



IAN GARDNER

Co-author of *Tonight We Die As Men*

Foreword by
ED SHAMES

Introduction by
James "Pee Wee"
Martin

NO VICTORY IN VALHALLA

The untold story of Third Battalion 506 Parachute
Infantry Regiment from Bastogne to Berchtesgaden

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REGIMENT FROM BASTOGNE TO BERCHTESGADEN

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FOREWORD BY ED SHAMES

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Foreword

If you wanted to read a novel about World War II this is not your book. However, if you wish to be informed about the true history of the Battle of the Bulge, you hold in your hands just that. The author who gave us one of the greatest works about the 3rd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (506 PIR) in Normandy, entitled *Tonight We Die as Men*, and also the sequel *Deliver Us From Darkness* – the day by day account of how millions of Dutch citizens were freed from the yoke of German slavery – has given us a third volume. Here Ian Gardner provides us with an insight into exactly how it was to be minimally equipped for the extreme cold when the 101st Airborne Division was deployed around Bastogne. During that bitter winter of 1944/45, shivering for warmth, our mission was simple – kill or capture the enemy.

As one who served from the beginning in just about every firefight with 3rd Bn (I Co, Bn Operations Sergeant, and HQ Co First Sergeant) to the very end with 2nd Bn, I still find it incredible that Ian, with pure undiluted facts, has been able to guide the reader through practically each and every muddy, miserable freezing step of the way! If you are a history “buff,” then I’m sure you will agree that this is a great and informative book about what those of us who survived believe to be the most important battle of World War II. It has been said “had we not prevailed at Bastogne” then the Allies would still be fighting for victory in Europe.

Edward D. Shames

506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, August 1942–September 1945
First Battlefield Commission – 101st Airborne Division Normandy

Preface

To accurately chronicle the actions of any war or battle while holding the reader's interest is a difficult task. Many written historical accounts are typically fact-filled, with strategies and maneuvers that may be accurate but are hopelessly boring to the casual reader. To bring the reader into the story, one must look at the event from the perspective of those who were there. In this book, Ian Gardner has captured the human story and gives the reader the necessary background information as well as the personal interactions that make this account of the 3rd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment a very real and personal recount of a story not yet fully told.

This book takes readers into the minds of the men who served in the European Theater of Operations in the darkest and coldest days during the Battle of the Bulge in Bastogne through to the sometimes desperate and sometimes euphoric days in Germany as the war in Europe waned and the men counted their points to go home. Ian, through the accounts of hundreds of eyewitnesses to history, brings the days at the end of 1944 and beginning of 1945 into sharp focus. Detailed descriptions of the men and women who were in the middle of "The Rendezvous with Destiny" give the reader a sense of how coping with war and its tragedies is something unique to each person who has had to stand against the ravages of battle and even nature.

No Victory in Valhalla also tells the story of the other units that served with distinction but did not garner the attention of historians or media for accolades of their bitter fight against considerably larger German forces. Notable strategic actions, individual courage, bravery, and heavy losses make up the history of 3 Bn, which prevailed against overwhelming enemy artillery and tanks. It is this story of courage

and determination, told here with sensitivity and insight, that only the soldier who was actually there can accurately recount.

It is my humble pleasure to have been able to read the story of these brave and largely unrecognized men. For those who did not return and gave the supreme sacrifice, this is a fitting testament to their memory. Ian Gardner has once again done a superb job of honoring and recognizing the service of so many ordinary Americans who served in an extraordinary way to battle tyranny and provide freedom for millions and asked nothing in return.

George E. Koskimaki

101st Airborne Division HQ – World War II

Author and historian

Acknowledgments

No Victory in Valhalla owes a huge debt of gratitude to Jimmy Martin and Ed Shames, who convinced me that this final chapter in their story could and should be recorded for posterity. I could never have imagined when co-writing *Tonight We Die As Men* with Roger Day that it would define my life for the next 13 years and bring me into contact with so many incredible people such as Reg Jans. Without Reg's help, *No Victory* would be a shadow of what it is now. Over the last decade Reg has become one of the foremost battlefield guides operating in the Ardennes and guest expert for many premier World War II tour companies. Reg has probably forgotten more than I will ever know about Bastogne and the Battle of the Bulge and I will be forever grateful for his loyalty, assistance, and continued enthusiasm. Likewise Foy and Recogne locals Joël Robert and Jean-François d'Hoffschmidt have both been incredibly helpful to this project.

The early years were costly, but with much support and understanding from my wife Karen and my folks we made it through. Looking back it all seems like a distant dream but only those who really know me will understand how close I came to losing everything. Partly because of this Ed Shames and Jim Martin have become passionate supporters and their television, radio, and numerous public appearances have helped enormously to raise awareness of my work not just in the USA but also many other places around the world. At this point I would also like to say a few words of thanks to 101st Airborne historian Mark Bando and his brilliant books such as *Vanguard of the Crusade* and *The 101st Airborne at Normandy*. Right from the start, Mark, despite a busy schedule, was always on hand to offer me help and advice.

