

FREE
PREVIEW



HEILBRONN:

The war was nearly won. But as the 100th Infantry Division's GIs attacked fortified Heilbronn, Germany, they feared they'd never see V-E Day.

by Edward G. Longacre



one last place to die



THE 100TH INFANTRY DIVISION HAD ACQUIRED AN UNENVIABLE REPUTATION by the time it disembarked at Marseilles in October 1944. Organized around a 1,500-man cadre of regulars and national guardsmen, the unit commonly known as the Century Division had spent its first two years doing little more than overcoming growing pains. Only now was it finally headed into action, in the long-delayed Allied invasion of Southern France.

Activated in November 1942 at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and later transferred to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the division went through basic training followed by three months of maneuvers in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee. By early 1944 the Century appeared ready to deploy overseas. But in subsequent months, 3,000 of its men—nearly 20 percent of its original complement—were detached as replacements for units already in combat. The high turnover forced an extra training period that lasted through September.

The division's long stateside posting encouraged army officials to use it for exhibition purposes. Thousands of its recruits paraded through the streets of New York City during the Fifth War Loan Drive, while others staged assault and firepower demonstrations for visiting Allied officials, Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) cadets, and assorted VIPs. This was not a background that inspired the confidence of those under whom the division would serve, including Lieutenant General Jacob L. Devers, commander of the 6th Army Group, and Lieutenant General Alexander M. Patch, commanding the Seventh Army.

Confounding expectations, the 100th division proved its fighting ability quickly and dramatically. Within a month of taking the field, the division—composed of the 397th, 398th, and 399th Infantry regiments, headquarters artillery and four field artillery battalions, a cavalry reconnaissance (light tank) company, and an assortment of support units—was muscling its way through the High Vosges Mountains of northeastern France. When the Centurymen penetrated the Winter Line, a barrier to the Rhine River plain and the German border, they achieved a feat no army had achieved since the first century BC.

At year's end, Adolf Hitler launched Operation Nordwind in France's Alsace and Lorraine provinces, hoping to duplicate the initial success of his late-1944 surprise assault in the wooded Ardennes region of eastern France, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The Century was the only Seventh Army element that held its ground throughout Nordwind, the final German offensive in the West.

The 100th Division had already earned a new reputation; soon it would gain a new nickname, too. In mid-March 1945, the division joined other 6th Army Group units, including the French First Army, in pursuing the enemy through Alsace. Among the Century Division's conquests was the heavily fortified town of Bitch, which had been invested several times during earlier wars but never carried. Proudly calling themselves Sons of Bitch, the Centurymen—

part of the VI Corps after March 26—charged toward the Rhine River, the last barrier to the German homeland.

Even before the division began crossing the upper Rhine on March 31, it was clear that the German Wehrmacht was on the ropes. While Devers's army group closed in on southern Germany, Lieutenant General George S. Patton's Third Army was crossing the Ruhr River and hastening eastward. British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's 21st Army Group was already across the Rhine, heading in the same direc-

tion, and Russian forces were within 50 miles of Berlin. Yet even the most optimistic GI understood that the enemy, fighting on his own soil, would not be subdued easily.

Several locations in southern Germany offered the Wehrmacht good terrain for a strong defense of the Fatherland. One was the city of Heilbronn, which lay squarely in the 100th Division's path. Nestled in a picturesque valley halfway between Heidelberg and Stuttgart, the 700-year-old Swabian municipality was shielded on



Previous spread: Men of the US 100th Infantry "Century" Division hurry through Heilbronn, Germany, on April 11, 1945. These men of the 399th Infantry Regiment's 1st Battalion must dodge shrapnel, bullets, and *nebelwerfer*—bombs called "screaming meemies" because of their screeching flight. Fierce combat with German forces under the umbrella of the 17th SS Panzier-Grenadier Division had raged since April 2.

