

9: BITCHE—AND THE FORMIDABLE MAGINOT

The tentacles had been torn away. The preliminaries of Wingen, Soucht, Rosteig and Reyersviller were over. Before us loomed the mighty steel-and-concrete fortifications of the Maginot Line buried deep in the protecting rock and earth of the hills. Only a thick mushroomed head or an obvious hump in the contour of the sloping terrain protruded from the underground bastions. From the slightest breeches in these cupolas and exposures poured volumes of automatic fire and shell fire ranging up to 135mm caliber, covering every approach and inch of the open surrounding ground. From Bitche itself our every move was observed and relayed to batteries of 88s, which sent shells screaming and crashing into our positions with frightening accuracy.

We cringed in our foxholes and wished we had dug just a little deeper as the shells exploded and tore up the ground around us. As yet we had not made a direct attempt on the forts and knew, despite the intensity of the fire we were undergoing, the enemy had not yet opened up to his full capacity. Soon we were to know the fullest fury of the Maginot Line guns manned by dyed-in-the-wool, confident Nazis, ordered and determined to hold the line at the cost of their lives.

The Divisional objective being Bitche, the 398th Regiment's objective was the main defense line of Bitche, namely Forts Freudenberg and Schiesseck. Fort Freudenberg was a single defensive unit independent of Fort Schiesseck as far as underground connections were concerned. It extended deep into the earth in sections of floors and was equipped with modern machinery and motors, facilitating movement between floors to the exposed pillbox. Elevators brought supplies and ammunition up to the bombproof casemate above the earth, which was the only visible indication of the powerful underground fortress. This, the business end of the fort, was armed with twin machine guns, automatic rifles and a 47mm antitank gun.



Ducking tree bursts in the forest near Bitche

Behind Freudenberg lay Fort Schiesseck, the more powerful of the two forts, consisting of eleven mutually supporting pillboxes jointed together by subterranean railways, tunnels and communications. This greater fortress was spread out to cover any approach to Bitche with armament consisting of every conceivable type of modern automatic weapon in addition to mortars, 47mm antitank weapons and 75mm and 135mm howitzers. The 75s and 135s were mounted on elevators which popped them out into the air from casemates, spit out five or six rounds, then just as suddenly disappeared.

At the time we were ignorant of these facts. What we didn't know certainly helped us. An open cross-section of the defenses that lay before us would have been both amazing and frightening. All we knew was that there was plenty of fire of every description coming from the queer-looking knobs in the hills—more than we had ever seen or heard before.

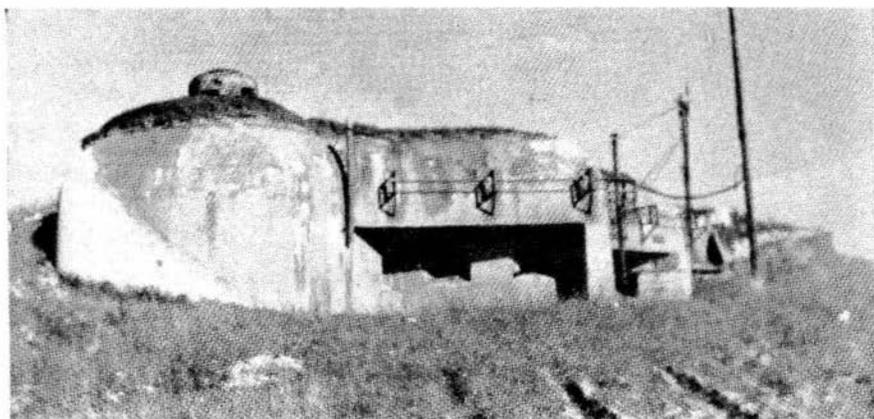
Early on the morning of 14 December, with the 44th Division on the left and 399th Infantry Regiment on the right flank, the 398th attacked the Maginot Line. Following a concentrated artillery barrage on the forts, 1st Battalion riflemen left the cover of their holes and started slowly up the open gradual incline, immediately meeting with a furious machine-gun, mortar and artillery barrage. With not the slightest ripple in the ground behind which to escape murderous shrapnel from bursting shells or automatic fire criss-crossing from the pillboxes, the doughboys hunched over and moved forward. The sickening whistle and ear-splitting crash of enemy artillery sent them to the ground and clutching the earth, more from force of habit than for the protection they knew wasn't there. Maintaining great presence of mind throughout, they inched their way forward cutting through masses of barbed wire to wipe out machine-gun nests protecting the approaches to the forts en route. Fighting their way to only feet away from massive Freudenberg itself, they fired into its apertures and breaches driving the Germans away from their weapons and down into the protection of the fort's depths.



