







*Taking "ten" during the initial drive on Bitche. Right, a Centuryman takes a sniping position in a ruined house. The Jerries learned respect for the M-1.*

fire fight when the enemy was taken by surprise as part of the regiment took le Hochkopf; or Hill 430, the commanding peak in the area; the second was an enemy counterattack against Co. A on the crest of a hill, in which our troops drove off an enemy force twice its size. Although the enemy continued to throw in harassing mortar shells, one of which temporarily knocked out the mobile shower-unit, supplies got through unhindered and the 397th, when it had taken le Hochkopf, held positions well suited to block an enemy attack from the northeast while the division continued its northward advance toward Bitche.

Our division was now in position to begin its attack to breach the Maginot Line in the Bitche area. The plan called for the 398th Inf. to attack swiftly along the ridge north of Reysersviller as it circled west of Bitche, breaking through the Maginot Line by first taking Freudenberg Fort and the Freudenberg Outpost. Because divisions in other sectors had found the Maginot forts lightly defended, there was reason to believe that this plan might succeed. If the 398th met heavy resistance, it was to stop this attack and prepare for a major assault with stronger forces.

In the first action of this plan, the 398th entered Reysersviller on 13 December and took the ridges beyond it to the north and northwest. Co. A, attached to the 3rd Battalion, went into Reysersviller unopposed, and the 3rd Battalion moved to le Kirschscheid, a hill north of the western end of the town, and met only sniper fire. The 2nd Battalion, continuing its attack to the northwest, crossed the highway to Bitche



east of Reysersviller, moved along a hill road above the town. Co. F, spearheading this attack, was the first element of the division to reach the Maginot Line. Having taken le Schoenberg in the curve of the Bitche road, Co. F went on to the next hill, le Schimberg, just north of the center of Reysersviller and adjacent to the 3rd Battalion. Co. G followed to positions at the head of a valley running northeast toward Bitche, and Co. E moved up behind to hold le Schoenberg. The lines thus formed a part of a ring around Bitche, a kilometer and a half to the northeast. To block an attack from the northeast in the sector which separated the 398th and the 397th to the east, the 3rd Battalion of the 399th Inf. and Cos. A and B of the 398th moved into the hills between highway and the railroad from Lemberg to Bitche.

During the afternoon of 14 December, the 1st Battalion 398th Inf., moving northwest along the hill road above Reysersviller through the 2nd Battalion sector, launched an attack against the first of the major fortifications of the Maginot Line. The "Folly of France" may have been weak in other sectors, but before Bitche the construction of "The Line" was of unbelievable strength. Two of four main forts, Freudenberg and Schiesseck, lay directly in our path. Fort Freudenberg was a huge single unit. Fort Schiesseck was divided into 11 interconnected units of varying size and firepower. All were constructed of rigid, reinforced concrete with walls from three to ten feet thick. One unit, No. 11, descended five flights into the earth where a tunnel joined it to the other units. Even a narrow gauge supply railroad was included in this maze of fortifications. Of the 11 units, Nos. 2, 4, 6, and 9 were the largest and were provided with moats



and emergency exits. With Fort Otterbiel and Fort Grand Hohekirkel added, this 15-mile belt of concrete had stymied every effort of the Germans and was captured only after the French capitulated voluntarily after the fall of France.

With the 3rd Battalion keeping abreast to protect the left flank, the 1st Battalion 398th now hurled its might against Fort Freudenberg in the vicinity of Freudenberg Farm. In spite of unyielding enemy resistance by foot-troops supported by heavy artillery and flak guns, our infantry, artillery, and tank team, with tanks from Co. B of the 781st Tank Battalion, was able to neutralize this first major fort.

Cos. A and B then attempted to turn to the northeast against the outer forts of Fort Schiesseck beyond the Bitche road. Because this attack had to be made across a bold plateau, however, enemy opposition forced the companies to dig in after a short advance. Had they succeeded, the 3rd Battalion was to move ahead, take the rest of the fort and give supporting fire to the attack of the 399th on Bitche itself.

While the 2nd Battalion of the 398th held positions south and east of this attack and captured an infiltrating enemy patrol, the 1st Battalion of the 399th moved to le Schoenberg in a sector between 2nd Battalion 398th Inf., and 3rd Battalion 399th Inf. The 399th Inf. thus held hills on either side of the Lemberg-Bitche road. Although the enemy was defending Bitche from pillboxes, forts, entrenchments, and machine-gun emplacements strengthened with mine fields and roadblocks, the 1st Battalion sent patrols toward the town. A patrol from Co. A got into a lively fire fight just west of the College de Bitche and came back with two prisoners. Also near

the College, a Co. B patrol encountered some Krauts, killed two, and captured four. Patrols from the 3rd Battalion went far ahead of our lines, one to the hill just east of the College, where the enemy was observed laying a mine field, and another across the railroad as far as the lake called the Etang d'Hasselfort where the enemy had earlier been seen preparing positions. The 399th set up an observation post in the 1st Battalion sector on le Schoenberg which gave a remarkably clear view of Bitche and the declivitous hill at its center called the Citadel.

Co. A of the 398th Inf. again tried an attack on Fort Freudenberg on the morning of 15 December, but enemy opposition was so strong that the company pulled back to its line of departure to await an artillery softening up. Now began 36 hours of air and artillery attack on the forts surrounding Bitche. Besides its organic artillery battalions, our division had five attached battalions: two of 105mm howitzers, two of 155mm howitzers, and one of 4.5-inch guns, or 60 firing pieces. On call, in addition, were a battalion of 155mm rifles, a battalion of 8-inch howitzers, two batteries of 240mm howitzers, and one battery of 4.2-inch chemical mortars. During the night the 781st Tank Destroyer Battalion moved into place for direct fire from the edge of the woods three 105mm assault guns and two tanks mounted with 76mm guns. The 824th Tank Destroyer Battalion brought up three of its guns but could find a place for only one of its three-inchers. During the afternoon of 16 December two M12 self-propelled 155mm. rifles moved into firing position.

The first day of the firing a shell from a 240mm howitzer smashed the grilled door of Fort Freudenberg, and later another 240, failing to go off, plowed through the very walls. Seven Germans carrying a white flag came out and surrendered. But the artillery in general did not cause much damage to the forts. Men reported seeing large shells actually bounce off the curved concrete surfaces.

Unit Number 7 of Fort Schiesseck had an hydraulic firing turret which rose, fired, and retracted with great rapidity. Hit after hit failed to halt this turret until a 240, catching it in the up position, caused it to jam. The next direct hit should have demolished the jack-in-the-box but only succeeded in loosening the jammed mechanism, and the turret continued firing. White phosphorous shells fired by the artillery in the hope that the fumes would enter the forts and drive the enemy out, proved unavailing. During the initial two days of the assault, 78 fighter-bombers dropped 27

tons of 500-pound bombs on the area in a futile attempt to neutralize the flanking strongpoints and destroy those targets which could be reached only from the air.