Top: The Centurymen proudly wore this patch on their left sleeves. Above: The Neckar River protected Heilbronn, and German artillery made crossing it tricky. Here, beside a blown bridge, engineers ferry a jeep across. Shells had already wrecked a pontoon bridge. Opposite: A 100th Division tank patrols in Heilbronn on April 12. Getting tanks over the river was essential to the assault, so engineers used smoke to hide crossings.



the west by the deep, swift-flowing Neckar River, while a semicircular range of hills to the east, north, and south offered excellent artillery positions.

Heilbronn, which had a population of 100,000 before the war, was a strategically valuable industrial and railroad center, but Allied bombers had reduced large sections to ruins. It seemed unlikely that the Germans would attempt to hold such a devastated place. But by early April Heilbronn had become a haven for German troops fleeing the 6th Army Group's advance, including elite organizations such as the 17th SS Panzer-Grenadier Division. Other defenders included training regiments, engineering battalions, anti-aircraft units, labor and maintenance details, horsepack companies, and *Volksturm* home guard organizations manned by 70-year-old grandfathers and teenagers known as *Jugend*. In the fighting that lay ahead, GIs would even encounter sailors and *Afrika Korps* veterans of fighting in the North African desert. The commanders of this motley but formidable force had determined to make a last, desperate stand at Heilbronn.

When the soldiers of the 100th Division reached the west bank of the Neckar and peered across at the shattered, eerily silent city,

more than a few experienced a foreboding. No one appreciated risking his life on the brink of victory, but there was no alternative. The men counted on the physical and mental skills that had seen them through months of severe combat and almost equally severe weather. "I never wanted to kill," remembered an enlisted member of the 397th Infantry's F Company, "few of us did. It was simply a matter of survival. I carried the Browning Automatic Rifle, grenades hung from my field jacket button holes. I was young and strong and very much wanted to stay alive. I had become resigned that to live was to kill. It was a ghastly resolve."

The division could trust in the skill and savvy of its commander, Major General Withers A. Burress. A graduate of the Virginia Military Institute, and a veteran with 30 years' army service, Burress had forged a reputation for accomplishing the objectives assigned to him without unduly risking his men's lives. Not surprisingly, he inspired respect and confidence in his soldiers, many of whom regarded this dignified, soft-spoken Virginian as a latter-day Robert E. Lee.

Assigned the primary role in the effort to clear Heilbronn, Burress characteristically sought to minimize potential casualties.

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When seizing occupied towns on both sides of the Rhine, he had moved carefully and cautiously along a broad front. Now he set out to use the same approach. For the most part, the 397th would take the advance, with the 398th in reserve. The 399th would guard the right (south) flank while maintaining contact with the French II Corps, which was advancing slowly down the west bank of the Rhine.

EVERY BRIDGE SPANNING THE NECKAR to Heilbronn had been destroyed. Upon learning that, Burress decided to cross at Bad Wimpfen, eight miles to the north, where other Seventh Army elements would support him. He could then swing the division south across the Kocher River and come at Heilbronn from the rear. Burress's strategy was sound and prudent, but his immediate superior would have none of it. Major General Edward H. Brooks, commander of the VI Corps, had already sent the 10th Armored Division to the Neckar above Heilbronn. At 5 P.M. on April 3 he ordered Burress to detach one battalion—three rifle companies and

Heilbronn's northern suburbs. Other units fanned out toward the high ground southeast of Neckargartach to seize two objectives rightly believed to be held in force: Tower and Cloverleaf hills.

The remainder of the 398th's 3rd Battalion crossed the Neckar with little difficulty. Only the last boats met resistance, in the form of submachine-gun fire, and there were no casualties. Passengers in the crossings of the days to come would not get off so lightly. One GI whose boat would come under intense fire on April 5 would liken his crossing to "striking a match to a barrel of gun powder."

By 9 A.M. on the 4th, the lead element of the 3rd Battalion had established a bridgehead with the 10th Armored and advanced several hundred yards from it. One platoon had begun to climb Tower Hill and another was entering the factory district farther south. Thus far, opposition had been sporadic. Suddenly, Heilbronn erupted. Without warning, 1,000 or more Germans poured out of factories, houses, and railroad yards and launched a furious counterattack. They struck from every direction, includ-



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one heavy weapons company—to help the tankers establish a bridgehead for use by the Century and other commands to follow.