The Maginot lay beyond

Freudenberg now stood silent but increased fire from units of Fort Schiesseck raked the area surrounding it in an effort to relieve the mounting pressure from the outside. Despite the fire the 1st Battalion doughs climbed all over the pillbox looking for an entrance. They tried desperately to blast open the casemate with charges of dynamite, but like a child pounding its little fists on a great locked door their efforts were of no avail. The fort was as strong as it was silent. Its massive feet-thick steel door and walls of solid concrete intermeshed with steel girders were barely scratched when explosive charges were set off around them. Although temporarily neutralized by the 1st Battalion men who poured a continuous fire into its narrow firing slits, the heavy fire directed by other units around the beleaguered pillbox compelled the men to relinquish their prize and withdraw.

The following day, with a fuller knowledge of the exact strength of the forts, tactics were drastically changed. The forts were to be worked over with a greater softening-up process. Masses of artillery from 8-inch and 240mm howitzers to 105mm howitzers were brought to bear on the enemy positions. Hour after hour the artillery battered away at the pillboxes but without damaging effect. The 240mm shells were seen to hit directly on and, obviously of a time-fuzed nature, would bounce off the casemates and detonate in the air or on the ground yards away. The exploding-on-contact shells hit the forts time and again only to leave a black splotch on the concrete after the slowly rising

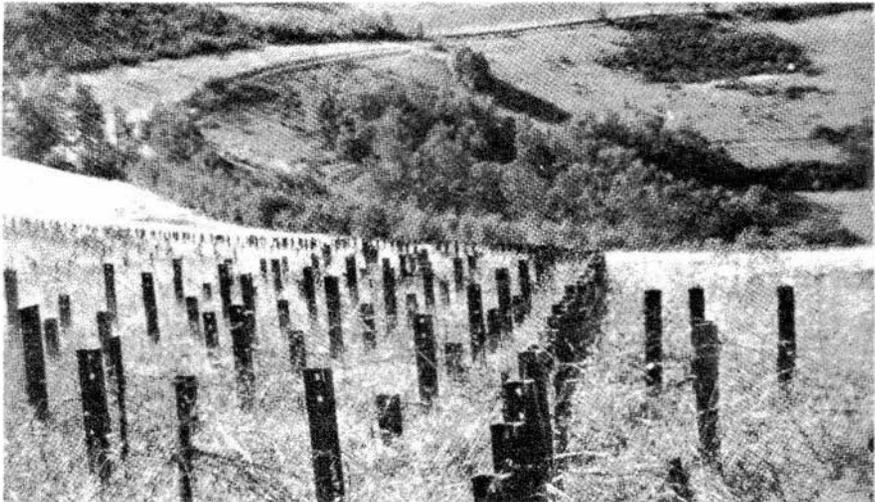


Maginot defender

smoke had cleared away. For two days the massed supporting artillery fired round upon round into the forts. As fast as a giant artillery piece recoiled another round was loaded into the chamber and sent screaming into Freudenberg and Schiesseck. For two days the earth shook under the concussion of the tons of explosives.

Amid this the Air Corps came into play. Flights of Thunderbolts hovered and circled over the forts, picked their targets, then dove and dropped their 500-pound bombs. Through the incessant pounding the forts appeared none the worse. Grim and ominous, heavy fire still belched from their apertures. The three disappearing-type casemates of Schiesseck were repeatedly hit during the intense shelling but still they continued to bob up and down, spitting fire and steel.