The huge amount of time invested in *No Victory*, not only by Ed and Jim but also by Lou Vecchi, Harley Dingman, and Manny Barrios,

has made this book come to life. With each passing year my list of contributors dwindles a little more. When I started back in 2001 there were around 55 veterans on the “team.” Many, like Ralph Bennett, Joe Beyrle, Ray Calandrella, Hank DiCarlo, Teddy Dziepak, Johnny Gibson, Ben Hiner, David Morgan, Bob Rommel, George Rosie, Don Ross, Harold Stedman, and Bob Webb, are speaking from the grave via tapes and notes compiled while they were still with us.

Other personal insights come from interviews provided over 30 years ago to George Koskimaki while he was researching his groundbreaking books on the 101st Airborne Division. George was the radio operator for MajGen Maxwell Taylor during World War II and his work has inspired several generations, myself included – and so the wheel of synergy turns full circle. Jimmy McCann’s widow Pat also provided me with a wonderful cassette tape originally recorded for George by Alex Andros, which also featured personal recollections about Bastogne from Harry Begle, Dud Hefner, Clark Heggeness, Gene Johnson, Pete Madden, Frank Malik, Jim McCann, Bob Stroud, and Gordon Yates. Everyone except Andros has since passed away, but the information these H Company men left behind on that October afternoon in 1991 was a true gift from above.

As usual this section has been one of the hardest parts of the book to compile, as I am anxious not to forget any of my many contributors. If anyone’s name has been overlooked I hope you will accept my sincere apologies. Individual thanks are extended by country to the following.

United States of America: Kathleen “Tachie” Anderson, Fred Bahlau (HQ Co), Mark Bando, Manny Barrios (I Co), Ralph Bennett (H Co), Joe Beyrle II, Sharon Bunker, Don Burgett (A Co), Ray Calandrella (Co HQ), Denis and Donna Cortese, Dan Cutting, Louis DeNegre, Mario “Hank” DiCarlo (H Co), Harley Dingman (I Co), Carole Dingman, Bob Dunning (81mm Mortar Ptn), Teddy Dziepak (I Co), John Gibson (Medical Detachment), Ben Hiner (Co HQ), Bob Izumi (G Co), Ken Johnson (H Co), John Klein, Gerry and Bobbie Lord, Piet “Pete” Luiten, James Martin (G Co),

Pat McCann, Earl McClung (E Co), Karen McGee, George McMillan (I Co), James Melhus (MG Ptn), Tim Moore, Neil Morgan, Joe Muccia, Ray Nagell (B Battery, 321st GFA Bn), Jennie O’Leary – Sun City Library Arizona, Carolyn Packert, Bonnie Pond, Jake Powers, Rich Riley, Doyle Rigden, Bobbie Rommel (MG Ptn), Ken Ross (502nd PIR), Bob Saxvik, David Schultz, Ed Shames (I Co, 3/506 Co HQ, 506 RHQ, 2/506 and E Co), Ray Skully (G Co), Harold Stedman (I Co), Tom Stedman, John Sushams, Ann Tanzy, Helen Thomas, Kathy Tozzi, Lou Vecchi (H Co), John Vecchi, Bob Webb Jr, Bill Wedeking (MG Ptn).

Belgium: Ivonne Dumont, Jean-François d’Hoffschmidt, Philippe d’Hoffschmidt, Reg Jans, Jean-Marie Koeune, Adjutant Eric “Rony” Lemoine, Maguy Marenne, André Meurisse, Robert Remacle, Joël Robert, Jules and Denise Robert, Philippe Wilkin.

Germany: Florian Beierl, Klaus Ibel.

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I would like to extend a special thank you to the following people: Doug Barber and Dave Bevis for their belief and invaluable assistance, Donald van den Bogert for the help with the photographs, Greg Gray for his help proof-reading the manuscript, Tim Moore for providing me with the G Co Morning Reports, Bob Smoldt for Robert Harwick’s personal letters, Geoff Walden and his wonderful website “The Third Reich in Ruins,” Marcus Cowper, Bruce Herke, Emily Holmes, Kate Moore, and the creative team at Osprey, Brian Gottlieb who on my behalf was given unlimited access to the The George E. Koskimaki Collection, the US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks (Pennsylvania), and Gerhard Roletscheck (President of the Society for the Modern History of Landsberg am Lech) whose help on Chapter 13 was crucial.

Lastly, my parents (Dennis and Joan) always encouraged me to follow my dreams and I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of my dad Dennis Edward Gardner who died on March 6, 2012, after a long

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battle with heart and kidney disease. Since I started work on *No Victory in Valhalla* the following people have also passed away: Ralph Bennett, Jack Brown, Bob Dunning, George Dwyer, Philippe d'Hoffschmidt, Ken Johnson, Earl McClung, and Ray Skully... RIP gentlemen, it's been one heck of a ride.

Introduction

When *Tonight We Die As Men* was first published in 2009, we remaining soldiers of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment became admirers of Ian Gardner's work. None of us could have imagined our experiences would become the subject of such detailed research, scholarly pursuit, and popular fascination.

