

HOLD AT ALL COSTS

ACTION ON THE NORTHERN SHOULDER DURING THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

By Don Smart

The morning was cold, dark and quiet. As the 5 o'clock hour ticked away, the lookouts manned their foxholes while off duty men slept. It had the look of another day; improve the defenses, look to your weapons and possible patrols. This stretch of the Ghost Front in front of the small village of Hofen was defended by the 3rd Battalion, 395th Regiment, 99th Infantry division. Integrated into the front line was Company 'A', 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion with its twelve 3-inch guns. At 5:25 on the morning of December 16 this routine changed dramatically.

They were called "The Checkerboard Division" from the insignia of a shield with a checkerboard inside. The 99th had served in peace time as a training unit for Army reservists in the Western Pennsylvania—West Virginia—Ohio triangle. In November of 1942, Brigadier General Walter E. Lauer took command and started shaping the division's three Infantry Regiments, the 393rd, 394th and 395th, into a combat unit. By the end of 1943, they had conducted division size mock battles and maneuvers in large areas of Louisiana and Mississippi. Just when the division looked like it was ready for combat, they were ordered to give up three thousand soldiers to divisions in Italy. The officers were shocked and disillusioned as the three Regiments were gutted and reduced to no more than battalion size. Moving to a new home at Camp Maxey in northeast Texas, the 99th started anew with an infusion from the U.S. Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) ranks.

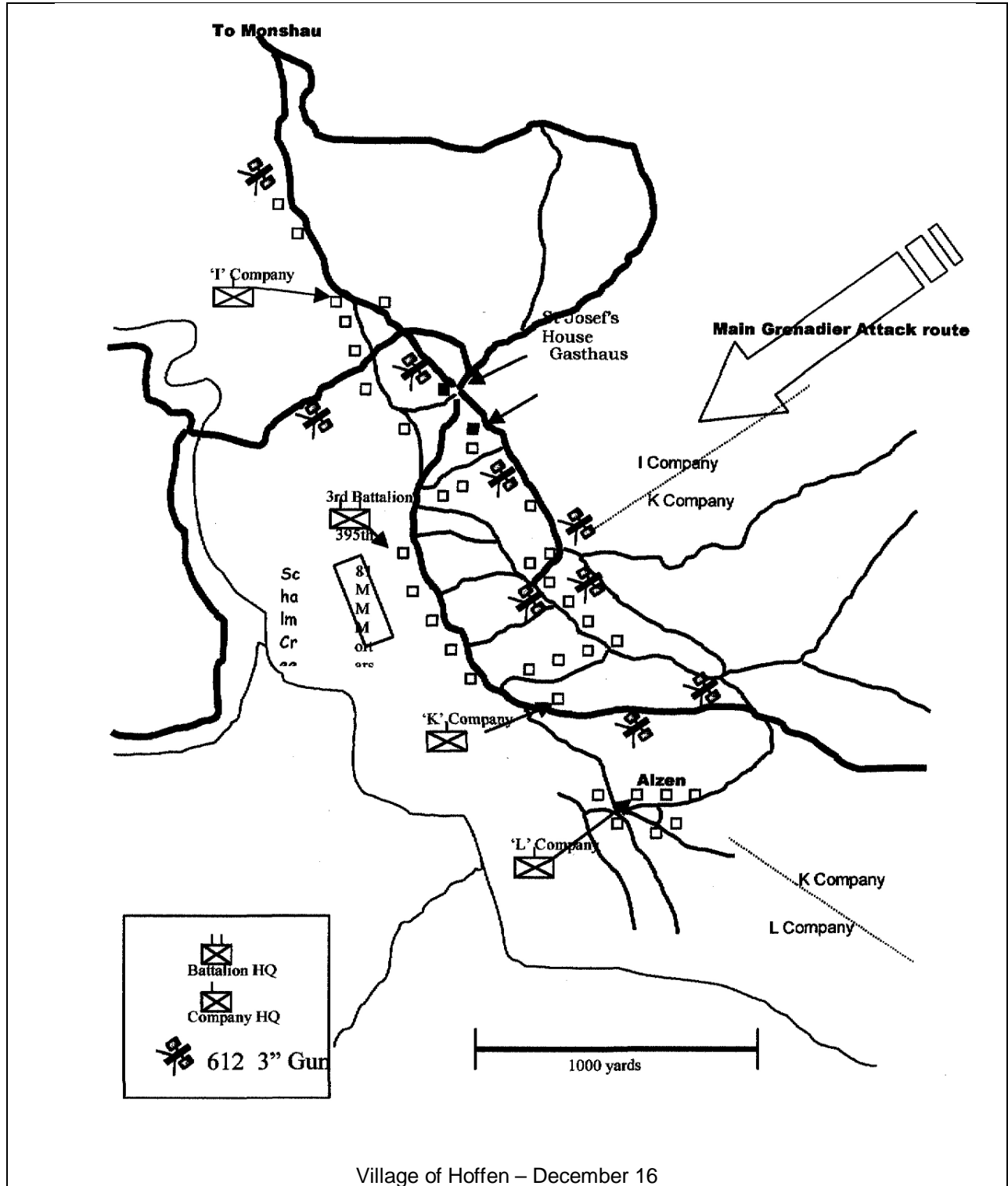
The ASTP was formed to put the brightest and best of America's young men into college training for the army's future needs of engineers, scientists, doctors or linguists. However by the end of 1943 it was evident that the army could not meet the needs for men who could shoot rifles, machine guns and stand up to the enemy. The army needed 150,000 of these young soldiers for combat training. To fill the Checkerboard's ranks, they came from schools in the southwest; Louisiana State, University of Arkansas, Baylor, Oklahoma A&M, New Mexico State, John Tarleton Agriculture College, McNeese Junior College and East Texas State Teachers College¹. Three thousand two hundred former students arrived at Camp Maxey and started the regimen of integration into combat units.