On 17 December the stage was set again. The 398th Infantry Regiment following an intense artillery preparation and in the wake of a rolling barrage supplied by the 375th Field Artillery Battalion, again hit at Forts Freudenberg and Schiesseck. In the interim Colonel Daly, Regimental commander, was wounded in action and evacuated. Lt. Col. Robert M. Williams, now one of the youngest regimental commanders in the entire ETO and soon to be a full colonel, immediately assumed command and led the attack.



Barbed-wire obstacles

The 3d Battalion, with Companies I and L in the assault, started up to Freudenberg and Schiesseck. Again the terrible raking fire was met. Mortars and artillery bracketed the advancing doughs but this time craters, left from the bombs dropped by the Air Corps, gave some shelter. Company L was receiving direct fire from Fort No. 2 which was equipped with a 135mm howitzer in a disappearing turret. Despite this fire the company, together with the dynamite-laden 325th Engineers, continued a steady advance towards Freudenberg which had now resumed firing. At the same time Company I under intense 88mm fire from Bitche pushed on toward Fort No. 10.

We were playing all our cards in this tremendously important but carefully planned attack. It could not fail. Every available unit of the Regiment took part. Every man, regardless of his job, was on the line where he was needed. The medics worked heroically. In their blazoned red-crossed helmets they darted about the battlefield treating the wounded and evacuating them under fire. Wiremen and radiomen scampered through the inferno to set up and maintain vital communications which were continually being disrupted by shell fire. Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon men and engineers loaded down with ammuni-

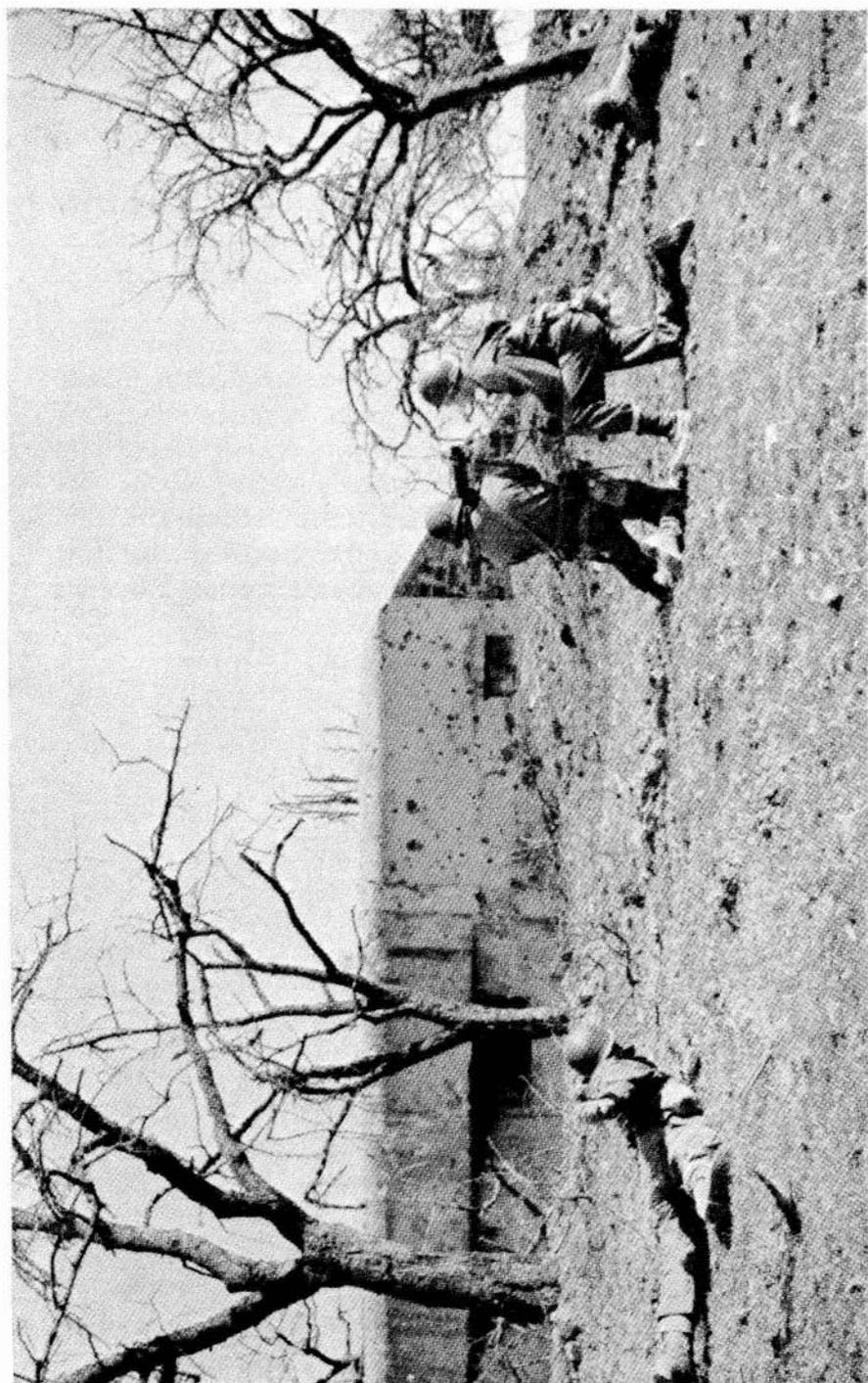
tion and explosives struggled over the pockmarked terrain right up to the pillboxes. All did not reach their objectives. Some fell under the heavy automatic fire; others disappeared in a blinding explosion of artillery fire.