In a diversionary thrust, the 397th, to the east, took two hills commanding the road entering Bitche from the east, securing that edge of the division front. But as a whole, our operations of 16 December were not very successful. Bitche was proving a tough nut to crack.

After a 30-minute air bombardment and a 45-minute artillery preparation, the 3rd Battalion 398th began a four-day assault the following morning that captured Fort Freudenberg and the 11 units of Fort Schiesseck. In the clear dawn, through woods covered with frost, the battalion moved to positions held by the 1st Battalion at the edge of the forest south of the Freudenberg plateau. Just before noon, the 3rd Battalion started across the open ground toward the forbidding fortifications.

The plan was elaborate. While a diversionary air attack and artillery shelling began to the east against Camp de Bitche in the 397th sector, the 3rd Battalion 398th was to capture all the forts on Schiesseck Hill in a daring maneuver which meant exposing themselves to attack from three directions. The 2nd Battalion, moving as rapidly as possible to minimize this danger, was then to attack northward and reduce all forts in their line of advance until they had captured high ground south of Schorbach to the north and west. This action would protect the left flank of the 3rd Battalion.

If successful, the 3rd Battalion, by taking Schiesseck Hill would have flanked Bitche. The 399th was then to seize that town at once to protect the right flank of the 3rd Battalion 398th, while the 1st Battalion 398th moved in between the 2nd and 3rd. The success of this entire strategy depended upon timing. If any portion of our strategy went wrong, the 3rd Battalion 398th could be cut off by the enemy.

Actually, the 2nd Battalion didn't move up on the left flank until 19 December, two days later. The 399th Inf. did not advance on Bitche, and there was a constant gap closed only by occasional patrols to the west of the 398th where the 44th Div. was trying to take Fort Simserhoff. The reason for this delay was that the whole Seventh Army was about to be engaged in a different kind of war, and the division was to have a new mission.

Cos. L and I, the attacking companies of the 3rd Battalion 398th Inf., had special equipment for their





job. Each squad carried a bazooka and a satchel charge of TNT. The pole charges which each squad had been issued were left behind in casements which the battalion had taken a couple of days before. Each man was also carrying two thermite grenades and two hand grenades, about a quarter of them white phosphorous. Each company had two nine-man squads of engineers from Co. B of the 325th Engr. Battalion attached. The engineers all carried demolitions as well as two 25-pound satchel charges or "beehive" demolitions, which are shaped charges with the quality of clinging to vertical surfaces. The companies were to attack in waves of platoons: the assault platoon, covered by fire from the other two, would knock out the initial resistance; the support platoon with the engineers would destroy the fortification and seal up the openings; and the reserve platoon would move up to keep the enemy from reentering the fort while the other platoons went forward.

In the assault, Co. L, led by 1st Lt. Samuel Teitelbaum, was the first platoon which started down the trail toward Fort Freudenberg, then swung left to approach as closely as possible up a wooded ravine. At last the men had to make a dash for it across the open ground under artillery fire from the Schiesseck units and Bitche. They found the barbed wire cut by the artillery and reached the unoccupied structure with its unexploded 240 still inside.

Coming up behind were Capt. Robert E. Brinkerhoff, the CO of Co. L, with his command group, and the support platoon under 2nd Lt. Elmer R. Givens. The assault platoon, by-passing Unit 9 to the north, struck northeast toward Unit 11. Leaving a six-man guard at Freudenberg, the support platoon followed. Capt. Brinkerhoff got permission by radio not to destroy the fort but to use it as a CP and observation post. The engineers with Capt. John J. Upchurch III,

CO of Co. B of the Engineers, came up with the support platoon and conducted four prisoners who had been taken during the advance back to the ravine. Here two platoons of machine guns from Co. M had set up, the limitation on their fields of fire being compensated for by the protection the positions gave them from artillery.

Enemy artillery made Lt. Teitelbaum's platoon cross to the north of the Bitche road and approach Unit 11 by crawling along a trail and ditch. Below them to the south they could see 2nd Lt. Vincent G. Williams and the assault (third) platoon of Co. I approaching Unit 10. This platoon had attacked the fort directly from the south, passing through the 1st Battalion and over the ground where the dead of the previous attack still lay. They had inched up the incline under very heavy artillery fire, but found that no resistance was coming from the fort itself.

Above and to the north, the 1st squad of Lt. Teitelbaum's platoon had sprinted from the ditch across the road to the protection of a pile of logs. From here, covered by fire from the rest of the squad, Sgt. Paul E. Brannon, Pfc. Theodore O. Bayard, and Pfc. Floyd E. Baker rushed onto the roof of the fort. Baker dropped two grenades into the turret and silenced a machine gun which had been firing from there. The rest of the squad rushed the entrance of Unit 11, the personnel entrance of the system. In front of the grilled door was a moat five feet wide and about ten feet deep. After S. Sgt. William Hust and three men had placed a log across the moat, Pfc. Richard D. Ahlers crept along the log to the grill and found it locked. He worked back across the log and returned with a satchel charge. Then he dashed for a shell crater where the rest of the men were taking shelter from the explosion.

The hurriedly-placed demolition didn't go off, and

*Supply entrance to Ft. Schiesseck. Small railway cars could roll right into the fort. Note steel cupola on top.*



*Personnel entrance. It was from the protection of logs in foreground that Baker-Bayard assault was covered.*





*Schiesseck system above ground as viewed from Unit-9. Unit-1 can be seen in the distance. Turrets of others appear to the right.*

the squad decided to try to explode it with a bazooka round. But the three men with the bazooka had been killed by a mortar shell when the squad began to rush the fort. Despite the shell fire, Pfc George Burzynski ran back to the second and third squads, still in the ditch by the road, and came back with a bazooka. Pfc. Robert McKnight then crawled to within 25 yards of the door and fired the bazooka to set off the charge and blow in the door. The men surrounded the fort and entered it to find the lights still on and in one room a fire raging. To blow open an inner door in the main corridor the squad needed engineers.

But these trouble-shooters were still pinned down at the junction of the Schorbach-Bitche road. Someone went down to Co. I at Unit 10 and brought back several engineers who were attached to that company. A shaped charge failed, but pole charges proved more successful. The support platoon of Co. L with Lt. Givens, now came up to Unit 11, and Lt. Teitelbaum sent a squad to locate a machine gun firing from his right, then tried to reach Capt. Brinkerhoff with a "536" which, as usual, didn't work. When the captain finally was reached by radio, he ordered the attack to continue.