General Lauer and his officers were delighted with the young, intelligent, hale and hardy newcomers. The old grizzled NCO's had serious doubts at first, however, as training progressed the former student-soldiers processed into fighters. By August of 1944, the 99th was honed into a power that was ready for combat. In September the division started the trip to the unknown and on November 9, 1944 the Third Battalion, commanded by Lt. Colonel McClernand Butler, arrived at the small village of Hofen on the German border. They relieved a part of Combat Command 'B' of the 15th Armored Infantry Battalion, 5th Armored Division.

'I' Company, commanded by Captain Charles Burgin, was on the left flank, with their line running from the center of Hofen. They tied into the 38th Cavalry Squadron, guarding the small town of Monshau. 'K' Company (Captain Horace Phillips) held the center position and

¹ Butler's Battlin Blue Bastards

extended around Hofen toward Alzen. 'L' Company, commanded by Captain Paul Rice, anchored the right flank in front of the tiny hamlet of Alzen. Col. Butler placed his Heavy Weapons Company 'M', commanded by Captain Ernest Golden, at a strategic point behind the rifle company areas.





Picture of St. Josef's House, used as OP 6 during the battle of Monshau/Hoffen. Picture taken on a trip to the Ardennes in 2002. Directly across the road is open fields leading down a slope to the small town of Rohen.

Colonel Butler is deeply admired by all ranks of the 3rd Battalion. He is an up-from-the-bottom Lieutenant Colonel and descended from a true Civil War Hero. As a combat commander, he knew his business and put on no airs around his men. He continually worried about the 3 miles plus that his three rifle companies, 193 men each, had to defend. There were gaps and spaces between the companies, platoons and squads. German patrols probing into Hofen at night prompting short, sharp firefights. Sounds of men running, harsh German whispers, potato-masher grenade explosions mixed with cries of pain at times were the norm in early December.

The battalion digs their foxhole line along the east edge of Hofen, looking out over cultivated fields delineated by hedgerows sloping down toward a shallow draw. About a mile away is the small village of Rohern. German soldiers are clearly visible moving around the village making some kind of preparations. The 38th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Robert E. O'Brien, defends the town of Monschau, a small picturesque place of cobblestone streets and timbered houses. Built on the steep bank of a meandering river, the town is known as a honeymoon place for German lovers. The Cavalrymen has some powerful allies in the form of a company of big, tracked M-10 Tank Destroyers sporting 3 inch guns. On the right past the small town of Alzen, L Company tied in with a troop of Cavalry belonging to the 99th Division. This unit had a handicap since their role is reconnaissance with the strong suit of mobility and speed. Their equipment is not suited for holding a defensive line.

Butler knows his men's fighting holes are spread too thin and does not form a good continuous line. He consolidates his rifle platoons into tiny points of massed firepower

interspersed with 30 and 50 caliber machine guns to keep attackers at bay. Since most of the infantrymen have a clear and treeless firing range he can cover most openings along the three-mile long front.

A hundred yards behind the foxhole line, Colonel Butler positions his eight 81-MM (3.24-inch) mortars. He places them in battery to achieve the most efficient bombardment. In addition, Butler keeps one rifle platoon off the firing line as a reserve. The sector is further bolstered by twelve 105-MM (4.2-inch) howitzers of the 196th field artillery battalion. The unit's artillery spotter, Lieutenant George Lonney, sets up shop in the tallest building in town designated as OP 6 or called St Josef's House by the locals.

On December 13, Butler and his men receive a blessing in the form of reinforcements. Company 'A', 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion rolls into town to support the 2nd Infantry Divisions assault on the Roer River Dams. The twelve towed guns are 3-inch high velocity rifles capable of firing both canisters filled with manshot, devastating to attacking infantry, plus projectiles that are armor piercing. The men of the 612th are trained to double both as riflemen and machine gunners another plus for Butler's infantrymen. The 612th men are also veteran combat troops, having fought through Normandy and the campaign for Brest.

Captain William S. Groff, Company Commander, sizes up the situation and agrees to integrate his weapons into Butler's defensive system. Colonel Butler is very appreciative to have tested fighter crews plugging some of the gaps in the line, plus their presence will raise the spirits of his troops. The Tank Destroyer troops dig emplacements, log up the parapets to shield the guns and get integrated into the communications net work. It's now December 14, the final grains of sand begin to run through the hourglass as 'Null tag' (zero day) approaches. Sergeant Dick Showalter, 18th Platoon Company 'A' of the 612th, commented on the arrival in Hofen.