As the 3d Battalion men advanced cannon, antitank, mortar and heavy machine-gun fire pounded away at their initial objectives and artillery toned down the volume of fire from adjacent forts.

Freudenberg and Forts 10 and 11 were now reached. The enemy had been driven into the bowels of the earth and the heavy supporting fire was lifted and concentrated on other Schiesseck units as the riflemen went about blasting open entrances. The great steel door at Fort 11 flew open when a satchel charge was set off by a bazooka round after it had failed to explode. The doughs stormed through and down into the depths of the fort, setting up defensive positions guarding tunnel approaches from other units.



Battalion CO on the objective



Post-mortem

With the ending of day, darkness and heavy barbed-wire entanglements slowed down the attack and the order was given to defend and hold what had been taken. The Germans in an attempt to take back Fort 11 infiltrated through underground tunnels at night but were spotted. A fire fight broke out, probably the first of its kind, below the surface of the earth. Machine guns and rifles blinked and echoed through the hollow passages while above and outside outposts peered into the blackness, awaiting a counterattack and unmindful of what was going on below.

The next morning the nightmare and the attack continued on behind a rolling barrage of artillery. There were still more casemates to be taken. Both sides broke out in another fury of lead and steel pelting. Friend and foe determined to thwart the other's plans. The elevator-operated 75s and 135s popped up and down faster than the day before spitting increased volumes of fire and death. The battlefield broke out in a frenzy of movement. Litter bearers darted about. Assault teams crept and crawled to their next objectives. Antitank guns and cannon already firing at point-blank range at Schiesseck units, moved up farther and were joined by batteries of "Long Tom" 155mm artillery. Moved up during the night after firing long-range indirect fire support, the 155s with muzzles lowered pointed directly at the forts and blasted away. Although this terrific, point-blank close-up shelling had no material effect on the stubborn knobs, it drove some of the enemy down and away from their weapons, cutting down fire power. The 3d Battalion doughs now had time to reach the enemy blocks before the guns could be remanned and fired. Together with the engineers they went to work cutting away barbed-wire entanglements and neutralizing the forts one by one as the artillery kept adjacent emplacements buttoned up with constant shelling.