In recent years and over the course of many conversations, I have come to know Ian well and right from the start could tell that his background as a British paratrooper gave him an additional insight into our experiences. The questions he asked demonstrated to me an in-depth knowledge of what we as a unit went through, which when researching and writing an objective account of a complex historical event is a significant advantage. Ian is associated with many premier World War II researchers, authors, and historians, such as my friends Mark Bando and Reg Jans. I am delighted Ian has written this account of the 3rd Battalion from the Battle of the Bulge to the end of the war because our story forms a natural trilogy.

After fighting in Normandy and Holland we were looking forward to some “down time” in the relative safety and comfort of Mourmelon, France, but on December 16, our hopes in this regard were abruptly ended. With little notice, and with only inadequate weapons, ammunition, proper clothing, and limited other crucial supplies, we were trucked into Belgium to take positions around the city of Bastogne, which straddled a crucial road network. Here we were to make a stand to deny the Germans clear passage to Antwerp. To this day it is difficult to express the misery we endured over the three weeks that followed – frequent enemy assaults (including armor and artillery), freezing temperatures, basic rations, and lack of water. Although nearly 70 years have passed since we lived like animals in

foxholes and bunkers, Bastogne has become a permanent part of my consciousness. I am frequently asked, “What got you through?” To be blunt it was the rigorous and unforgiving selection process of our early training when only the fanatically tough and dedicated made the grade. This paid dividends for the 101st Airborne Division in Normandy and Holland but especially during the Battle of the Bulge. Not once during my time on the line at Bastogne did I ever hear any talk of defeat, much less surrender. We always knew we would prevail and accomplish our mission of stopping the German offensive in our area of operations. However, we must not forget that there were over 30 units involved in the battle for Bastogne, including the 10th Armored Division, whose Sherman Tank Destroyers made such a huge contribution to the final American victory.

After Bastogne the 506th PIR were mainly involved with defensive operations in Alsace Lorraine and Germany before heading to Bavaria. As things progressed, we “originals” became increasingly concerned with surviving the war. Many of the replacements began to taunt us about not being as tough as we thought we were. Few of them had seen real combat so the jibes were somewhat understandable. By early May 1945, we were aware of the possibility of moving into Hitler’s rumored “Alpine Redoubt” and were convinced we would be facing a determined force. Much to our surprise and relief this was not the case and the next two months turned out to be the best time of “Our War.” In addition to normal duties everyone did their best to uphold the age-old tradition of all conquering armies by scavenging everything and anything we could lay our hands on. Our short time at Berchtesgaden and in Austria at Zell am See after VE Day is still remembered fondly to this day.

Those like me who had been through every combat operation since Normandy were classified under a point system, and as a “high point man” with an ASR (Army Service Record) score of 85, I was sent home in September 1945.

Upon my return, I was hoping to go back to my old job as a toolmaker in Ohio and was surprised to learn that there were no

vacancies. In 1942 I had left my reserved occupation against the wishes of my employers and volunteered for the 506th PIR. I was shocked that many of my colleagues who had elected not to join the services had earned a small fortune while working on lucrative government contracts. Consequently, I was unemployed much of the time during my first two years after coming home and began to wonder just what I had been fighting for. That being said, military service gave many guys like me a wider perspective on the world as a whole, as prior to the war we were all very provincial in our thinking. Friendships were made with people whom ordinarily I would never have met and many of those associations still remain to this day.

If the Allies had not prevailed the results to our world would have been catastrophic. I can truly speak for everyone by saying our generation really did save the world. It has been gratifying to live long enough to see the recent historical scholarship and interest in “Our War.” We who remain hope that the lessons of World War II will not be forgotten.

Jim “Pee Wee” Martin – “Toccoa Original”

G Company / 506th PIR / 101st Airborne Division – World War II
November 2012

“Johnny, we hardly knew you”

Camp Châlons, Mourmelon-le-Grand – November 28–December 18, 1944

Mourmelon-le-Grand was a dreary, long-suffering French town some 20 miles from Reims, which through the ages had endured the embrace of soldiers from many nations. Caesar is said to have quartered two divisions of infantry and several squadrons of light horse at Mourmelon during the latter stages of his Gallic campaign. Despite its name, Mourmelon was really no more than one long street dotted with a few shops and cafés and most definitely not to be confused with Mourmelon-le-Petit, which, as its name suggests, is even smaller.

As battalion supply sergeant Ben Hiner from Morgantown, West Virginia, glanced out of his office window at Camp Châlons, he was shocked to see 1st Lt John Williams standing outside 3rd Battalion Headquarters (3rd Bn HQ). Six months earlier, Williams had almost ended Hiner’s life after shooting him “accidentally” with a German pistol. Williams had just taken over as executive officer (XO) for Headquarters Company (HQ Co) and was deep in conversation as the 23-year-old staff sergeant rushed outside to confront him. “Don’t you walk away,” Hiner demanded as Williams, face drained white, turned to leave. “You nearly killed me back in St-Côme ... no letter of apology – you couldn’t even be bothered to visit me in the hospital. What were you thinking?” Visibly shaken by the unexpected encounter, the lieutenant kept walking. As Ben followed Williams along the road he called out, “If Colonel Wolverton had been alive to see what you did

to me he would've had something to say about it – are you listening to me, Sir?”