"When we arrived at Hofen, we could see the village of Rohren. The next day it snowed as we moved the guns to the hill and dispersed them throughout the town. Two guns were set up to cover the road into town in a crossfire."

The 99th Infantry Division was assigned to V Corps, commanded by Major General Leonard T. Gerow. V Corps had the 1st, 2nd, 9th and 78th Infantry Divisions. V Corps is assigned to the First U.S. Army commanded by Lieutenant General Courtney H. Hodges. This army was part of the 12th Army Group under the command of Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley. The 12th Army group had overall responsibility of the Ardennes front.

The 99th Division's right flank tied into Major General Troy H. Middleton's VIII Corps. The VIII had the 14th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron holding a five-mile width in the all-important Losheim Gap. The 106th, 28th, 4th Infantry and 9th Armored Divisions covered the front all the way south to Echternech.

Like the 99th the 106th was a green division fresh from the states. The 4th and 28th were veteran units that had been bruised and battered in the Hurtgen Forest campaign. This 75 mile front was called the 'Ghost Front', a place to rest divisions and give others a chance to gain experience. Null Tag would demonstrate it made no difference as to experience.

Across that one and a half mile stretch of frozen snow covered fields interlaced with hedgerows that separated Hofen from Rohen, the enemy is silently gathering forces for the great plan; Wacht am Rhein (Watch on the Rhine). Hitler suddenly thrust this plan on his staff in September 1944. It called for the German Army to break through the thinly held area in the

Ardennes, and drive to the port city of Antwerp. This would split the allied armies causing another “Dunkirk like situation” for the English. Hitler assumed the fragile coalition of the allies would then fall apart and America would sue for peace. The Ardennes battlefield was seventy-five miles long with the Monschau/Hofen area as the northern most shoulder. Conquest of this area and the subsequent holding of this shoulder was vital to the successful operation of the plan.

67th Army Corp. commanded by Lieutenant General Otto Hitzfeld, has the responsibility for taking the Monschau/Hofen area. The 67th is a part of the Sixth Panzer Army, the most powerful and best equipped of the three armies scheduled to assault the thin American lines. Commanded by General of the Waffen-SS Josef (“Sepp”) Dietrich, the Sixth Panzer Army consists of the 18th SS Panzer Corp with four assault divisions, the 2nd SS Panzer Corp with two SS divisions and the 67th Army Corp.

Hitzfeld’s mission was to smash across the American lines taking the road network above Elsenborn that goes through Eupen and Liege. He would set up a blocking front to protect Dietrich’s 1st and 2nd SS Panzer Corps as they raced for the Meuse River and on to Antwerp. The 67th Corp was composed of the 326th, 272nd and 246th Volksgrenadier Divisions. The 272nd, commanded by Colonel George Kasmalla, was virtually destroyed in Normandy and had to be rebuilt for the Ardennes offensive. It was scheduled to attack Monschau but when the Roer Dam offensive started it had to fight defensively against the American 78th Division. The 326th Volksgrenadier division, commanded by Colonel Erwin Kaschner, was also rebuilt after retreating from France. Its ranks were stocked with inexperienced and poorly trained troops. Hitler gave Josef Goebbels the task of forcing the “Slackers and rear-area swine” into the front line ranks. Men were moved from Navy and Luftwaffe units to fill out the division.

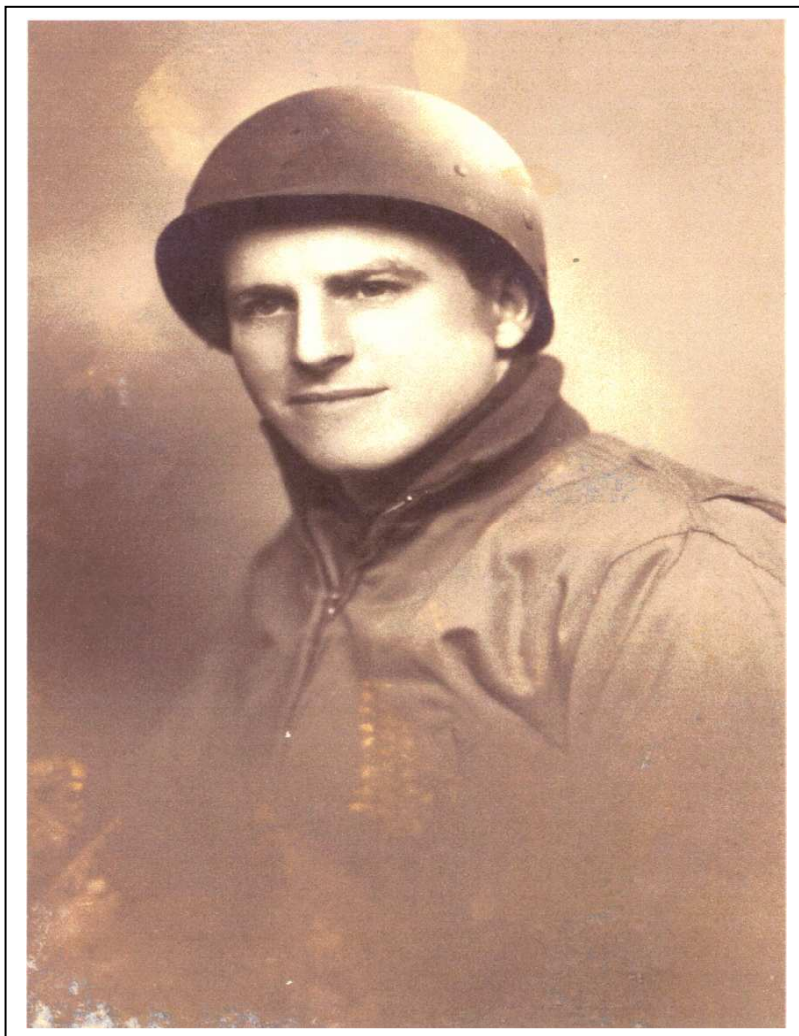
As Null Tag approaches, Hitzfeld’s staff begins to have a problem that changed the attack plans. The attack of the 2nd Infantry Division at the Wahlerscheid Crossroads and the 99th Division on its right flank has held some of the 326th VGD men in place for defensive purposes. The give and take of the battle rages around the crossroads for several days with no success on either side. Then on the night of December 15-16, the 9th Regiment, 2nd Division finds a way through the barbed wire and pillboxes and falls on the 326th VGD battalion. The Americans are everywhere; driving the Grenadiers out of the forts and bunkers, killing and capturing. As dawn on December 16 approaches all this is made mute. The Americans listen to a furious cannonade they have not heard before. Null Tag is here.