Some of the forts were entered; others could not be blasted open despite the amount of explosive charge applied and were sealed. Still others could be neither blasted nor sealed. These were surrounded and covered. With all the casemates entered, sealed or surrounded and covered, resistance from the Maginot



Citation

Line emplacements ceased. Defensive positions were set up, and wisely, for on 19 December Freudenberg was counterattacked. The attackers were discovered by an observer in the pillbox. Silently, word was passed around. Machine guns arched around and pointed in the direction of the Krauts. Then when the Germans were but a hundred yards away the guns opened up. In a short simultaneous burst many were killed. The rest frantically waved white strips of cloth, not flags, but unmistakably a pleading offer of surrender. Later the same day a greater and more determined attack developed from the northeast, but with many of the 3d Battalion men behind weapons in the pillboxes the attackers were easily dispersed leaving the hillside littered with dead.

For the next three days the 3d Battalion clung tenaciously to their hard-won positions despite the enemy's repeated attempts at dislodgment. The men outside and surrounding the forts that



At long last—Bitche

could not be entered bore the brunt of artillery and mortar fire but remained alert with grenades and explosives regardless, preventing the Germans inside from remanning the weapons. Counterattacks from the draws surrounding the high ground were beaten off and only added to the pile of grotesquely sprawled bodies which were gradually becoming mangled beyond description as shells exploded around the exposed area.¹

The 1st Battalion meanwhile pushed past Forts Schiesseck and Freudenberg to seize the remaining high ground flanking and overlooking Bitche, and the 2d Battalion moved into the gap between the Divisional flank and the 44th Division on the left, after a fierce fire fight. While digging in and buttoning in with the 3d Battalion, the enemy fired a blinding barrage of time-fuzed artillery shells inflicting numerous casualties, but this action con-

¹ For its outstanding performance in taking the Bitche fortifications the 3d Battalion was awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation. The text of the citation is given in the Appendix. The recommendation of the CO, 398th Infantry, for award of the Citation to the 3d Battalion, also in the Appendix, gives more details of the Bitche action.



Moving toward Camp de Bitche

cluded the long bloody battle for the gateway to Bitche. The cost of the entire operation was high, but the German casualties far surpassed ours and we did smash a fortress that could have caused a lot more distress, as we soon shall see. "Axis Sally," Nazi drum-beater for discontent and disunity among the Allied nations, lost her usually fine composure and soft voice and venomously spat out, "Bloody Butchers of Bitche!" after our part in the Fort Schiesseck and Fort Freudenberg operation. But now we commanded the high ground and that part of the Maginot Line protecting the city. The 397th and 399th Infantry Regiments stood poised before Bitche, and Camp de Bitche, ready to sweep into the comparatively defenseless city.

However great and significant our accomplishment, it was overshadowed by ominous rumblings and a startling turn of events to the north. The Americans along the entire line had been maintaining constant and heavy pressure on the enemy, pushing slowly on towards the Rhine and gradually thinning the depths of his defenses to a bursting point. The German High Command, taking stock of its dwindling food supplies and war materiel, realized the mounting pressure could not be contained throughout the winter. Taking advantage of extremely bad weather which prevented air reconnaissance, the Nazis secretly



Montbronn

gathered their remaining manpower, tanks and guns to form a potent mobile army. From within the farthest corners of the Reich every available gallon of gasoline, vehicle and weapon were placed at the disposal of this huge and powerful striking force. Plans called for a lightning stroke into and past our lines to the rear, capture of stores of equipment and gasoline which were absolutely imperative for further movement to continue on into France. It was a tremendous gamble, the success of which depended solely upon maintenance of supplies. Clothed in absolute secrecy the Germans went about building up for the all-out assault. The plot seethed and boiled and unexpectedly the explosion came.

Suddenly on 16 December 1944 the massed German armor and infantry power erupted and flowed through the American lines carrying everything before it into the Ardennes. Crack SS panzer units, the cream of the German Army, spearheaded the drive intended to reach Antwerp and the Nazi radio, elated over initial successes, boisterously proclaimed "Paris by Christmas!" The great juggernaut fumed and roared through Allied defenses and captured stores of fuel, equipment and supplies.