LtCol Robert Lee Wolverton had been horrifically slaughtered in Normandy moments after landing on June 6, 1944. The men from 3rd Bn were passionate about their leader as was Col Robert F. Sink, the commander of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (506th PIR) – affectionately known in combat as “The Fox” and in garrison as “Uncle Bob.” From the early training days in Georgia at Camp Toccoa, Col Sink had developed a respect and admiration for the “Point”-trained West Virginian (“Point” means a graduate of the prestigious West Point Military Academy). It was obvious that Wolverton’s immediate successors following his death – Maj Oliver Horton and LtCol Lloyd Patch – were both highly capable, but to the “originals” they could never be in the same league.

A New Englander from Massachusetts, Lloyd Patch was a short but muscular leader who had been responsible for destroying a gun battery on D-Day for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. As a captain serving in 1st Bn, Patch was commanding HQ Co on June 6, when he assembled a group of six soldiers from various regiments and led them in a highly successful attack against a 105mm gun site near Ste-Marie-du-Mont. Reversed, the captured guns were then used by the Americans to neutralize enemy machine-gun positions, allowing Patch and his small team to capture the town. Despite Patch’s track record, the veterans from 3rd Bn truly believed that Maj Robert Harwick was cut from the same cloth as Wolverton and, therefore, the only true candidate for command. Originally from H Co, Harwick had been 3rd Bn XO in Holland, and temporary commander after Maj Horton was killed at Opheusden, on October 5, 1944. When Lloyd Patch took over on November 21, Bob Harwick was re-assigned to 1st Bn, where he became LtCol James LaPrade’s XO.

During the occupation the Germans had used the adequate facilities at Camp Châlons (which included three magnificent cinemas) as a tank depot and airfield. Everyone was horrified by the traditional

French-style latrines, each designed with two footprints set into concrete either side of a shallow drainage hole. Immediately plans were commissioned and 1/Sgt Fred Bahlau (HQ Co) was asked by Col Charlie Chase (regimental XO) to oversee the building of a new set of toilets and washrooms. Accommodation was basic but clean, with all junior ranks sleeping 32 men to a barrack block. The senior NCOs fared better and were quartered three men to a room, each equipped with its own stove and basic amenities.

By the end of November 1944, acting company commanders 1st Lt Joe Doughty (G Co), 1st Lt Jim “Skunk” Walker (H Co), and 1st Lt Fred “Andy” Anderson (I Co) finally received their captain’s bars after several years’ service and action in Normandy and Holland. Walker, a fiery redhead from Alabama, summoned platoon sergeant Ralph Bennett (3 Ptn) into his office to discuss a suitable punishment for being late returning to Ramsbury in the United Kingdom when the battalion was mobilized for Holland:

It made me laugh that Walker always looked like someone had asked him a question to which he did not know the answer – and this day was no exception. The captain’s antagonistic attitude improved during the interview, when I smugly reminded him about my exemplary conduct in Holland and that I’d won the Silver Star. I figured that there was no way that he could even think about charging me with being “absent without leave” (AWOL). It was a close run thing but in the end the SOB relented and dismissed me with nothing more than a warning followed by a few choice words.

Not all members of 3rd Bn lived up to the unit’s meritorious war record. After spending most of the previous six months in the stockade, Pvt Howard “Sunny” Sundquist (H Co) was posted back to 1 Ptn. Capt Walker and platoon sergeant Frank Padisak unanimously blocked the move and Sundquist was “side swiped” to 1st Bn. Sgt Lou Vecchi (H Co 1 Ptn) from Martinez, California remembers, “Not long afterwards

Sundquist went AWOL and vanished without a trace. Months later he was arrested and I appeared as a witness at his court martial, where I am pleased to say the lizard was found guilty of desertion and given a substantial prison sentence.”

Back-dated leave passes from Holland slowly began to filter through, and despite the fact that there had been several reports of a sniper taking potshots at Allied troops in Reims, the city was still popular, but ultimately everyone dreamed of Paris. After what the men had been through, the three- or seven-day passes could not come fast enough, and inevitably disappointment and frustration soon set in. Joe Doughty discovered that Camp Châlons was not going to be quite the relaxed three-month posting he had first imagined. Somewhat taller than average, Doughty was a quiet, fair man, who had a relaxed but firm attitude toward discipline and was well respected by the company. However, soldiers like Pvt Macrae Barnson from Los Angeles, California demanded a completely different approach. Although Barnson was an unstoppable combat asset (having been seriously wounded in Normandy and Holland) he was a total nightmare in camp. Earlier on November 22, Macrae had gone AWOL after returning from the 10th Replacement Depot. Finally, on December 10, Barnson’s luck ran out when the Military Police brought him back to Mourmelon whereupon he was incarcerated in the regimental guard house to await trial.