As the hour moves past 5:00 am on December 16, the 3rd Battalion men on guard stare out of their foxholes into the black night across the quiet fields with sleep heavy eyelids. The remaining troops were bedded down in houses and barns. When the clock hands hit 5:25, all hell broke loose. The heavy artillery barrage rocked the little town of Hofen, throwing shells all over the area. The air was filled with whining and crashing of shells as the American artillery went into counter battery to answer the German challenge. In moments every soldier was up, alert and in arms. Thor Ronningen, ‘I’ Company, 395th Infantry remembers the moment.

“I was in a hole we had dug as a guard post about twenty yards southeast of the Gasthaus with Rollin Satler and Gus Bottiglieri. I was asleep when the barrage started. It was a terrifying experience to wake up to the crash of the artillery and the ear-splitting scream of the rockets. Although we were under a foot or more of wood and earth, the ground shook like a bowl of Jello. The shell bursts destroyed the phone lines and each group was cut off and alone. We felt like we were the sole surviving members of the unit.”

The houses in Hofen either crumbled or were set afire. The streets and lanes around town were strewn with burning timbers, wrecked vehicles and ripped up communication wires. For the men in the forward foxhole line, they could only cower and try to burrow farther down. The men asleep in the buildings were jarred out of bed and scrambled into basements or out into the night. The inferno went on for 20 minutes, which seemed like an eternity to the troops trying to stay alive in Hofen. Even the German soldiers were amazed. One stated, "We old soldiers had seen many a heavy barrage, but never before anything like this."²

As silence descended over Hofen, the 3rd Battalion and 612th troops slowly emerged from the basements and foxholes to survey the damage. The first task was to see to the wounded and cover the dead. The 3rd Battalion suffered four men killed in the artillery barrage. Next they had to repair the broken phone lines and get the communication network going again. Sergeant Showalter remembers that moment.



"It was a hell of an artillery barrage. My Platoon leader and I got up and made the rounds to check for casualties. Everyone was OK, nobody got hit. We got the wire crew started replacing the lines and started to go back for some more shut-eye. About that time small arms fire erupted all up and down the line."³

As the shocked and numbed GI's looked out of their foxholes, the next strange phenomena took place. First one, then another then a score of brilliant searchlight beams pierced the night and reflected off the low hanging clouds. The foggy terrain is suffused in a yellowish light. As the Americans watch, the Germans come plodding through this surreal landscape. Bulky figures, with rapid-fire machine pistols, assault rifles and machine guns slug over their shoulders, marching along as if on parade.

The GI's watch in amazement and wonder at the German's tactics. Colonel Butler quickly gives the order not to shoot out the searchlights. The light clearly reveals how many

² A Time for Trumpets

³ Personal Interview

armed men are coming at them. The two German Grenadier assault companies are headed straight for the 3rd Battalion's 'I' and 'K' companies.

Closer and closer, the Grenadiers come until they reach the first barbed wire traps. In the foxholes and behind the line, the Americans bring rifles to their shoulders and full charge the 30 and 50 caliber machine guns. The 612th are loading anti-personnel canisters in their 3-inch guns. Behind the battalion lines the heavy mortar squad's holds the shells over the barrels ready to drop it in. Then the Germans hit the first line of the minefield.

The mines beneath the shallow snow cover began to explode as they were stepped on. As if on this signal rifle and machine gun fire, canisters of high explosive shells and a cloudburst of mortar rounds tear into the front ranks. The air is filled with explosions, yells and screams as Grenadiers are killed and wounded. And yet, they are dogged, inexorable in the German way, and keep coming at the foxhole line.