At Unit 10, Sgt. Harry E. Johnson used a satchel charge to destroy the grill across the supply entrance into which ran a narrow gauge track. Again after a delay, because the engineers had gone to Unit 11, the inner door was destroyed, and with the explosion the whole fort seemed to burst into flames. Fed apparently by fuel oil stocks on a lower level, the fire continued to send up billows of smoke for 24 hours.

It was now late afternoon. While Lt. Williams of the Co. I assault squad sought his CO, 1st Lt. John M. Albright, the support platoon of Co. I, led by acting platoon leader T. Sgt. Robert L. Armstrong,

moved from Unit 10 in the direction of Unit 11. There, Lts. Teitelbaum and Givens of Co. L, leaving a guard to prevent enemy occupation of Unit 11, had gone forward to the crest of the hill to make a reconnaissance. Between them and the upper units of Fort Schiesseck lay a formidable wire entanglement. Explaining the difficulty by radio, they learned that the CO would come forward from Fort Freudenberg to look the situation over. After this reconnaissance it was decided that Co. L should dig in for the night on either side of Unit 11.

Flank defenses had been set up around Fort Freudenberg. The reserve (3rd) platoon of Co. L had dug in along the road all the way from Legeret Farm to positions east of the fort. Casualties from enemy artillery, much of it from Unit 7 with its rising and retracting turret, were heavy. A Love Co. light machine gun was set up to cover the draw to the north, and mortars were ready to fire from a draw to the south. The fort itself was full of activity. The Co. L CP was there, and so were Lt. Col. Raymond Renola, CO of the 325th F A Battalion, and Capt. Vernon C. Hines, the artillery forward observer with Co. L, his radio operator and a wire crew. Capt. Hines decided to take his radio operator, S. Sgt. David B. Hatch, forward to a shell crater for better observation. As they reached their hole, a shell landed in a crater just ahead and splattered the corpse of a German soldier all over them, draping Capt. Hines with the entrails. Sgt. Hatch vomited, and they left their new-found OP.

Investigation showed that from the main room of Unit 11 a stairway, winding around an elevator shaft, descended for five stories to a tunnel with a narrow-gauge track running through it. Lt. Albright, CO of Co. I, had already posted a guard, but when Capt. Brinkerhoff of Co. L returned from his reconnaissance with instructions to dig in for the night, he decided

*Pictured from top to bottom are a stretch of typical Maginot terrain, a common Maginot fort, a Maginot unit showing cupola, a concrete pillbox, and Ft. Freudenberg.*



that the guard should be placed at the lowest level. Later the guard came up and reported having been engaged in a fire-fight with Germans. Communications Sgt. Joseph Clark of Co. L spoke German, and he and 1st Sgt. Marven L. Larson of Co. I went below to try to persuade the Germans to surrender. Cautiously, the two men felt their way along the tunnel over barricades the guards had placed to hinder any enemy who might try to use the passage. After moving through the tunnel for a short distance they heard the Krauts conversing and Sgt. Clark shouted to them in German, advising them to surrender. The Jerries' only answer was a volley of shots through a grill, and the two sergeants took off like BABs, banging against the barricades as they retreated through the tunnel.

Co. L and two platoons of Co. I dug in around Unit 11 for the night, and the Love Co. light machine guns, replaced at Fort Freudenberg by the heavies of Co. M, came up on line. They were joined by the reserve platoon of Co. I, under S. Sgt. Samuel Rosenberg. This platoon had been broken up late in the afternoon when, while attempting to advance, the maneuvering of a friendly tank drew enemy artillery fire upon them.

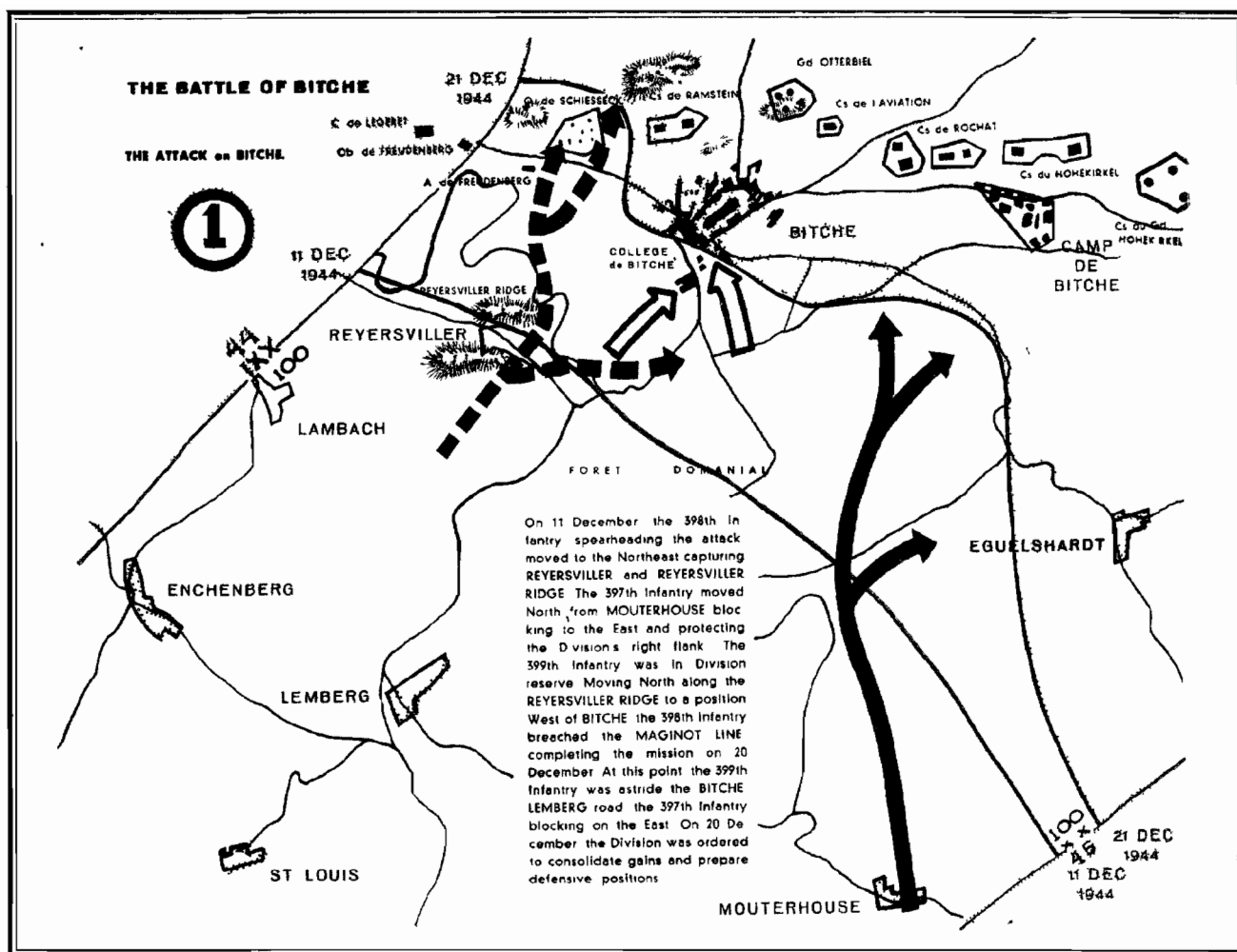
To the southeast, the guns of the battalion Anti-Tank Platoon commanded the Bitche road, and a medium tank of the 781st Tank Battalion controlled the Schorbach road.

