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Sep

11

1944

US troops cross the border into Germany



Two American soldiers look down on a long row of “dragon’s teeth” concrete devices to halt invading tanks at the Siegfried Line. American troops move through a break in the vaunted defense line and pass into Germany. 09/15/44.



Sergeant Warner Willi Holzinger, born in Germany in 1916, his family emigrated to the US in 1921 and he became a US citizen in 1940.

On the 24th August Hitler had finally bowed to the inevitable and ordered that further work begin on the Siegfried Line, the main static defence line on the German border with France. 20,000 slave labourers were drafted in to add to the defences which had been sitting dormant since 1940. Yet as the Allies swept through France and Belgium, the retreating Germans were not yet organised enough to man the defences in many places.

In the late afternoon of the 11th September the 85th Recon Squadron of the 5th Armored Division despatched six GIs and a Free French interpreter, Lieutenant DeLille, to investigate the French-German border.

Should probing indicate great weakness in some portion of the frontier line, penetration may become possible.

The patrol was led by Staff Sergeant Warner W. Holzinger:

When we started out on our mission, we took my radio peep [the term used by the US Armored forces at the time] with us to keep in touch with the 2d Platoon and with headquarters. We worked our way down to Stolzembourg [a village on the Luxembourg side of the Our River]. From the citizens we learned there were no enemy soldiers in the vicinity. I have been thankful many times I could speak German.

The enemy had blown to some degree the small bridge that spanned the Our River. Even at that, we were able to cross on it. We could have waded the river too.

On the German side of the river there was a pillbox camouflaged as a barn. It's a good thing it wasn't manned.

Lieutenant DeLille and I talked with a German farmer.

He told us that the last time he had seen any German troops was the day before. He also told us that if we followed the road up the small mountain behind his farm, we would be able to see the first line of pillboxes.

So, Lieutenant DeLille, Pfc [William] McColligan, the German farmer, and I went into Germany about one and a half miles, where we could get a good view. We studied the pillbox area with our field glasses. None of them seemed manned. We returned to Stolzembourg, where we reported the information [by radio] to Lt. Loren L. Vipond [his platoon commander]

Even though it was now apparent that they could walk into at least the first few miles of Germany unopposed, the US High Command faced a difficulty. They were rapidly outrunning their own supplies, still travelling by road from Normandy.

Captain Armand R. Levasseur, the plans and operations officer of the 1st Division's 26th Regiment was later to write:

The men generally realized that the picnic, wine, and flowers campaign of France and Belgium was at an end. Now at least, the German was fighting on native soil, so resistance was expected to stiffen...[nevertheless] the end now seemed within our grasp.

Optimism was high, in fact too high in view of the tough battles that lay ahead.

Sound tactical doctrine dictated that the enemy's defenses, reached at the close of a pursuit, which had turned into a rout, be penetrated as rapidly as possible.

The enemy was to be given no breather to recover from the staggering blows struck in France and Belgium. For this reason no time was available for specialized training so valuable to the success of an attack on permanent type defenses. Also, at battalion level little was known as to the nature of construction, strength, or depth of the fortifications.

See [Gerald Astor: The Bloody Forest: Battle for the Hurtgen: September 1944-January 1945](#)



The bodies of two German soldiers lie in front of one of the Siegfried line bunkers, following later fighting.



A US M18 Hellcat in the streets of Brest in September 1944. Presumably belongs to the 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

Meanwhile German resistance in France was not quite over. On the west coast of the “fortress” port Brest continued to hold out until the 19th September. Among the US troops besieging the town was Victor J. Miller who had landed at D-Day with the 5th Ranger Battalion. They had fought their way off Omaha beach and had remained in action for much of the time since:

Brest turned into almost a guerrilla war at times. One day we had experiences which were unbelievable; but I will tell them anyway since I have Sgt. Floyd to vouch for the truth of the matter. We were moving up the peninsula somewhere, and we in special weapons were at the rear of the Company. As we moved up following, Sgt. Floyd suddenly froze, then pointed silently to our left front. There was a hedgerow running along our left, and above it, coming toward us, were the tops of a long row of German helmets! He and I ran across to our left and entered the lane between hedgerows along which the Germans were coming. We aimed our rifles ahead, and waited. As the German soldiers in their fully armed condition came around a bend in the lane, they were greeted by our rifles aiming straight at them! They were caught dead to rights with nothing they could do! German after German came around the bend and they just kept coming! We finally had approximately 36 soldiers which we stripped of their weapons and turned over to some soldiers who were behind us. We went on to catch up with our Company.

We soon caught up with the slowly advancing rifle platoons and watched as they went through several trenches, emplacements, and then finally they settled down up there in a

relaxed manner. After a bit, I radioed to our Lieutenant and asked what we should be doing. He said the Germans had been cooking their dinner and had run away as they approached. Our men were going to finish cooking it and eat, so we had just as well come up. We moved up there and laid down our weapons and sat down. Just then, it sounded like WWII starting all over again. Bullets seemed to be flying everywhere! I dove down about 8 feet into a concrete passage, and everyone else found cover some way. Finally, one of our men managed to crawl out and get his machine gun. He fired a few bursts and a white flag appeared. Here came a group of soldiers! Apparently they had been upset at our preparing to eat their dinner!