The German troops breach the foxhole line at the junction of 'I' and 'K' companies and rush down the streets using machine pistols and rapid fire rifles—ideal weapons for close-in infantry mayhem. The men of the 3rd Battalion and Tank Destroyer crews take them on, man to man, firing muzzle to muzzle or using their guns as clubs. A few of the Americans in the overrun foxholes surrender but for most of the Germans in Hofen it's a one way fight. As soon as they see that reinforcements are not coming, they began to surrender. Corporal Jewel W. Raulins, 3rd Platoon, 2nd gun of the 612th Tank Destroyers describes the close-in fight among the houses.

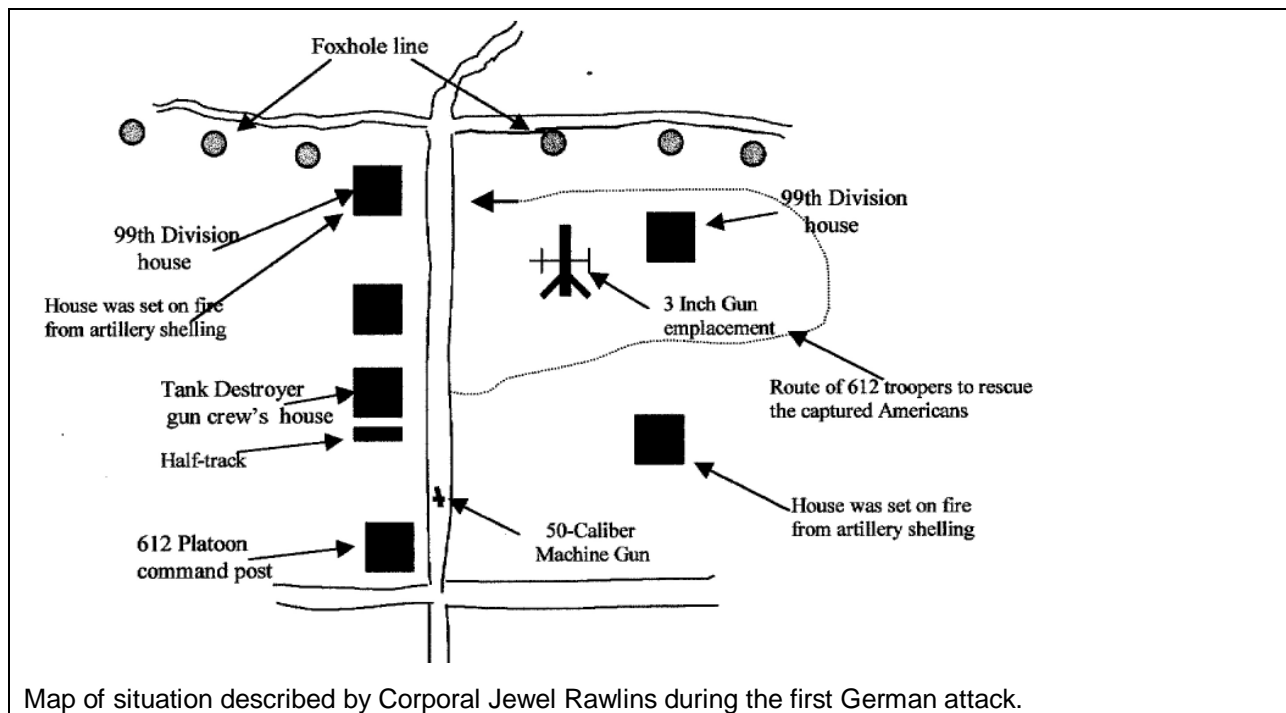
“The house across the street where our gun was dug in was set on fire by the artillery barrage. The fire was lighting up everything. The Germans were using this light to sneak up on us from the dark. Our crew was in the other houses. We weren't firing at anybody until I looked out a small roof window and saw a German soldier walking around the house next to ours. Several more joined him and they began firing at the house we were in. At that time we only had our rifles to return fire with. There were about 10 or 12 of us in the house from my gun crew. Sergeant Reed went out to our half-track parked behind the house and got a 50-caliber machine gun. We set it up and started firing at the Germans in the next house only about 50 feet away. That kept most of them under cover. During the firing exchange, one or two had sneaked up the street along side of our house. We had blocked all the ground floor windows with sandbags. This was to keep tanks from sticking their gun in the open window. I went down to the basement to our telephone connection and called our post down the street. I told them to put a machine gun in the road and fire straight down the road keeping as close to the ground as they could. This kept the Germans from coming up the road and getting any closer. It got daylight in about 30 minutes. We could see the Germans down at the forward house with at least 2 American prisoners. We knew they were American from the camouflage net on their helmets. My squad crossed the road and ducked in the house that was past our gun position. This was about 20 yards away. There were about 20 Germans behind the house and they seemed confused about what to do. There were also quite a few wounded and killed in the road. We went in and took the German prisoner. They were ready to give up. We asked the Germans where the two Americans were and they didn't know. We learned they had grabbed a gun and ran down the road to the house we were billeted in. We sent the bunch of prisoners to the rear and then manned the anti-tank gun to start firing at the retreating Germans.”⁴

⁴ Personal Interview

By 7:00 am the battle is over. The Grenadiers either hide in town or sneak back toward the village of Rohen. The Americans hunt down the ones in houses and they are dispatched to the rear as prisoners. Sergeant Showalter recounts the roundup of prisoners.

