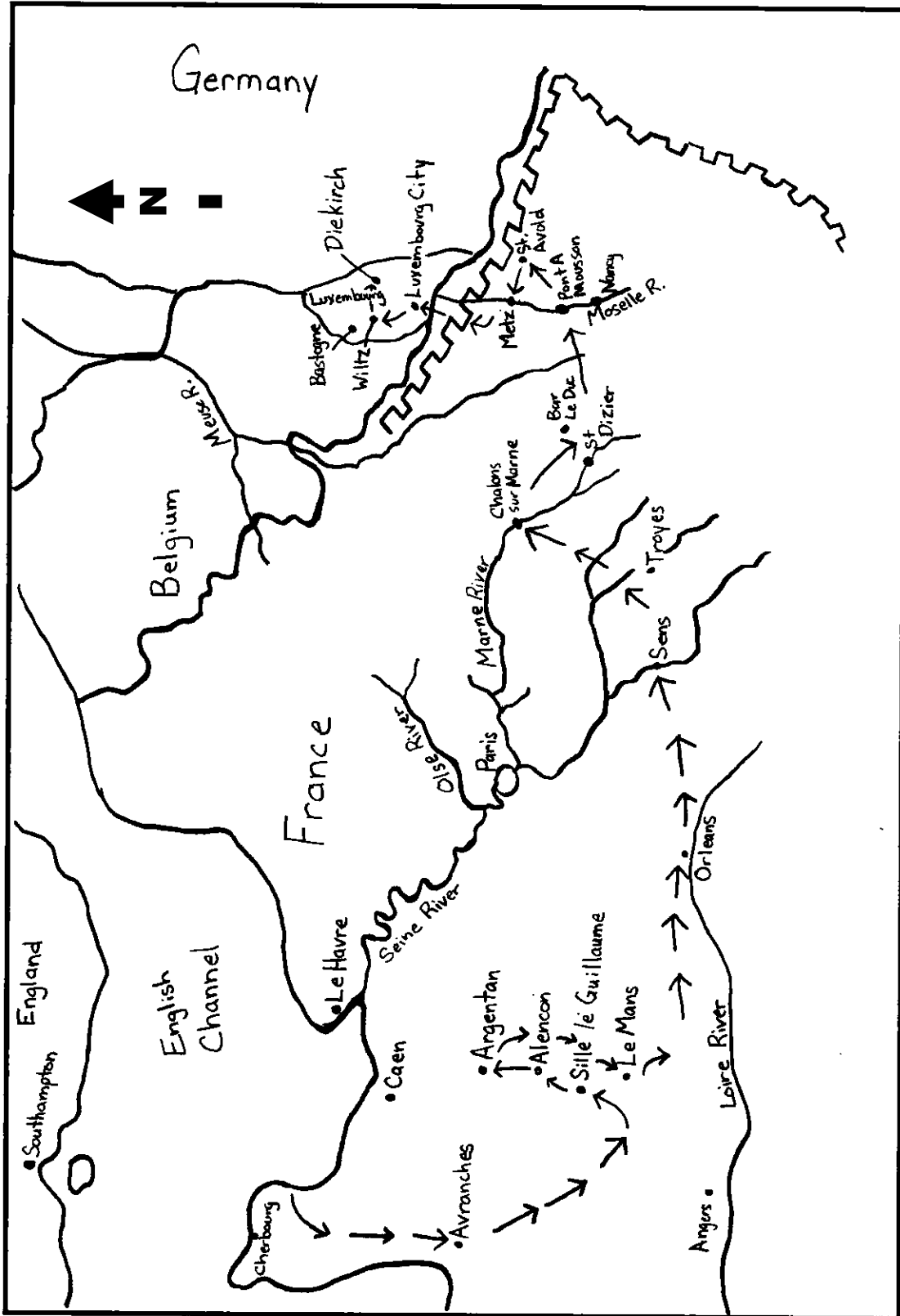
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<sup>31</sup> Bredbenner, *80<sup>th</sup>*, p. 146.