Ironically the weather took a turn for the worse and heavy rain reduced the camp to a 6in-deep sea of mud. Gravel was requisitioned and bricks recovered from ruined buildings to construct company streets and sidewalks. In a letter home to his parents, Cpl Bob Webb from the Communications Platoon wrote the following:

Things are back to normal and it’s the same old training all over again. The camp is getting better all the time and the mail has been coming in pretty good and I have already received a couple of Christmas and birthday presents. However, the packages just don’t make a Christmas, and the only gift that I want is for the war to be over. Our chaplain

called me the other day and wanted permission to give my name to Anthony Wincensiak's parents as "best friend" and first point of contact. Anthony was killed in Normandy and was my assistant before I got busted. He was a lovely, 18-year-old Polish kid who although new to the outfit was liked by everyone. I wrote his folks last night. I knew it would be hard but when I got into it – boy was it tough!

Five hundred and forty enlisted men and 38 officers under command of Maj Franklin Foster were flown into Mourmelon as replacements for the 506th PIR, who had suffered around 60 percent losses in Holland. During the flight, five aircraft, hampered by poor weather, were forced to return to the United Kingdom. The new soldiers had previously been processed through the Casual Detachment at Denford Farm Base Camp in Berkshire and temporarily attached to Service Co before being assigned. Twenty-year-old Pvt Bob Izumi, a Japanese-American, was one of 40 new men posted to G Co:

My parents had settled on the west coast in the late 1890s. Before the attack on Pearl Harbor my dad was a teacher specializing in Japanese language. Following the declaration of war with Japan, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which permitted the military to circumvent the constitutional safeguards of American citizens in the name of national security. The order set in motion the evacuation and mass incarceration of any persons with Japanese ancestry living in the USA. Strangely those of Chinese or Korean origin were not interred like us but instead were permitted to wear armbands stating their particular race.

The Izumi family were sent to Manzanar Internment Camp in California where they grew their own food and lived in tarpaper barracks.

My parents were deeply upset by what was happening but at the time it was all a big adventure to me. Most of us had jobs on campus

making products for the War Effort such as camouflage netting and earned around \$7.00 per month. We went to school and were taught by volunteer teachers who came from all over America. Helen Ely taught me history and it was through her that my younger brother Roy and I gained permission to leave the camp in 1943 and continued our studies in Iowa.

I finished my education and volunteered to join the US Army in June 1944. The military was still segregated at the time so I had no choice but to enlist in the 442nd Regt Combat Team – a Japanese-American unit more commonly known as “The Nisei” whose motto was “Go for Broke.” I was only attached to the 442nd until September 1944, when the opportunity arose for me transfer into the 101st Airborne Division and train to be a paratrooper.

Upon arrival at Mourmelon, Izumi was posted to 3 Ptn G Co, which at the time did not officially have a platoon leader or even an assistant. Due to the temporary lack of leadership, mortar sergeant Harvey Jewett managed to persuade Pvt Clyde McCarty, Pvt Harry Barker, and Pfc Stan Davis to go AWOL. The four men were arrested the following evening and returned to G Co where they were immediately confined to quarters. Two days later Capt Doughty reduced Jewett to the rank of private although no formal charges were made against the other three soldiers. Initially Izumi wondered what he had gotten himself into but the situation soon resolved itself after discipline was restored.

The squalid conditions on the line during the last three weeks in Holland saw hundreds hospitalized with non-combat-related injuries such as yellow jaundice and emersion foot, like 26-year-old T/5 Teddy Dziepak from I Co. “I was sent to England for about five weeks recovering from trench foot and returned to 1 Ptn in late January 1945. My stay in hospital gave me the opportunity to write every day to my wife Bette in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, who I was missing terribly.”

As the battalion was preparing to leave Holland, 1st Lt Bill Wedeking (OC [Officer Commanding] MG [Machine-Gun] Ptn) was

evacuated after being diagnosed with yellow jaundice (probably caused by ingesting contaminated water). Although a form of hepatitis, the acute liver complaint is most visible in the white conjunctiva, when the eyes of the sufferer become bright yellow. “After spending two days in a hospital near Brussels, I was flown back to the UK and sent to a specialized medical facility in Scotland.” In Wedeking’s absence, Lt Fenton was brought in to command the platoon, ably assisted by T/Sgt George “Doc” Dwyer. Doc took over from S/Sgt Nathan “Nate” Bullock, who graciously stepped back down to section leader, alongside S/Sgt August Saperito (ex G Co).

After escaping from the Germans in France, when Doc had returned to England he was posted to the Parachute School at Chilton Foliat, and much to his regret missed out on Holland. Several other men had also managed to escape and return to England, such as Pfc Jimmy Sheeran and Pvt Bernie Rainwater (I Co), Cpl Martin Clark and Pvt Joe Mielcarek (MG Ptn), and Pfc Ray Calandrella and T/4 Joe Gorenc (Co HQ). The Geneva Convention stated that all escapees who made it back to their parent units were entitled to return home under the ZI (Zone of the Interior) option. After reaching the United Kingdom on September 9, Marty Clark was debriefed by the authorities and was in the process of taking the ZI option when he bumped into Joe Gorenc in London. Like his escape partner “Doc” Dwyer, Joe had refused ZI and rejoined 3rd Bn, although at the time it was probably more for financial reasons than anything else. The week before D-Day, Joe had won \$2,000 in a card game. Unable to send his winnings home, Gorenc asked his immediate superior, Ed Shames (who was then battalion S3 operations sergeant) to hide the cash in his private billet above the grocery store at Ramsbury.