“We rounded up a bunch of Germans, I think near to a hundred. My Company commander asked a German Lieutenant what his orders were. He replied, ‘To take the town at all costs.’ Captain Groff replied, ‘Well we will hold at all cost.’ I thought to myself something was going to have to give.”⁵

The fight ended with amazingly light casualties on the American side. The 3rd Battalion listed 4 killed, 7 wounded and 4 men missing. The 612th only had one man wounded. The Americans discovered an aspect of the fighting that they were not ready for. Hitler had admonished his troops with the following statement: “The battle will decide whether Germany is to live or die. You soldiers must fight hard and ruthlessly. There must be no pity. The battle must be fought with brutality and all resistance must be broken in a wave of terror.”⁶ The Germans did not respect the Geneva Convention as it applied to medical personnel. Corporal Angelo Vicari of ‘K’ company was a medical corpsman. As the battle wound down, Corporal Vicari went down to attend to a member of his company wounded and lying in the open. As he neared the soldier, a German opened fire with his machine pistol, sweeping the ground around Vicari. The bullets came closer and closer until he was hit in the right side and rolled over arms and feet flying in the air. Both men were rescued and later recovered.



Late in the morning Sergeant Showalter volunteered to tour the front to check the German position. He recalls, “I went down the road until I came across three Germans manning a

⁵ Personal Interview

⁶ A Blood Dimmed Tide

machine gun. I disarmed them and made them carry the gun and mortar back to our lines. They were just kids, I don't believe they were much more than 16 years old.”⁷

At noon a couple of hundred Grenadiers again rushed out of the woods and hit the center of the 3rd Battalion line. They were quickly decimated by the accurate fire with several killed and wounded. The rest slipped back to Rohren. The first days fighting was over for the 3rd and 612th. More than two hundred dead Germans litter the field in front of Hofen. The American medical corpsmen start bringing wounded Grenadiers in to the aid station.

The men manning the Monshua/Hofen line were not bothered for the rest of the day except for an occasional artillery shell. The wire crews were kept busy restoring the communication. The 612th men improved their gun position and moved the ammunition into safe areas. Corporal Rawlins stated, “We had just stacked the shells along side the gun positions. It was a wonder one of the German artillery burst didn't land right in the middle of the ammunition pile.”⁸

There was little sleep the night of December 16/17. Most of the troops not on watch had moved into the damp crowded cellars. The 3rd battalion and 612th men were on full alert as the early morning hours crept by. Today was their lucky day, the main thrust would be at the thin Calvary line guarding Monshua and Mutzenich. Colonel Kaschner and his staff decided if his forces can break over the northern most area and get behind the Americans then his Grenadiers can push through Hofen and into the valley beyond.

Another threat would soon appear for the Americans guarding the north gatepost. Hitler felt the success of the plan depended more on his forces on the north flank than the south. As “Null Tag” approached, Hitler developed an interest in paratroopers to help seal off the north shoulder. He wanted a paratroop battalion to drop behind Monschau/Hofen, astride the north—south road leading across the Hautes Fagnes (High Marshes), to block American reinforcements. This part of the plan fell on a veteran paratrooper, Colonel Graf Friedrich August von der Heydte.

The plan immediately got off to a bad start when Colonel Heydte managed to keep only about 250 of his veterans with the rest being misfits and incompetents sent in by other units. “Null Tag” night arrived but most of the troops did not reach the airfield so the operation was cancelled. General Fritz Kraemer, chief of staff to Dietrich, arrived at der Heydte's headquarters on December 16 and told him to get the mission going that night and hold for at least two days.

One-hundred twelve Junker 52's took off just before midnight from two airfields. The planes got scattered by American anti-aircraft fire and German paratroops were scattered all over the terrain. Colonel Von der Heydte could round up only three hundred men, not near enough to hold his position. This little force could only watch the massive convoys carrying the 1st Infantry (Big Red 1) and 7th Armored Divisions roll by.

As gray streaks of dawn color the sky the German Artillery starts its drumbeat again. Hammering at Mutzenich hill, the rail line and road network caused the Calvary troopers to go deep into their holes as the earth trembles and shakes. The artillery stops and the Grenadiers swarm out of the woods. All morning the Germans attack all up and down the line held by O'Brien's 38th Calvary. To complicate matters a group of miss-dropped paratroops from Von der

⁷ Personal Interview

⁸ Personal Interview

Hedyte's force come out behind the Cavalrymen and a flight of Messerschmitt 109 fighters appeared to strafe friend and foe alike. By midmorning the area is swarming with Grenadiers and the defense began to fall apart. The artillery howitzers working with the Cavalry add their weight with the diabolic overhead proximately fuse plus the big tank destroyers lumber into the fray blowing holes in houses with their 3-inch guns exposing the Grenadiers.