In the center of the division front, a platoon of Co. C 399th Inf. fought its way to the support of a patrol which had entered the College de Bitche during the night, and succeeded in driving the enemy from this former seat of learning.

The enemy, however, showed no sign of giving up the area. Where we forced them to withdraw, they did so slowly, laying mines and booby-traps to impede our advance. In an effort to dislodge the Krauts from their almost impregnable positions, our artillery blanketed the hill with fire during the night of 17-18 December and followed with a severe 15-minute barrage at dawn, just prior to our attack.

Shortly before the artillery began blasting the Krauts in final preparation for our assault, Capt. Hines, the artillery FO with Co. L, who had spent the night in Freudenberg, was warned by a guard on lookout duty in the turret of the fort that some Jerries were coming down the Schorbach road from the





north. Hines and Cpl. James M Hagman climbed on top of the fort and killed five of the Germans who were walking as though unaware that a war was in progress. Then a Co. L machine gun opened fire, and the Germans raised a white flag. As the firing ceased, one Jerry bolted and escaped, but one officer and 11 enlisted men surrendered to the two intrepid Century-men. While Capt. Hines was searching his prisoners, three more Krauts walked in from Legeret Farms, to the west, and surrendered. At this point, however, a German machine gun began firing from the woods to the northwest, forcing the two Americans and their 15 prisoners to take refuge in the fort.

The attack, designed to reduce the remaining fortifications barring our entrance into Bitche, got under way slowly. As planned, Co. L was to take Units 6, 7 and 8, while Item Co., to the right, was to capture Units 4 and 5 to the southeast.

Upon attempting to move forward from Freudenberg, however, the reserve platoon of Love Co., under S. Sgt. Wesley E Jones, was immobilized by enemy

artillery fire on the road and machine gun fire from the same weapon which had forced Capt. Hines to take cover earlier. Sgt. Jones reported the difficulties of his position by telephone and the 2nd Platoon, which had been the support platoon the day before, was assigned to the assault.

The men of the 2nd Platoon, under Lt. Givens, were reluctant to leave their holes in the face of the severe enemy fire. But, gradually, urged on by Lt. Givens, they began to crawl through lanes blasted by our artillery in the enemy's wire entanglements. Almost immediately, machine gun fire from Bitche caused the Love Co. men to flatten. The same fire caught the men of Lt. Williams' Co. I platoon just as they were leaving their holes. Somehow, the lieutenant managed to reach a crater, and from there he directed his men, shell-hole by shell-hole, through the barricades of wire.

Unit 5, a concrete pillbox with turrets for machine guns and automatic rifles but without a personnel entrance, was unmanned when the Co. I platoon finally



succeeded in surrounding it. But until our artillery covered the town of Bitche with smoke, the Jerry artillery kept the I Co. men from closing in on the fort. Now the Infantry was in a position to cover the approach of the Engineers. The "Dynamiters" were employing new tactics in storming fortified positions. Instead of having large detachments hand-carry the demolitions necessary to reduce such mammoth forts, small groups accompanied the assault with a minimum of explosives, leaving the heavy charges to be brought up by truck as near to the front as possible. Sgt. Dee W. Crosby, for his bravery in organizing this work of the engineers in the face of enemy fire, later received a battlefield commission.

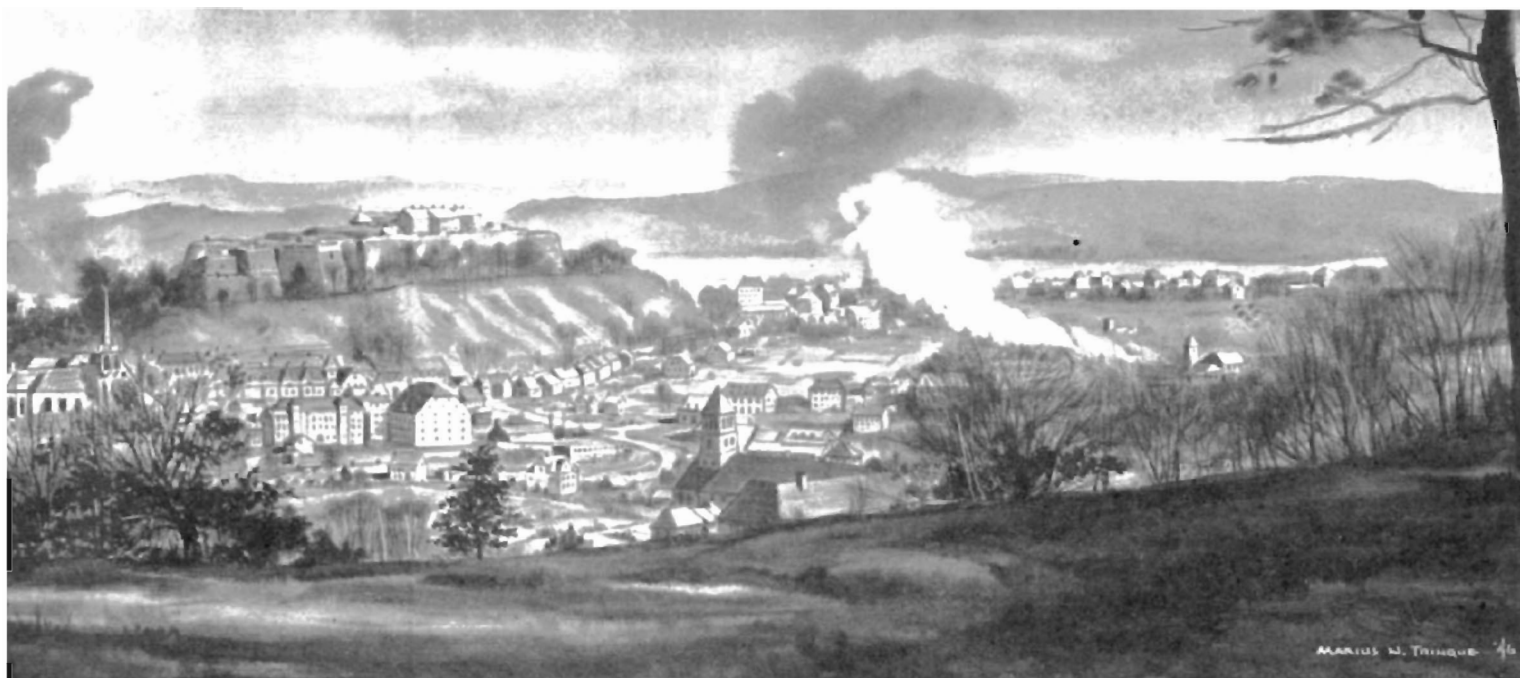
Unit 5 presented a difficult problem in demolition. When pole charges failed to explode, Lt. Williams tried the trick with a bazooka. But this, too, was unsuccessful. Leaving two squads to guard Unit 5, the platoon leader and one squad crawled to Unit 4 which, like Unit 5, was unoccupied and had no entry above ground. Stripping off his equipment, the lieutenant tried to squeeze through a firing port but heard voices below and instead threw in grenades. When the dust cleared he found a light still burning in the 57mm gun turret. After throwing white phosphorous grenades into the turret, he began to help the engineers place charges.