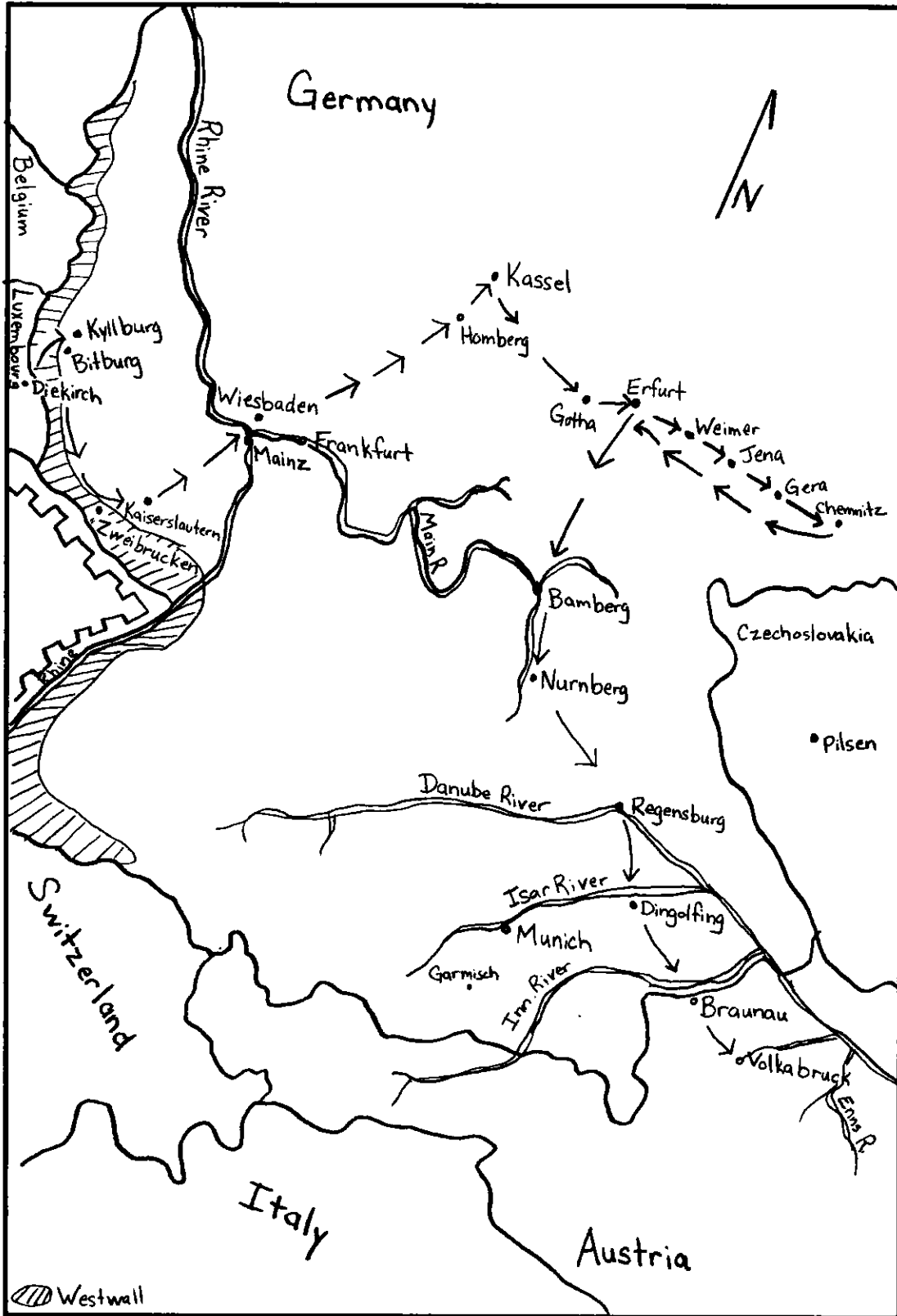
<sup>32</sup> Hayes, *The Valiant Die Once* (mss).

<sup>33</sup> Murrell, *317th History*, p. 83.





Map 13 – Route through France and Luxembourg



Map 14 – Route through Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia

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