O'Brien's headquarters calls 5th Corp and makes it clear that if they don't have help quickly the top end of the gatepost will swing open. First; fighter-bombers from the 9th Tactical Air Force roar out of the sky. With the artillery laying red smoke on the front line, they bomb, rocket and machine gun the German soldiers holding the village. On the heels of this action part of the 5th U.S. Armored Division shows up with a company of M-4 medium tanks clanking into town. Several companies of the 9th Infantry Division arrive at Mutzenich to shore up the Cavalry's defense. Aiding the combat personnel, mechanics, cooks and the slightly wounded keep up a shuttle system of supplies and guarding prisoners. Clean up operations move into full swing.

Quiet descends on the battlefield by mid-afternoon. The lines are reestablished and all German incursions rejected. O'Brien reports that December 17 costs the Germans over two hundred dead and as many bagged as prisoners. As night falls on the Ardennes that December night, American commanders all up and down the line wake up to realize this German offensive is not some small spoiling action.

As the light fades on the 17th, Colonel Kashner and his officers have now expended forty-eight hours and hundreds of dead troops trying to push open the Monshau/Mutzenich/Hofen gatepost. He is looking at decimated assault battalions, but this makes no difference to Dietrich's Headquarters. The 1st SS Panzer Corps has crashed through the American lines at Honsfeld/Bullingen and they need the 67th Volksgrenadier Corps to be on the Monshau—Eupen road post haste to guard the northern flank.

Kaschner knows from his Grenadier reports what is in front of him on Mutzenich hill and Monshau. No longer is he facing a sorely tried cavalry recon squadron, but a small army of fiercely hostile men backed by massive machines. He gets General Hitzfeld's approval to make a supreme and final effort against the 3rd Battalion at Hofen. This force of infantry and tank destroyers has remained the same for forty-eight hours. Kaschner and his staff know they must hurry because somewhere on the road to Hofen is the dreaded 9th Infantry Division.

To lend a hand to the exhausted Grenadiers of the 326th, Dietrich's 6th Panzer Army sends some tracked assault guns plus a few armored cars. Another assault battalion is on the march to reach their jumping off point before daylight on December 18. In the early hours, the sounds of engines, tracked vehicles moving, shouted orders drifts across the moonlit snow to the American lines. Butler and his men sense something bad is coming and at 3:30 am the mayhem starts again.

Artillery, mortar and rockets hit the center and left side of the 3rd battalion lines. Streets and buildings again take a beating. Sergeant Showalter described the sound and fury of the attack, "the Germans decided to shoot the works as they unleashed a vicious rocket attack this time. It seemed like hundreds of them at a time would come screaming at us. In the distance they made a humming noise, which increased to a screaming whistle as they approached."⁹

⁹ Personal Interview

The Grenadiers in the assault battalion come shouting and running at the porous American line. Once again as they hit the trip wires and mine field, they are met by a solid wall of steel in the form of bullets, exploding shells, manshot, mortar bombs and hand fired missiles. Adding in to the horror the Germans face the 155 MM howitzers of the US 5th Corps. Many fall, screaming of terrible wounds, but the survivors keep coming, over running the thin foxhole line.



The 3rd Battalion troops and tank destroyers keep up a furious fire, but it is not enough as squads of Grenadiers rush through the lines and into the village streets beyond. The breakthrough success is muted by the action of the German armor. The officers controlling the armored guns and cars are afraid of the 3-inch guns of the Tank Destroyers and keep the vehicles in defilade on a sunken road so the armor-piercing

rounds can't get at them. Mortars and howitzers still kill a couple of the machines.

The fight now degenerates into a bloody street brawl. The German troops make it all the way to Butler's headquarters but cannot sustain their aggression. Butler calls Lieutenant Loony and requests artillery down on his own headquarters to breakup the attack. The GI's, gun crews and Buffer's rear echelon men go after them with rifles and machine guns. In movie hero fashion the Americans fire their 30-caliber machine guns from their hips. Dick Showalter remember, "Some of the guys had removed our 30's from the half-tracks and were driving the enemy troops using marching fire."¹⁰

As daylight filters through the clouds, the surviving Grenadiers filter back through the foxhole line to the safety of Rohren. The Armor, seeing what is happening, also starts to pull back. The first attack is over, but the German command hopes that the American infantry is at a breaking point. As the ten o'clock hour approaches, the Americans watch German troops and Panzers muster in front of Rohren for the next push. The gray of the cloud-covered sky soon reveals German infantry marching up the road toward the Hofen defense line.

¹⁰ Personal Interview

The main point of attack was again right at the center of Butler's line near the Company 'K' and 'I' boundary. Sergeant Showalter estimated the attacking force as regimental strength. The men of the 3rd Battalion and 612th are tired and worn out from the continuous fighting, but again man the foxholes and gun emplacements. The Germans again rush through the barbed wire and mine field to engage the Americans hand to hand. The German armor again do not expose their tracked guns to the fire of the Tank Destroyer's 3-inch guns. The Germans rush through the deadly 30 and 50-caliber fire plus the canisters of manshot and into the village streets. They surround buildings and fight their way into other buildings. Butler throws his reserve platoon into the fight aided by cooks, clerks and the Tank Destroyer crews. Company 'L' on the right flank puts together a scratch force and rushes them into the fray. The 'I' company commander remembers, "Every person we had was on the front line."¹¹ Most of the cooks, mechanics, drivers and clerks never expected to fire a weapon at an enemy, but they performed heroically during the battle. Sergeant Foy C. Peavy, Gun Sergeant 3rd Platoon, recounted the tense moments of close combat.