To the left, the Co. L assault platoon had passed Units 6, 8, and the inverted saucer of Unit 7's retractible turret—all without ground-level entrances—and faced Unit 3 on the nose of Schiesseck Hill. Leaving five men to guard Units 6 and 8, Lt. Givens with ten men went north and east toward Unit 2, the largest

above-ground fort in the upper Schiesseck units. Its only personnel opening was an escape grill in its moat.

The 1st Platoon of Co. L, acting as support on this day, also passed Units 6 and 8 and, after throwing grenades into the ports, dug in around Unit 3, the easternmost of the forts on the nose of the hill. Misunderstanding a signal from Capt. Brinkerhoff at Unit 7, who was trying to warn them against a machine gun he believed to be firing from Unit 3, Lt. Givens and his men left Unit 2 to go to Unit 3. As they started forward, an explosion, either of a mine or artillery shell, killed four and wounded one of our men. The rest found the men of Lt. Teitelbaum's platoon already dug in around Unit 3, and a reconnaissance of the northeast nose of the hill showed merely more wire and shell craters.

The Co. L communications sergeant, Sgt. Clark, with Pfc. Orrie Kittleson, Pfc. John C. Kearfoot and two other wire men, had been sent after Lt. Givens to check Unit 2 as a possible CP. The explosion which killed the four men of the assault platoon sent the sergeant and the wire men scrambling into the moat around Unit 2. Once inside, they could hear Germans talking beyond the grating of the waist-high escape port. When Kittleson tried to climb out of the moat, he was wounded by machine gun fire from the fort. The others pulled him out of range to dress his wounds. The aperture was intended to give fire over the moat, but by depressing the gun to the limits, the Germans were able to hit the rim and to endanger the men with ricocheting slugs. When Pfc. Kearfoot was mortally wounded by such a shot, Sgt. Clark was so enraged that he fired a full clip from his M-1 through the



grating. Inside, a voice called out in German, "Stop shooting." Interested in the possibility of prisoners, Clark did. "We want to help you. Are you British or American?"

Clark answered in German, "We are Americans."

"Good. We understand that the Americans know how to treat prisoners. We also treat prisoners well."

"Come to the point!"

"We are glad that you are not like the Russians. We are not like them either. Now, we would be glad to surrender if you can get some more men to storm the fort. We would not like for it to look as if we had given up too easily."

Clark felt that his earlier suspicion of a trick had been substantiated. He explained that he would like to get medical aid for his wounded men.

"Are there any wounded German soldiers outside in the area?"

"Yes. Several, only a short distance away."

On being told that he could go for a medic, Clark said he would climb out of the moat and told the Germans not to shoot.

A German officer replied arrogantly from the grating, "We are not your prisoners; you are ours. You will find that Germans do not surrender so easily. . . . And you had better come back, or we will keep the medic."

Outside the moat Clark found Pvt. Russell J. Vander Hoff, a medic who had come up to treat the wounded man from Lt. Givens' platoon. While the medic lowered himself into the moat, Clark returned to his CO, explained the situation, and was ordered not to go back.

It was now noon. Because Lt. Williams and his platoon were still having difficulty with the destruction of Units 4 and 5, the Co. I CO, 1st Lt. John M. Albright, sent T. Sgt. Robert L. Armstrong to take Unit 2. Having left six men still guarding the tunnel in Unit 11, Armstrong had only eight men with whom to pass Unit 4 and try to cross the bare hill to Unit 2. Machine gun and mortar fire almost at once forced the platoon into a slight defilade, the only available cover. By radio, Armstrong explained his position to Williams who said he'd send support for an attempt to work down hill to Unit 3, already held by Co. L, and attack Unit 2 from the rear. Short of men himself, Williams tried to find the Co. I 2nd Platoon, which had been scattered the day before and finally assembled during this morning in positions with Co. L between Units 7 and 8. When he had brought this platoon to Unit 4, Williams learned that he was in command of Co. I because 1st Lt. Albright had been killed by a shell which landed in his crater O.P.

1st Sgt. Lawson and Pfc. Alfred E. Kickey of the engineers, who had sought shelter there from a demolition he was firing on Unit 4, were wounded by the same shell. Lt. Williams, as new CO, brought the command group to Unit 4 and recalled Sgt. Armstrong to place his men along a line of skirmishers between Unit 4 and Unit 5 to the south and later sent the Co. I 2nd Platoon into line beside that platoon of Co. L which stretched from Unit 3 on the northeast part way to Unit 4. Williams also placed his light machine guns to cover the draw below Unit 5, his right flank, and called for the heavies from Co. M in the hope of setting them up in the turret



*Wreckage of Freudenberg Farms after weeks of incessant pounding by our artillery. This enemy strongpoint proved a major trouble-spot.*

of Unit 4, his center. Pfc. Kickey's demolition had broken in the wall above the escape port in the fort. Kickey had had difficulty in placing the charge because, when he got into the moat, he had moved some wire entanglements and set off a booby-trap. But he succeeded in placing the charge only to be wounded in Lt. Albright's crater when he took cover. Though Unit 4 was now accessible, no one entered because the phosphorous grenades tossed into the turret earlier had started a fire and set off small arms ammunition which continued to explode during the afternoon and night.

Having relieved the 1st Battalion of the 398th at the line of departure, the edge of the woods, where it had suffered casualties from the artillery, Co. K, under 1st Lt. William E. Nelson, was ordered to move north from Fort Freudenberg and Unit 11 and neutralize Unit 9. Co. I had earlier by-passed this unit, but now a machine gun seemed to be firing from there. Lt. Nelson called for a tank for support. He was told it would arrive, but his offer to direct it was declined. The tank finally came up to the crossroads near Freudenberg, dashed off west toward Legeret Farm, and then clanked back toward Bitche. Disgusted, Lt. Nelson decided to go on without it.