Back in London after an emotional reunion and a few drinks, Joe invited Marty to Ramsbury for a “proper goodbye.” Marty recalls, “The guys encouraged me to stay even though the machine-gun platoon didn’t really need my services anymore. Once we reached Holland, Joe sorted out a position for me at Battalion HQ in the S3, but it wasn’t the safe and comfortable job he’d originally promised.”

On October 6, outside the battalion command post (CP) at Boelenham Farm near Opheusden, Clark was badly wounded by a mortar burst along with 1st Lt Alex Bobuck (Adjutant) and 1st Lt Lewis Sutfin (81mm Mortar Ptn). Both officers were hit in the legs by shrapnel while another fragment pierced Clark's right lung, almost killing him.

Pfc Don Ross (S3 runner) had also been captured in Normandy. Don's younger brother Ken joined the 101st Airborne at Mourmelon. Ken recalls: "My brother's experience with the 506th inspired me to become a paratrooper. The training I received was tough but nowhere near as tough as his. Those guys who passed selection for the 506th back in Toccoa were forged from steel and we all knew it. Despite that my dream was to fight alongside Don as a member of 3/506 but after he went missing I opted for the 502nd PIR where I was assigned to RHQ [Regimental HQ] Demolition Ptn."

After being wounded Pfc Jim Martin (2 Ptn G Co) was evacuated to the 61st General Hospital at Witney in Oxfordshire before being sent to the 10th Replacement Depot at Lichfield. Jim's experience was altogether different from that of many others, as he recalls: "A prison would have treated its worst inmates more humanely. The colonel in charge of the depot encouraged his staff to be brutal and I witnessed many beatings." Jim was not alone in thinking that the severe conditions were specifically designed for a higher turnover of manpower.

In early November about a dozen guys from G Co, myself included, were told we were being sent to a regular infantry unit. Of course we all wanted to go back to the 506th but were told that this was not negotiable. The following day, under the watchful eye of the Depot NCOs, we were virtually forced onto the train that was to take us to our new unit. During one of the later stops in France we noticed a parachute drop going on nearby and decided to go "AWOL." Eventually we made it to a makeshift command post (CP) and discovered that the paratroopers were from the 504th PIR. The soldiers manning the CP were surprised to see us and enquired

where on earth we had come from. We explained our situation, and to cut a long story short, despite interference from the replacement depot, the 504th contacted the 506th who then furnished us with the necessary travel permits for our return to Mourmelon.

Despite the enormous influx of new soldiers the most radical changes to the battalion were experienced among the officers. This was not surprising due to the fact that during the battalion's 72 days in Holland 17 commissioned men from the 506th had been killed. By the end of November 1944, G Co received several new lieutenants, including 1st Lt Lawrence Fitzpatrick and 2nd Lt Sherman Sutherland (formerly A Co and battlefield commission) who subsequently became 1st Lt Frank Rowe's assistant in 2 Ptn. 1st Lt John Weisenberger (previously assistant battalion S1) was re-assigned to G Co as XO, while 1st Lt Blaine Pothier became temporary XO for the battalion.

After recovering from his leg wound, former adjutant Alex Bobuck was promoted to captain and posted to a regular infantry unit as a foreign liaison officer. When 1st Lt Pete Madden rejoined 3/506, he returned to HQ Co, taking up his previous post commanding the 81mm mortar platoon, alongside 2nd Lt Frank Southerland. Lt Southerland seemed to fit in and was well liked by the men, unlike his predecessor Lewis Sutfin. At the same time 23-year-old family man Gil Morton was promoted to platoon sergeant after Roy Burger received his battlefield commission and was posted to HQ 2/506 mortars. Each 81mm squad was made up of seven men, including the squad leader who was usually a corporal. The complete weapon system weighed 136lb and could be broken down into three parts: tripod, tube, and base-plate (which by itself weighed 46lb). As a consequence the majority of the mortar platoon lost anything up to 4in in height during their wartime service!

H Co received its fair share of new officers, including 2nd Lt Harry Begle and lieutenants Lawrence, Wilkinson, and Smith. Harry Begle recalls, "Along with Lt Ed Wilkinson, I was posted to 2 Ptn as assistant to 1st Lt Clark Heggeness, so rather unusually the platoon had three

officers on its table of organization.” 1st Lt Bob Stroud from 1 Ptn (nicknamed the “Forty Thieves” by Col Wolverton) recalls his new assistant, Lt Smith: “Smith stuck to me like glue and every time I’d turn around he’d be right there like some sort of anxious puppy.” 2nd Lt Willie Miller rejoined 3 Ptn after being wounded at Opheusden, and was relieved to learn it was still under the able and efficient command of 1st Lt Alexander Andros from Illinois. 1/Sgt Gordon Bolles was another familiar face. A regular soldier, “Pop” Bolles had been with the outfit since Toccoa. “Pop” had a wonderful sense of humor and was the only “top kick” (slang for “first sergeant”) to serve throughout the entire war with the same company.