Another comic end to what might have been a bitter battle occurred when we went to take the city of Le Conquet, the last inhabited place toward the tip of the peninsula. We didn't know what to expect as we made our way to the town. Once in, it was dash from building to building, expecting any minute to be fired upon. At last, we had completed our task of securing it. At that moment there was a great rumpus and we covered into entryways and other such spots hoping to be safe and be ready to repulse whatever was coming. Lo and behold, here came the Free French marching in with banners, and the populace now came out and cheered them!

That reminded me of a time some two months before when we had been holding a section of the front lines. A contingent of Free French came to take their part. They came out from town in a bus at 8:00am, had hot chow brought out by the bus at noon, and then rode back to town for the night at 5:00pm! We Americans have a lot to learn about fighting a war!

Much of the rest there around Brest was not comedy. Several forts ringed the city. We took one as the air force finished bombing it. There were quite a few dead. We were rather low on mortar shells, and encountered a German mortar. This was their small one, 50mm, and was made to be assembled and carried baseplate, bipod and tube as one unit. Huff suggested we take it along, so we did, plus shells. We were told to dig in for the night about then and did. We did feel we should try out the mortar, though, to have an idea of its range. With ours, we knew at what angle to set the tube and how many increments to leave on a shell to go a certain distance. Knowing nothing of this with the German one, we sat it up and dropped in a shell. It went just about as far forward as the area where our line platoons were digging in! Too bad! Before long one of the fellows was back complaining bitterly: "We haven't been here 30 minutes and already the Germans are shelling us with their mortars!". We sympathized with him, but sure didn't tell him we had the mortar!

That was a bad night for me. I had dug a good hole, much more than a slit trench. We were on the forward slope of a hill, which is not a good place to be. I was in my hole in the late evening when a German 20mm gun opened up on our area firing exploding shells. They began to hit all around my hole. It seemed only a matter of time before one would hit the slightly higher back of my hole. I tried to be scientific about this. If I crouched against the front wall of my hole and the shell hit the back, would I get less shrapnel than if I crouched against the back below where the explosion would be? I

puzzled over this until the firing stopped and I realized that I would continue living another day, which I hadn't expected to do during the bombardment.

The next day I was wandering around the fort and its ditches when I came to a German soldier with the top of his head blown off. He was lying on his pack. I needed some clean socks, which they often had, so I was lifting him up to get to his pack. Just then Floyd came around the trench at the far end and just saw a headless soldier raising up! He froze until he realized that I was there! This may sound gruesome to those who do not know that war is a bunch of people trying to kill each other in any way possible and trained to enjoy each enemy death! That was what our Countrymen had sent us to do.

Later I was more of an observer as we were attacking the fortified positions around one of the forts. My section was camping in the bottom floor or basement of a 3-story house. It was rather quiet where we were. One day one of the fellows, it might have been Huebner, started to hunt one of the chickens running around outside. He armed himself with a flare rifle we had picked up from the Germans and was going to shoot one with that. As he tiptoed around the house, Lt. Col Richard Sullivan, our C.O. now and quite tall and thin, saw him and began tiptoeing after him in a similar deep crouch, assuming he had spotted some enemy. Finally he tapped him on the shoulder and asked for what he was looking. Huebner froze at sight of our C.O., then blurted out: "Chickens, Sir!". The Col. just laughed and climbed up to our top floor to observe the situation.

Pillboxes had been built so impregnable that penetrating and eliminating them was tremendously difficult. The one right in front of us was the first target. Lt. Aust went out with a patrol under covering fire and placed a 40lb. charge of C-2 against an embrasure and it later went off with no apparent damage. A mortar barrage before they left it killed two Rangers. That night Lt. Greene went out with 11 men and two 40lb charges and a beehive type 50lb. one, plus 20 gallons of gasoline and oil. When these all went off, it was tremendous; but the next morning no visible damage had been done. That day they surrendered Brest, though, and it was found that the charges had been effective, and bodies of 17 German soldiers were found inside.

Read the whole of Millers account at [Justin Museum](#).



{ 2 comments... read them below or [add one](#) }

[Ran Barton October 10, 2014 at 7:36 pm](#)

Thanks for the link, Steve.