"We didn't have any problems with tanks, however, the German infantry kept trying to climb through the windows. We had to keep shooting them as they came in. We had an artillery forward observer located in the upper floor. At times he called artillery directly on the house when the Germans had us surrounded."

The Germans had succeeded in seizing quite a few of the houses and set up machine guns and mortars to hold off the Americans. Butler first calls the 105-mm artillery down on his positions. This causes the Germans to scurry for cover. He then brings up his 57 mm anti-tank crews to fire directly into the buildings. The American infantrymen creep up to lob phosphorous grenades into the building. The white hot phosphorous and smoke cause the Germans to come spilling out of the houses.

Two men from 'I' Company exemplify the courage of the Americans facing the overwhelming rush of the Germans. They were later awarded the 'Distinguished Service Cross' for their stand in facing the German onslaught. The citations read, "PFC Richard E. Mills was manning a foxhole in the middle of 'I' company. The German soldiers swarmed up the slope to his position. He opened fire with his automatic rifle killing and wounding many of the enemy. Time and again he stopped their frantic attempts to pass his position. When his weapon jammed, PFC Mills jumped out of his foxhole and in the open hurled grenades stopping the German drive. Sergeant Thornton E. Piersall of 'I' Company was in the direct path of the assault. The Germans came in waves but were repulsed by the intense fire of Piersall's weapon. The enemy moved a machine gun and rocket launcher to eliminate the threat. When his ammunition was exhausted, Sergeant Piersall crawled from his emplacement, grabbed an enemy grenade launcher and grenades from the dead Germans. He fired with devastating accuracy knocking out the machine gun."¹²

The 612th troops lost their first soldier during the battle. Sergeant Peavy recounts this strange quirk of fate that killed his platoon sergeant.

"We were placed next to a large brick building, that seemed to be a school of some sort. The walls were about three feet thick. That was one thing that protected us during the shelling. I lost my Platoon Sergeant in the building. His name was Nuttall. We were on the second floor at a

¹¹ Butler's Battlin Blue Bastards

¹² Butler's Battlin Blue Bastards

small window. He was standing right beside me looking across the field to locate the advancing Germans. It was a stray bullet that came through a window, hit him in the heart. He fell back in my arms dead instantly.”¹³

As the afternoon shadows creep up the German Troops are through. Most surrender, some slip back eastward to Rohren. The 326th Volksgrenadier Division is finished as the primary assault unit at the Monschau/Hofen gatepost. Kaschner orders one more attack during the night of December 18. This is beaten back by heavy fire from rifles and machine guns in the foxhole line. A group of Grenadiers manage to sneak up on one of the Tank Destroyer crews. The Germans attacked with automatic weapons and grenades. A bullet hit the receiver on the 50-caliber machine gun causing it to jam. Sergeant Dominic L. Iannotti commanding the gun crew decided to surrender after several men were wounded and he deemed further defense futile. One man escaped back to friendly lines but eleven men were taken prisoner.

The Germans continued spasmodic shelling of Hofen but the ground attacks were mostly patrol actions and easily beaten off. The men of the 3rd Battalion and Tank Destroyers held their ground and wondered about the battle in other areas. The Tank Destroyer men heard the disheartening news that Company ‘B’ and the Recon Company of the 612th had been overrun at the small village of Honsfeld. The attacking force was an SS unit and had shot several of the Tank Destroyer men who had surrendered.

The tide of battle began to change by December 22, with clearing skies the allied air forces came out in great strength. On December 29, ‘A’ Company of the 801st Tank Destroyer Battalion arrived to relieve the 612th Tank Destroyer troops. The 3-inch guns were left in place for the new company. They would be of no use to the 612th men since they were to transition to self-propelled M-18’s with 3-inch guns. After a short indoctrination course at Verviers, Belgium the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion moved out on January 2 through swirling snowflakes to go back to war. The battalion rejoined the 2nd Infantry Division for the march across Germany. The 612th finished the war at Plzen Czechoslovakia.

Hitler sneered at the American Soldier, calling them “The Italians of the Allied Side.” He did not believe a mixture of ethnic and racial types could field an effective fighting force. All up and down that frozen 75-mile front the individual American GI proved him wrong. Single GI’s, squads, platoons and companies held their ground until overrun or forced to retreat, disrupting the timetable for Hitler’s last-gasp offensive, ‘Watch On the Rhine’. The Monshua/ Hofen battle had been the first major combat engagement for the 3rd Battalion, 395th Infantry Regiment. Backed by the combat savvy Company ‘A’ 612th Tank Destroyers, they more than proved their mettle in holding the northern gate closed. Both Units were awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for the fight at Hofen. This was the only sector in the entire battlefield that the American original line of defense was never penetrated. If the Germans had broken through, nothing would have prevented them from easy access to the road network all the way to Eupen, Belgium.

Colonel Butler and his battalion finished the war with an exemplary combat record as they joined the march across Germany to bring World War II to a close.

¹³ Personal Interview