The old sweats in I Co – first lieutenants Floyd Johnston (1 Ptn) and Don Replogle (3 Ptn) – welcomed 1st Lt Jerome Knight and second lieutenants Denver Albrecht and Roger Tinsley. Knight and Albrecht took over 2 Ptn, while Tinsley joined Johnston. The new intake replaced Mickey Panovich, Ray Eisenhauer, Charles Santarsiero, and Jim Nye. Always unpopular, Nye (2 Ptn) had been posted to F Co in Holland, while Panovich (1 Ptn) and Santarsiero (3 Ptn) were badly wounded. Santarsiero’s injuries were so severe that he spent the next three years in hospital. After attending teaching college, Sgt Harley Dingman (3 Ptn) from Carthage, New York, had been called up at the age of 21 in May 1943 and was sent to Camp Wheeler in Macon, Georgia:

After basic training, I accepted promotion to corporal and stayed on at Wheeler as an instructor. Several months later I opted to join the paratroops. Not long after qualifying for my wings I was shipped to the UK and posted to I Co. At the time it took a little while for the guys who had just come back from Normandy to accept me as a junior NCO but everything worked out OK by the time we jumped into Holland. Later in the campaign up on the island, I was acting as an artillery observer when a small piece of shrapnel lodged in my hand. The wound was minor and I thought nothing more until a week or so later when it started showing signs of infection. Shortly afterwards,

I was evacuated and spent the next five weeks in a succession of hospitals. By early December, I was ready to return to the battalion but frustratingly got held back by bureaucracy at a replacement depot. One day I thought, “To Heck with the paperwork” and smuggled myself onto a truck bound for Mourmelon. When I got back to the company, Capt Anderson called me into his office. Anderson had a very dry sense of humor and told me that not only was I about to be accused of desertion but also they were billing me for the loss of a Thompson submachine gun! He thought it was highly amusing that I’d “deserted” to come back to the outfit when usually it was the other way around. He had me believing for a while that I was going to be court martialed but then he burst out laughing and asked me if I’d like to take the job of acting 3 Ptn sergeant – which of course I accepted without hesitation. There was a bottle of liquor on the table and Anderson offered up a drink to toast my new “promotion.” I was quite GI at the time and figured there was no way an enlisted man like me should be drinking with an officer! So I graciously refused, saluted, and marched out feeling a lot happier than when I went in.

Still recovering from wounds received in Normandy, Pvt Bob Penner, Pfc Lonnie Gavrock, and Sgt Manny Barrios returned to I Co. After being hit by shrapnel Manny had hooked up with Bob Harwick (who was also on the run from the enemy) in St-Côme-du-Mont where they were both liberated on June 8/9, 1944. “I was posted to 3 Ptn and put in charge of the 60mm mortar squad, where the only person I recognized was Harold Stedman,” Manny later recalled.

Soon after Gavrock arrived back at Mourmelon complications set in and Lonnie (who still had a bullet lodged dangerously close to his heart) was sent back to the hospital for the duration. Like Gavrock, Sgt Len “Sam” Goodgal (1 Ptn) was wounded at “Bloody Gully” in Normandy on June 13, but was lucky enough to make a full recovery. He recalls: “Some of our replacements, like privates Bob Chovan and Bill Chivvis, had proven themselves in Holland but they were not

bonded like the rest of us who had been through basic training at Toccoa. Some of these guys came in, got killed or wounded and we never knew them. I think most of us, who were now veterans of one or more campaigns, felt that they should have got more recognition as they gave everything, including in some cases their lives. I was no great soldier – I was just there like so many others.”

Twenty-year-old Chivvis joined 1st Squad on June 20, as a scout. “Len and the boys called me ‘Joe,’ after the cartoon character from ‘Willie & Joe.’ Everyone joked that I was the most ‘sorry arsed’ soldier in I Co, although it is fair to say, Len was a pretty close second!”

A small number of troops from the 506th were selected for temporary duty with the 9th Troop Carrier Command Pathfinder Group to train as Pathfinders. Pvt Irvin Schumacher from H Co joined 1st Lt Shrable Williams (Regt HQ Co) and around a dozen other soldiers to undergo an intensive two-week course at Chalgrove in Oxfordshire. Others like Pfc George McMillan (I Co 2 Ptn) were accepted as Air Dispatchers and also returned to the United Kingdom.