Steve Freeland [September 12, 2014 at 8:35 pm](#)

I found this interesting article on the etymology of the words "peep" and "jeep:"

<http://www.allpar.com/SUVs/wrangler/jeep-name.html>

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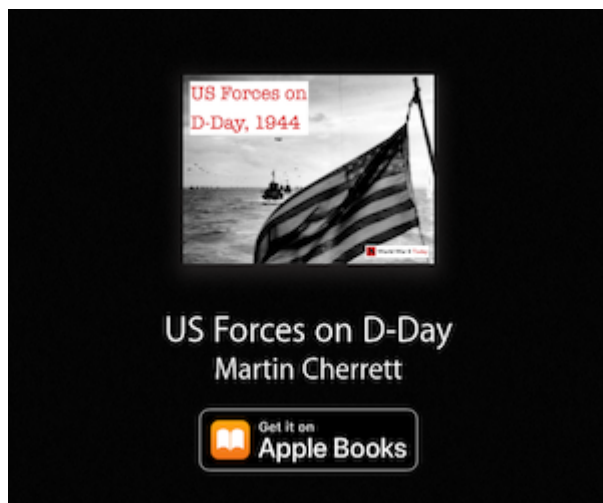
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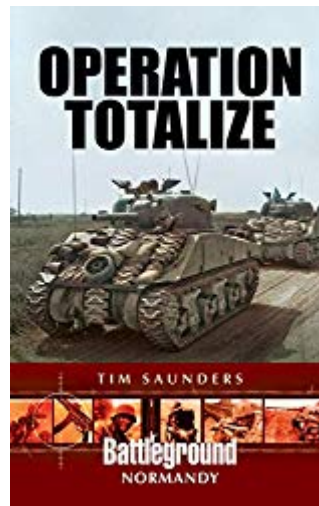
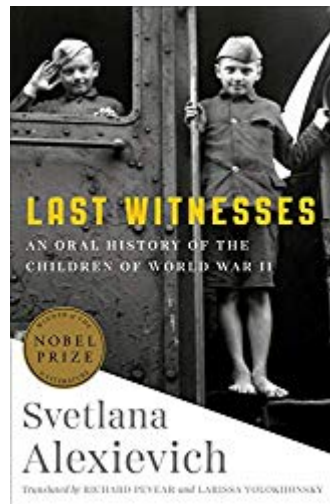


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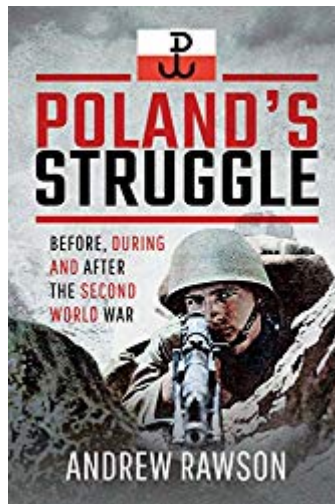


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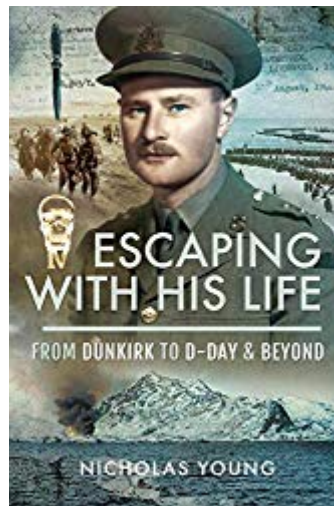
We saw them coming and I was the only one who could do anything about it; the 75mms would have to be within 300 yards to do anything to a Tiger. Sergeant Gordon, our tank commander said to us 'Wait until they are about 800 yards'. So, we waited and then he pulled us forward out of the orchard. You need to get out of the trees to traverse the gun. 'Target the last Tiger.'



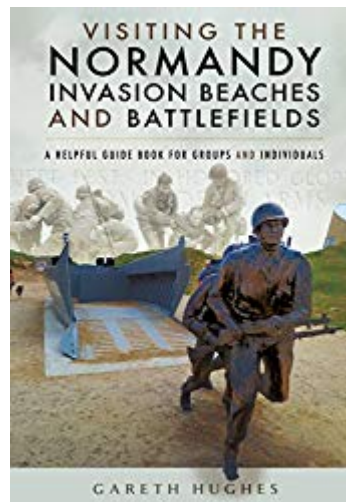
The 'Black Devils', as they were known, were involved in Operation Totalize, starting on 8 August, and they were engaged in heavy fighting for Chambois and Mont Ormel. They then fought a fierce battle in their Sherman and Cromwell tanks to stop the Germans escaping from the Falaise Pocket, as part of Operation Tractable.



To begin with I attacked the mortar area by calling down the concentrated fire of a field regiment. The immediate result was to stop the mortar fire and to set ablaze a half tracked vehicle concealed behind a hedge; it was probably carrying ammunition for the mortar positions nearby. The Tiger tank was then given the same treatment but as field guns are not designed to penetrate solid steel of any great thickness at such a range it only made the tank withdraw slightly and sit tight while I continued to observe.



[This was] a trying period, living in slit trenches mostly in the rain in the very close and woody bocage country. The enemy held a series of outposts, frequently altering his positions, and there was constant patrolling by both sides. Regular shelling, mortaring and sniping brought a trickle of casualties ... the trees and tall hedges caused many airbursts against which the slit trenches were ineffective and three inches of head cover had to be provided.



The initial landings went well, with nearly all the tanks making it ashore and the leading elements of 8th Brigade hitting the designated areas.“ Initial German resistance was strong. This should come as no surprise: it is important to remember that the American assaults had begun an hour earlier; thus German troops were, if not certain of an attack, on extremely high alert. However, shortly before 1030hrs the main resistance was subdued and obstacles were being cleared.

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