Saluting smartly, Burress dispatched the 3rd Battalion of the 398th Infantry to the northwestern suburb of Neckargartach. In the predawn darkness of April 4, K Company of the 398th paddled across the Neckar in 14 assault boats manned by 10th Armored Division engineers. Denied artillery support and a fog screen, the K Company men feared they were easy prey for defenders on the east bank. "It took us about 15 minutes to cross," a member of the company recalled. "It seemed to me that it was taking 15 hours."

Surprisingly, the operation went off without opposition. On the east bank, K Company spilled from the boats and advanced south. It immediately encountered an abandoned power plant and occupied it under a spattering of sniper fire. A portion of the company broke off to advance toward a factory district along

ing the rear, cutting off squads, platoons, and entire companies and inflicting heavy casualties.

Hammered by rifle, mortar, machine-gun, and *panzerfaus* (bazooka) fire, and pounded by salvos from 88mm howitzers perched on the hills behind the city, the 3rd Battalion withdrew as best it could to the power plant. The men who had attacked Tower Hill were quickly surrounded; dozens were killed or captured. One German soldier, later taken prisoner, testified that the trapped GIs "fired every weapon they had, and threw hand grenades until we were within four or five yards of them. It finally took all of the 90 men in my company to subdue them."

At first the GIs were mystified as to how their rear had been turned. Then they discovered the tunnels. Interconnected underground passageways extended to virtually every sector of the city. Defenders could pop up almost anywhere to blindside the Americans. Private 1st Class Thomas O. Jelks, whose company of

OPPOSITE DREAMLINE CARTOGRAPHY/DAVID DEES

Above, left: Tank men of the Century Division's 781st Tank Battalion kill time on April 9—reading, writing, and, seemingly, playing a harmonica—while waiting for a way to cross the Neckar after enemy bombs erased their pontoon bridge. Above, center: Meanwhile, across the river in Heilbronn, Century foot soldiers desperately needed the help and protection only tanks could provide—an advantage that the city's German defenders possessed. These are 399th Infantry Regiment GIs, on April 11. Above, right: Covering their heads, Centurymen try hard to disappear into the wall of a ruined building and a nearby debris pile as deadly screaming meemies announce their approach.

Thrown into the Fire

The US 100th Infantry Division
in the Battle of Heilbronn

GERMANY
April 1945

"House to house, room to room, over dead Krauts, through rubbish, under barbed wire, over fences, in the windows and out of doors, sweating, cussing, firing, throwing grenades, charging into blazing houses, shooting through floors and closet doors."

— a soldier of the 100th Infantry Division's 399th Regiment describing combat in Heilbronn

Ger. 17th SS Panzer-Grenadier Division

"Every house was an enemy fort and every bombed out building became a pillbox."

— a rifleman of Company F, 397th Infantry Regiment, 100th Infantry Division



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the 397th later crossed the Neckar to support the 398th's 3rd Battalion, entered the basement of an abandoned building and stumbled upon a tunnel. Before he could alert his buddy, Private Herman Willing, a bazooka-wielding Nazi emerged from a manhole and blasted the company's position. Jelks returned to find squad members carting Willing off on a door. "One foot was missing," Jelks remembered, "and the other was just hanging by a strip of skin."

The force of the unexpected assault shoved surviving GIs to within a few hundred feet of the river. They held their ground, but a steady stream of artillery fire kept them from expanding the bridgehead. Things got worse. Burress learned that his superior had withdrawn the 10th Armored and the 63rd Infantry Division from support of his Centurymen. Hoping to envelop Heilbronn, Brooks ordered the 63rd down the Neckar in search of an intact

bridge while the armored unit rumbled northeastward toward a crossing between the Jagst and Tauber rivers. For the foreseeable future, Burress's men would fight alone.