Leaving his 2nd Platoon at Freudenberg and sending his 3rd Platoon to Units 10 and 11, Nelson led his 1st Platoon toward Unit 9 under enemy mortar fire. Since no resistance came from the fort, the platoon threw in grenades and called for the engineers. A machine gun, firing from the woods in the northwest

draw, kept the engineers from crossing the Bitche road. The platoon radioed for a tank and then crawled to the edge of the draw, hoping to be able to rush the machine gun. But the fire was so thick that they asked for the Co. M mortars to blanket the woods. The engineers, supported by three tanks, set off satchel charges on the cupolas and 240 pounds of TNT against the observation turret without causing any damage. Nelson then withdrew to dig in at reserve positions around Units 10 and 11 while the tanks and anti-tank guns were placed for the night so as to cover roads and draws leading to our lines.

During the afternoon, Cpl. William A. Mueller of Co. L was in charge of the dull job of guard duty at Unit 11. He had broken down his rifle to clean it when he saw two Germans working up the south draw with a machine gun. Taking the offensive, he charged them with his only weapon, a bayonet. The startled Germans dropped the machine gun and surrendered. When Mueller told his story to his CO, Capt. Brinkerhoff jokingly asked, "Where's the machine gun?" In a few minutes Mueller struggled back under the machine gun and several bandoliers of ammunition.

Though the hill was now almost wholly occupied and as much damage as possible was being done to the forts, the Germans were still using the lower passages. Four Jerries appeared in the open in front of Pfc. Rogenos of Co. I's 2nd Platoon. The Germans apparently came from a concealed escape passage near Unit 5. When a couple of them were wounded, the four Krauts tried to escape and were killed.



*Reading mail and opening packages from home during a lull in the firing. Some of the doughfeet constructed 3-room apartments underground.*

About this time, Lt. Williams, acting as CO of Co. I, was wounded in the hand. 2nd Lt. Raymond H. Snell, just returned from the hospital and sent to the area by Maj. Ernest L. Janes, the 3rd Battalion CO, arrived at Unit 4 as Lt. Williams was leaving to have his wound dressed. Snell, the sole officer in the company, continued preparing for the night, extending his lines back toward Unit 11, placing his command group in the gap between Cos. I and L near Unit 4, and putting the heavy machine guns from Co. M in line between platoons. All this had to be accomplished without adequate communication because his "536" didn't work and he had no "300" radio. To make matters worse, the company communications sergeant, Sgt. Hyman Cohen, had been killed and Lt. Snell lacked experienced aid in operating what communications he had.

During this re-arrangement, Pfc. Theodore H. Bates, intent on digging his foxhole, absently allowed two Germans with a machine gun to approach him from the south draw. When he realized that they were Germans, he dived and seized one of them by the arm. In the fight which ensued, Bates bit deep into the shoulder of the German struggling to escape. Both surrendered.

Meanwhile, the engineers had been attempting to demolish the forts, detonating 1,600 pounds of TNT in the tunnel between Units 10 and 11, killing at least a dozen Germans hiding there and smashing the tunnel wall. Later, a PW said that 80 escaped through Unit 2 in the darkness. The engineers also tried to damage the ventilation intake ducts.

Though no counterattacks accompanied the heavy enemy artillery shelling during the night of 18 December, the men of the 3rd Battalion 398th Inf., continued to feel that they held a dangerously jutting point.

In other sectors of our division front, the 399th continued to hold the College de Bitche in the division center; Co. F of the 397th pushed forward in a small attack south of the Bitche-Hagenau road; and the artillery continued with its systematic destruction of Camp de Bitche.

Early on the morning of 19 December, a bedraggled German surrendered at Fort Freudenberg. He said he had been manning a machine gun in the northwest draw, west of the Schorbach road, and was tired of being without food. When he said others might be ready to give up, he was sent back and returned with one man. Capt. Hines, the artillery forward observer, sent a patrol to the point where the PW reported the machine gun and a third German was captured.

This third day of attack almost completed the conquest of Schiesseck. Only Unit 9, which was causing no trouble, and Unit 2, far to the northeast and occupied by Germans, still remained in enemy hands. Instead of making a costly assault on Unit 2, the troops drew back to the area around Unit 11, and an M-12 155mm. self-propelled gun moved from Hill 412 to the south to Legeret Farm to the west to fire on Unit 2. When the infantry had marked the target with smoke grenades, the gun fired 17 rounds, seven of them direct hits. Lt. Col. Raymond Renola, division artillery officer, said that one of the rounds went through the concrete walls, but most of the shells seemed to bounce off harmlessly. Capt. Hines, asserting that no part of the Maginot Line was impervious





*Closeup of entrance to mammoth Ft. Osterbeil. Note thick walls and ingenious construction into side of hill affording minimum target.*

to "155" fire striking at a 90 degree angle to a surface, said that the shelling would have been more effective had it come from a proper angle. Major Janes had Bitche smoked while the troops moved back to their forward positions. Later there was some argument about whether the Germans had reoccupied Unit 3 while the troops were gone, but the Co. L men who returned to that fort did not see any enemy.

Although a bulldozer, which could bury the fort entrances under tons of earth, had been brought to the area, enemy artillery fire on the hill was still too intense to allow the machine to be used. The engineers fired 500 pounds of TNT in an effort to destroy the stair and elevator shaft of three-story depth in Unit 11. Capt. John J. Upchurch, CO of Co. B 325th Engrs., dissatisfied with the damage done to Unit 10, went down the tunnel between Units 10 and 11 to find a place where he could block the passage. At a blind turn where grenades and ammunition were discovered stacked against the walls, he thought he had found the ideal spot. But at that moment a party of Jerries suddenly dashed around the turn and began hurling grenades. Capt. Upchurch and his patrol back-peddled and chose an alternative location nearer the entrance. Two 400-pound charges, however, failed to damage the tunnel, and a 600-pound charge set off by the engineers just about chipped the concrete.

These were the forts about which Ed Clark, staff writer for *Stars and Stripes*, describing the Maginot Line, had said that the fortifications were "stacked up gravel" and could be "reduced to powder with a pencil." Having read these statements, a number of the men who had attacked the forts in the Maginot around Bitche, sent Clark a box of pencils and wrote him saying he could have the job. Later Clark visited the area and wrote a retraction.

While 1st Lt. Clifford McClure was forward observing for the artillery, Capt. Hines and his men, having found the turrets of Unit 11 not suitable, busied themselves with keeping communications lines in working order.