WITH THE 398TH'S 3RD BATTALION in danger of being crushed, Burress ordered the 397th Infantry to the river and gave its commander, Colonel Gordon Singles, authority over the battalion he was being sent to rescue. Covered by mortar fire and a fog screen laid down by the African American troops of the 163rd Chemical Smoke Generator Company, the 2nd Battalion of the 397th was rushed across the Neckar at 2 P.M. Once on solid ground, the battalion moved into the industrial sector, where its brother unit lay entrapped. Under a heavy crossfire from occupied buildings, the men of E Company poured through a breach in the concrete wall that shielded the factory district on the north. They cleared several buildings of snipers, but Germans occupying a glassworks on their right flank cut them up badly. While attacking across an open area swept by enemy fire, Company E's three rifle platoons were separated from one another.



The devastation that made Heilbronn an urban guerrilla fortress was the work of Allied bombers, sent to halt industry and rail traffic. US strategists doubted the Germans would fight to hold the crippled city. They were wrong, as the Centurymen learned.

er and forced to go to ground. “We were pinned down...and suffering casualties,” recalled 1st Lieutenant Bill Law, the company’s commander. “We were in trouble and needed artillery. We didn’t get it.” On top of it all, the company did not receive the tank support critical to a successful penetration.

Early on April 4, the 100th Division’s engineers began laying pontoon bridges over the Neckar to allow tanks, tank destroyers, heavy equipment, ammunition, and medical supplies to cross. The Germans working the guns on the heights beyond the city waited until each bridge was nearly complete before zeroing in and blowing it to bits. The Americans scrambled for alternatives. A four-pontoon ferry managed to carry a light tank across but gave way while attempting to negotiate the steeply sloping east bank, plunging the tank into the water. Not until the morning of the 7th would a treadway bridge (a pontoon bridge primarily for tracked vehicles) be successfully rebuilt, under cover of a smokescreen produced by generators that had been ferried over the river. A few hours later a wind shift would dissipate the fog, permitting the enemy to demolish the span again. By then, however, 24 tanks and 9 tank destroyers would be across the Neckar, able to lend critical weight to the infantry’s offensive.



THIS SPREAD PHOTOS BY T. IRVING LEBOWITZ/NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Having remained in their city through the bomb raids, many Heilbronn residents stayed put during the battle, too. These civilians are leaving on April 9, perhaps made homeless by artillery and rockets.

Near dark on April 4, as Law tried frantically to reestablish contact with his wayward platoons, the Germans holding the factory district launched a second attack, spearheaded by four tanks. They struck along a 500-yard front that ran from the glassworks to a water-filled ditch adjacent to the river. The Century Division’s own tanks, firing from the west bank together with 105mm and 155mm howitzers, managed to neutralize the German tanks. Even so, enemy rifle bullets and mortar rounds killed or wounded 57 of Law’s men.

One casualty, Lieutenant Pete Petracco, had exposed himself to sniper fire while carrying a wounded member of his platoon to cover inside the glassworks. When Law finally located Petracco’s position, he found his subordinate mortally wounded. “Pete died in my arms, and his men fell silent,” he recalled. “They knew from my anguish he was dead.” Hours later, several of Petracco’s men, also wounded, perished when German artillery set ablaze the building they had occupied. Law recalled that when the fire died out, “all that was found were their dog tags.”

With defenders pouring into the city from outlying districts, Burrell labored feverishly to gain control of the expanding battle. At 11 A.M. on April 5 he ordered Companies I and L of the 397th, followed by the balance of the regiment’s 3rd Battalion, to cross the Neckar against increasing resistance. After dark the newcomers were followed by members of the 397th’s 1st Battalion, who paddled across two miles below the original crossing site and established a bridgehead opposite the center of Heilbronn.

MEANWHILE, THE BETTER PART of the 398th Regiment crossed well to the north of the city to engage the defenders of Offenau, Neckarsulm, and other occupied villages. The offensive in that sector was a sideshow to the main effort farther south, but the fighting was no less intense. Outside Untergriesheim on the 7th, Private 1st Class Mike Colalillo of the 398th’s Company C would single-handedly wipe out five enemy emplacements, two of them manned by machine-gunners, and then carried a wounded comrade to safety under a hail of fire. For his heroics, the former baker from Duluth, Minnesota, would receive the third Medal of Honor to be awarded to a member of the 100th Division.

Before dawn on the 5th, the men of the 2nd Battalion who had bogged down in the factory district managed to resume their southward advance. Resistance quickly intensified, however, forcing them to dive for the cover of warehouses and office buildings. These supposed shelters were soon receiving artillery, rifle, and *panzerfaust* fire. Some were showered by *nebelwerfer*, rocket-launched high explosives known to Allied soldiers as “screaming meemies” for the shrill sound they made in flight. Under the incessant pounding, floors and walls came apart with violent suddenness. Inhabitants were felled by flying concrete and glass. Others were deafened by the concussive blasts.





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The ceaseless shelling drove some men temporarily insane. At least one GI turned his M-1 Garand rifle on himself. After exiting a heavily targeted building, a platoon leader recklessly exposed himself to enemy fire. “We realized he had gone bananas, and he was removed from action,” one of his charges recalled. An enlisted man, blinded by debris and unnerved by the shelling, cried out, “Tell Jane I’ll come back to her—but I will tell her nothing about Heilbronn!”

ONE OFFICER DELIBERATELY BROUGHT American artillery fire down on his own head and the heads of his men, who were occupying a factory building under heavy attack by ground forces. Coolly calling in the target coordinates on his unit’s field radio, Lieutenant Carl Bradshaw, commanding the 397th’s Company F, had the divisional artillery bombard his embattled position. The resulting barrage dispersed the enemy but scared the wits out of Bradshaw’s men. Because Bradshaw, a high school math teacher from Washington, DC, had earned his troops’ trust, no one second-guessed him for taking such a risk. All of Fox Company mourned later that day when the much-loved officer was riddled by sniper fire while shepherding his men to better cover, and died.

Throughout April 5 and 6, elements of the 397th and 398th made their way south building by building, clearing defenders from rubble-strewn streets, a shell-desecrated church, a slaughterhouse, a sugar refinery, the Cluss Company Brewery, a Fiat auto assembly plant, and the Knorr food-processing facility. In the Knorr plant, the division’s heavy weapons specialists, who had been cut off from sources of water, found a way to cool their overheated machine guns. Using juice drained from cans of pickles found in a warehouse, they replenished the coolant in the jackets of their overworked guns.

As the columns of the 397th advanced, they met unexpectedly heavy resistance from the would-be soldiers of the *Volkstrum*. A G Company platoon came under fire from an unidentified force holed up in a railroad loading yard north of the warehouse district. After six of his men had been felled by this force, Lieutenant John Slade called in mortar fire, which quickly blanketed the yard. Minutes later a group of *Jugend*, many wearing the short pants of the Hitler Youth, broke from their hiding place and raced toward Slade’s position, crying hysterically and shouting “*Kamarade!*” Six of the prepubescent warriors fell before reaching safety, shot in the back by their officers. “They wasn’t nothin’ but kids,” Slade

The Baroque spire of Heilbronn’s Protestant Christian *Kilianskirche* (far left), somehow spared in the Allied aerial bombardment, presides over a ruined city as a Centuryman walks through the captured town on April 13. Other treasures had survived, too—stained glass windows from the cathedral of Strasbourg, France, stolen by the Nazis and hidden in a nearby salt mine, were discovered by Allied troops after Heilbronn’s fall.

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said later. “Before the mortars hit them, they had fought like demons, but now, they were only a disorganized mass of 14 to 17-year-olds.”

Inescapably enmeshed in the fighting, Heilbronn’s civilians suffered heavily at the hands of both invaders and defenders, especially once the Century Division entered the city’s residential sections. Dozens of citizens were killed or wounded by errant missiles, many while crouching inside their homes. It was unavoidable. “Every house was an enemy fort,” recalled a rifleman of the 397th’s Company F, “and every bombed-out building became a pillbox.” Tom Jelks recalled, “Most of the houses had cellars and German soldiers would take refuge in those. Half the time, there would be women and children in there and we didn’t know [they were] there and we would throw in a grenade and kill everyone. We couldn’t help it.” On the other hand, GIs rescued several hundred noncombatants, including Russians and Romanians enslaved by the Wehrmacht, and escorted them to shelters in the rear.