Part of the 2nd Battalion of the 398th Inf. advanced to the west of the 3rd Battalion to take the high ground south of Schorbach. Since most of the 3rd Battalion did not know of this move, the men continued to feel that they were out on a limb. Other elements of the 2nd Battalion came up with the 3rd Battalion around Unit 9 and near Unit 2, the farthest northeast of the units, to help the engineers reduce these last two forts. The 1st Battalion shifted forward to Fort Freudenberg and toward Unit 9 to be ready to move between the other two battalions on the following day.

Late in the afternoon, Sgt. Edmund A. Bogert, Pfc. John J. McKelvey, and another man of the Co. L guard at Unit 7, heard voices and discovered that 30 or more Germans, to whom an officer was gesticulating, had formed around Unit 2. Bogert and McKelvey fired. The Germans, mistaking the direction of the fire, threw themselves on the ground for cover in such a way that they were still exposed. Belatedly correcting their error, they scrambled to the other side of Unit 2 and took off. Bogert, afraid that the enemy would form for a counterattack, sent a runner back to the company CP. News of the incident had preceded the runner's arrival, and Lt. Nelson of Co. K had already sent out his command group to reinforce the area.

Shortly afterward an exhausted runner staggered in from Lt. Teitelbaum's platoon far out on the nose



*Interior of a Maginot fort. Picture at right shows results of incessant artillery and air bombardment. 240mm shells bounced off these walls.*



of Schiesseck, bringing word of a large force of Germans forming in the draw for an attack. At the same time, Teitelbaum had been able to reach the battalion OP by radio, inquiring where the artillery observers were. Capt. Hines immediately called for unobserved fire on the whole area and set out with his radio operator and two wire men, planning to lay wire back from the nose.

In the dusk the Co. L men moved to the edge of the wood, using hand grenades, thermite cannisters, light machine guns and their rifles against the virtually invisible enemy.

Capt. Hines reached the area and radioed that he was ready to start observing. He was asked for coordinates. "Coordinates, hell," he snapped, "Just throw some in, and I'll tell you where to put them." Soon five field artillery battalions and the regimental Cannon Company were firing into the area. Hines and his radio operator continued to move forward, slipping and sliding down the slope as they directed the barrage for 15 minutes. Then the fire rate was reduced to one round per gun per minute. In the comparative quiet, the men could hear screams, groans, and the sound of the enemy digging in. Later information from a PW showed that 50 Germans had been killed in the break-up of the enemy's preparation for a counterattack. Capt. Hines, out of curiosity, went out to the listening post of Pfc. Floyd W. Baker from which the news of the impending attack had first come. On his way three Germans surrendered to him.

In its last day of attack on Schiesseck, 20 December, the 398th Inf. completed conquest of the great fort by taking Unit 2. For the rest, the 3rd Battalion

acted as a holding force while the engineers went on with their destruction. These demolitions groups were led by S. Sgt. Dee W. Crosby who continually exposed himself to enemy fire to carry out the work of his engineers. They demolished the turret of Unit 1, thus far almost ignored, and ruined the elevator and ruptured a turret in Unit 2. The elevator in Unit 6 was also wrecked. A charge in Unit 7 unseated a turret and moved it ten yards at the same time raising the retractible turret so that the gun could be destroyed by a charge in its muzzle.

Early in the morning the 2nd Battalion continued its northward attack. Co. E was subjected to an artillery barrage, but took the hill a kilometer north of Schiesseck. Co. G sent a patrol north toward Schorbach which was found to be full of enemy troops. Then, Co. G, hindered by much small arms fire, moved west to establish contact with the 71st Inf. of the 44th Div.

The 1st Battalion had been ordered to pass through the 3rd Battalion and take Hill 370, a lump of wooded height jutting out northeast from Schiesseck, but the battalion's mission was changed to the seizing of the road junction on the northeast nose of Schiesseck itself. Leaving Co. A in regimental reserve, Cos. B and C took the road junction and captured 24 prisoners. But early in the afternoon, adjusting lines in the face of an enemy counterattack, the two companies drew back slightly and held the north slope of Schiesseck Hill.

On the division right, to the south and east of Bitche, the 397th had a quiet day though enemy artillery continued to drop in and two patrols came through the lines. One patrol was driven off with numerous casualties and the other captured intact.

At dusk, a XV Corps order was received instruct-

ing the division to consolidate its defensive positions in location, and prepare for an enemy counterattack. The 398th fell back to more tenable ground south of its forward positions. In the center, with evidence growing that the enemy was planning an attack out of Bitche, the 399th pulled back its outposts. On the regimental right, the 3rd Battalion left the edge of the woods at the north end of the pond called the Etang d'Hasselfort, while Co. C of the 1st Battalion, reluctantly withdrew from the hard-won College de Bitche.

The last day on the Hill, 21 December, the 3rd Battalion held the line while the engineers went on with their destruction of the forts. The 800 pounds of TNT which finally blew out the stair in Unit 2, brought the total of TNT used on Schiesseck Hill to 5,000 pounds. On this day, too, for the first time, the bulldozer, which had been in readiness, was used to bury five of the units. Until now, no one had wanted to risk bringing the bulldozer into action. But on this last day of the assault, Tec. 5 Joseph Anderson of the 781st Tank Battalion volunteered to brave enemy artillery fire to bury Unit 9 under earth, rock, and barbed wire, fill the moats and seal the escape ports of Units 2 and 4, and block the turrets of Units 6 and 8. Attempting to cover Unit 7, Anderson got his bulldozer so bogged down that he would have had to risk many lives to get it out. He and the engineers put it out of working order and abandoned it.

As part of the last action on Schiesseck, Pfc. Floyd W. Baker, from whose listening post the first news of the enemy's impending attack had come the night of 19 December, gained a reputation for single-handed action against small hostile patrols. About noon, shortly before the battalion drew back, Baker killed one and captured three Germans of a patrol, the third patrol he had done away with in a little over 24 hours.

Summing up our critical operations against the Bitche fortifications, Berlin Sally was reported to have called the engineers and the infantry "the underpaid butchers of Bitche."

Our casualties for the operation were very small for the immense accomplishment. Of the 692 men and 38 officers in the 3rd Battalion 398th Inf., 15 men and one officer were killed, and 120 men were wounded. The engineers had one man killed, two men and two officers wounded.

On 12 March, the 3rd Battalion received a Presidential Unit Citation for its action.

But the division was not to be permitted to follow-up the capture of Schiesseck. Instead, because the offensive by Von Rundstedt in the First Army sector (the so-called Battle of the Bulge) required the Third Army to move north, the troops of the Seventh Army were to be spread out over a very long front. Since there were not enough troops for an attack on such a front, the best we could do was hold thin lines in defensive positions.