Because the Centurymen could not know what lay around the next corner or behind the next pile of rubble, the sweep of the residential district was a frenetic, sometimes chaotic, experience. A soldier whose battalion of the 399th crossed the river below the city on April 8 described the process as “house to house, room to room, over dead Krauts, through rubbish, under barbed wire, over fences, in the windows and out of doors, sweating, cussing, firing, throwing grenades, charging into blazing houses, shooting through floors and closet doors.” Lieutenant Sam Stephens, commanding Company L of the 397th, directed an especially thorough sweep of one city block. Throughout April 7 Stephens’s men, whom he described as “fighting mad” after days of close-quarters combat, would send him messages such as “Have captured the living room and sent advanced patrols to the kitchen.” Eventually, happily, few blocks remained to be secured in this way.

Encounters with civilians caught up in the battle ranged from the bizarre to the poignant. One GI found a housewife picking flowers in her front yard while a firefight raged a few blocks away. Another Centurymen entered a dwelling by smashing a window. The only occupant, an old woman, muttered Swabian imprecations as she swept up the broken glass, making the intruder feel guilty. Sergeant Bob Tessmer, a Browning Automatic Rifle man in the 397th’s Company I, broke into a row house a few doors from a burning dwelling to find an elderly man and his invalid wife cowering in a back room. Tessmer assured the couple he meant no harm, but tears streamed down the man’s face as he examined the door the

sergeant had shattered. “*Alle ist kaput!*” he cried in a mournful voice. Tessmer reflected that the man “was correct. The war raged around him, artillery shells and mortars were coming in, and the fire at the end of his building would engulf his house in only a matter of hours.” To the 20-year-old non-com, the incident brought home the futility of war in a way he would never forget.

BY THE AFTERNOON OF APRIL 9, with the greater part of Heilbronn having been cleared, thanks largely to increased support from armored and artillery units, and with the northern and southern suburbs under siege by the 398th and 399th regiments, respectively, resistance began to fade. It took another two days, however, for the columns of the 397th to unite, clamping a pincers on the dwindling defenders. On April 12, the 397th completed combat operations by returning to unfinished business. Detachments from two rifle companies advanced cautiously against

Tower Hill only to find the 1,000-year-old castle at its summit abandoned. Meanwhile, the 397th’s anti-tank company, serving as infantry, overcame spirited resistance from Cloverleaf Hill and drove off its defenders.

Once Heilbronn was declared secure, the victors paused briefly before pursuing their disorganized, demoralized opponents toward Stuttgart. They could afford to catch their breath; no rallying point worthy of the name remained for the Wehrmacht. By April 12, 1945, the end of the war in Europe was less than a month away, and Hitler’s last stand in southern Germany was history.

Three of the 100th Division’s battalions would receive Presidential Unit Citations for their heroism in the battle. But as losses were tallied up, the Centurymen realized that their commander’s reputation for minimizing casualties remained intact. In nine days of near-constant combat, the Century had lost 60 men killed, 250 wounded, and 112 missing. Its men had killed or disabled at least as many Germans—undoubtedly, many more—and taken 1,800 prisoners.

The casualty list was remarkably short, given the scope and severity of

the fighting and the gains at Heilbronn. This was, of course, cold comfort to any Centurymen who had lost a buddy, a respected leader—or his sanity—in the hell that was Heilbronn. ★



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In Heilbronn, some Centurymen battled hard-fighting *Volkstrum* units, made up of elderly men and young boys like this 14-year-old Hitler Youth member captured in Worms, Germany, in April 1945. When one group of Hitler Youth tried to surrender in Heilbronn, their *Volkstrum* officers opened fire on them.

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