In this new mission our division front was shifted northwest and greatly extended. The area on the east of the division sector, held by the 397th on the high ground south of the Camp de Bitche and above the highway running east and south from Bitche through Eguelshardt and Hagenau, was taken over by elements of the 106th Cavalry Group. When this change had been completed without interference from the enemy, the 397th moved around to the northwest and took over the positions of the 114th Inf. of the 44th Div. The regiment learned that its new area around Hottviller had been quiet during the day. By the end of the period elements of the 106th Cavalry Group had also begun to relieve the 399th in the division

*Lower left, panorama of difficult hilly terrain surrounding Lambach. Below, group of mudsloggers relax after liberating town.*



center, south and west of Bitche. On what had been the division left, the 3rd Battalion of the 398th, after covering the work of the engineers, moved to an assembly area in the woods south of Schiesseck, leaving Cos. C and B in defensive positions there. The 2nd Battalion, in an assembly area to the southwest on the hills east of Siersthal, prepared to take over positions from the 71st Inf. of the 44th Div.

When the division had completed its adjustment to its new lines on 22 December, these were the sectors held: The 2nd Battalion of the 399th, holding the right flank, was in defensive positions facing east from just above the Lemberg-Mouterhouse road north to the hill called le Kreutzberg across the Lemberg-Bitche railroad, and then north along a line of hills just west of that railroad to the Lemberg-Bitche highway. At this point the line turned northwest, and the 1st Battalion of the 399th held the hills running parallel to the Reysersviller-Siersthal road from the Lemberg-Bitche highway almost to Fort Freudenberg. Here the 1st Battalion was in contact with the 1st Battalion of the 398th which continued in its positions around Schiesseck Hill. Further west was the 3rd Battalion 398th Inf., dug-in around Legeret Farm, in lines taken over from the 71st Inf.; while on the regimental left flank, the 2nd Battalion 398th Inf. entrenched near Holbach. The 397th Inf. extended on the division's left in the vicinity of Hottviller. The 3rd Battalion of the 399th was in division reserve with secondary defensive positions northeast of Lambach.

During the two days before Christmas the division continued to extend its front to the north and west and to adjust its positions for defense in depth. Mines and tree charges were placed along the main routes, and listening posts and anti-tank defenses were set up.

Defensive plans were somewhat revised during the afternoon of 23 December. On the division right, the 1st Battalion of the 399th pivoted northward so that its lines ran from the pond called the Etang d'Hasselfort west and then north along the ridge above Reysersviller to Freudenberg Farm, making an arc around Bitche. The 2nd Battalion of the 399th withdrew westward from the Lemberg-Bitche railway so that Co. G and Co. F, which kept one platoon in mobile reserve, held two hills called Hochfirst and le Schlossberg, straddling the Lemberg-Bitche highway and extending north of Lemberg just west of that road. Co. E was the battalion reserve in Lemberg itself. On line with the 2nd Battalion and between it and the 1st Battalion, Co. I dug in on the hill called le Spitzberg, just south of Reysersviller. The rest of the 3rd Battalion remained in secondary defense northeast of Lambach.

Except for patrols from the 1st and 2nd Battalions, the 398th sector in the center was quiet. The 1st Battalion, soon to move back through the lines, was still near Schiesseck Hill, the 3rd Battalion was still around Legeret, and the 2nd Battalion, holding a narrow front near Holbach, could give showers and clean clothing to part of its troops.

On the division left, the front was further extended when the 2nd Battalion of the 397th took over positions from a part of the 87th Inf. Div. and of the 12th Armored Div.

On one patrol from Co. F of the 398th, after the patrol had encountered a small group of enemy and wounded four, the men were forced back to their lines by enemy fire. Pfc. William R. Birchall volunteered to remain in the advanced position and when the enemy fire ceased moved out behind the German lines where he remained for seven hours until darkness, gathering information on the positions of enemy automatic weapons and troops.

*Below, a German tanker lies dead beside the wreckage of his tank. Right, a long line of Jerry prisoners is marched to the rear.*



When the 1st Battalion of the 399th had extended its lines to Freudenberg Farm, the 1st Battalion of the 398th was able to leave Schiesseck and move through the lines to reserve positions in Siersthal. The 398th Regimental CP moved to Enchenberg while the 399th CP moved out of that town and south to Sarreinsberg. The 2nd Battalion 398th Inf., widened its front northward to high ground near Holbach and Hottviller, and the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 397th were thus freed to extend to the division left flank. The enemy was quiet this day before Christmas except for a little artillery fire and a patrol which the engineers drove off from the 399th sector where the Germans were removing dynamite from trees.

The division's third Christmas was a day of little military activity. The army did what it could—a turkey dinner, served as hot as the cooks could manage with marmite cans; a PX issue of beer and peanuts. But the army could not forget the war, and it issued fleece-lined white coats with hoods for camouflage against the snow that was sure to come. The men of the 397th also received their November pay. But individual soldiers were able to add to the festivities; it was still possible to get schnapps in Alsace. Small groups, unaware perhaps that they were following a German custom, set up small pines or firs and decorated them with wrappings from the Christmas packages which had come through or with the tinfoil streamers dropped by planes to confuse radar detection. And food from home improved the army chow.

The 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 397th completed their shift to the division's left flank so that the regimental front now extended along the ridge from Rimling, on the northwest, eastward to Urbach. This shift was made in time to encounter two enemy attacks which caused the troops to move back from their

outpost lines to their main line of resistance. In this withdrawal Co. H lost two jeeps, and Co. F had the greater, though unmilitary, loss of its Christmas dinner and 25 of its newly issued white coats. Enemy possession and use of these coats continued to cause confusion for some time along the front.

The clear, bright air of this Christmas was perfect weather for our P47s in their missions over Bitche. War doesn't stop for Christmas.

Early in the afternoon of 26 December, about a hundred Germans using only small arms and automatic weapons, attacked the 3rd Battalion of the 397th in the area east of Rimling. The attack was broken up by our artillery. Tanks from the 23rd Tank Battalion then pursued the enemy who scattered and withdrew to Guiderkirch and Utweiler. On the rest of the division front the 398th and 399th repulsed almost constant small enemy patrols. The 3rd Battalion of the 398th went into reserve defensive positions in the Maginot Line area northwest of Holbach, and the 399th, on the extreme right flank of both the division and XV Corps, finally made contact with the 117th Reconnaissance Squadron of the 106th Cavalry Group, a part of the VI Corps.

Col. Andrew C. Tychsen, regimental commander of the 399th Inf. since its activation, became acting Assistant Division Commander on 27 December. He replaced Brig. Gen. Maurice G. Miller who was forced to return to the States because of ill health. Lt. Col. Elery M. Zehner, CO of the 1st Battalion 399th Inf., became acting commander of the 399th.

Below freezing temperatures continued to make digging-in a major operation. In the only action of the day, the 397th sent a patrol to Erching to capture prisoners but found no enemy in the town. Other patrols reported that the Krauts had also abandoned