One of McMillan’s friends was Pvt Al Cappelli from Wayne, Pennsylvania, who joined 2 Ptn as a wireman in the communications section a few days before the jump into Holland. Cappelli recalls: “I had been hurt during the early stages of the campaign by a blast from a German grenade which damaged my back. Our squad leader at the time, Sgt Joe Madona from Winthrop, Massachusetts, killed the soldier who threw the grenade and saved my life. I spent eight days in hospital and was told that our medic, T/5 Robert Evans’ careful treatment kept me from further injury. I can’t say enough about Joe Madona, who used to joke that we were the only ‘Dagos’ in the outfit – so we’d better make it shine!”

On November 29, two days after arriving at Mourmelon, Cappelli’s kidneys became so inflamed that he could no longer urinate. Capt Anderson immediately sent Al for treatment to the 99th General Hospital in Reims. “During my two-week stay,” Cappelli remembers, “I didn’t think anyone really cared, but when Joe Madona came to

visit with our platoon sergeant Albert Wall and three other guys, I actually wept with pride.” 3rd Bn surgeon Capt Barney Ryan was also at the same hospital working on detached service with 502nd PIR regimental surgeon Maj Douglas Davidson.

Unusually a number of parachute-trained senior NCOs were attached to both the 101st and the 82nd airborne divisions (albeit temporarily) from the 509th Parachute Infantry Bn (originally part of the First Allied Airborne Task Force). One of these men, Sgt Walter Patterson, was assigned to 1 Ptn H Co as a mortar squad leader, as Lou Vecchi recalls: “Patterson had a lot of experience and seemed to fit in right away. Walt took over the 4th Squad from Don Zahn (who had recently received a battlefield commission) and stayed with the platoon until the end of the war.”

The superb recreational facilities at Mourmelon meant that those who showed any sporting prowess competed for positions on the regimental football, basketball, or boxing teams. Joe Madona and Cpl Stan Stasica (H Co), rejoined the “Sky Train” football team to begin regular training sessions for “The Champagne Bowl,” an important game scheduled against the 502nd PIR in Reims on Christmas Day. John Wiesenberger and Lawrence Fitzpatrick were coaching the team when replacement and ex-high-school-football star Pvt John Kilgore (3 Ptn G Co) was sent on a work detail to deliver football strips. Wiesenberger recognized Kilgore’s name and asked if he would be willing to join Sky Train. “Of course I couldn’t say no and was pleased to learn that my squad mate, Pvt Albert Gray, had also been selected,” Kilgore later recalled.

Pfc Harold Stedman (3 Ptn I Co) began to connect with Pvt Richard Shinn, who had joined the company just before Holland. “Richie came from San Francisco where he lived with his parents who were both Korean. It turned out that Shinn, a gifted prewar boxer, had previously trained at the same gym as my cousin and competed against him in several competitions. Shinn knew I was keen on amateur boxing and taught me

enough to qualify for a place on the team that was still in the process of being re-formed. Richie always told me, ‘Stay in shape and maybe you won’t get killed’ – and of course, as I later came to realize, he was right.”

Sgt Hank DiCarlo (1 Ptn H Co) had a large sum of money at his disposal. “I hadn’t been paid properly since May and having just received all my back salary, I was loaded.” Shortly afterwards Hank was approached by 1st Lt Derwood Cann (battalion S2), who had just been given an unexpected three-day pass to Paris. Cann wanted to borrow \$500 and Hank trusted him enough to pay it back over the next few months in easy installments.

Four years of German occupation had not seemingly changed Paris in any way except for the fact that now it cost a small fortune to purchase anything. Many began their leave at the Café de la Paix or “Caffay De La PX” to meet old friends and decide which places to visit. Parisians straggled by, often clutching scuffed old briefcases containing family heirlooms, which they were hoping to sell to the new occupiers. Barroom rhetoric changed from “women” to “when the war was going to end” as by now most people just wanted to go home. Before the men went on leave a rumor began to circulate that the 506th might be parachuting into Berlin. Bob Webb spent two days in Paris and recalled, “The American troops were constantly getting rooked on the money exchange! Twelve months earlier, I had made a \$20 bet with a colleague that the war would be over by February 15, 1945 – which still seemed possible if the Russians achieved their aims in the east. However, we had a saying in the 506th that ‘Things would always get better before they got worse!’” Sgt Ken Johnson (2 Ptn H Co) adds, “In places like Mourmelon a bar of soap could buy you almost anything – liquor, laundry, even a woman if you tried hard enough.”

Pvt Bob Dunning from the 81mm mortar platoon had been wounded in Holland. “I discharged myself from hospital and returned to the outfit in early December. Because my hip was still causing problems, I was put on limited duty and worked as an orderly for HQ Co. Despite my temporary position it was still good to be back with the guys and I

went on leave to Paris with Jack Manley and Herb Spence, where we met up with three USO girls, one of whom I knew from Atlanta.”

The United Services Organization (USO) was a non-profit entertainment company. The overseas operation was also known as the “Foxhole” circuit. Although the big stars were not paid for their appearances, many of the regular performers worked full time in concert and other associated units.

“Most people who were lucky enough to get a furlough were only allowed into Mourmelon or Reims but I wanted Paris so badly that I just couldn’t wait any longer,” recalls Cpl Bob Rommel (MG Ptn). He continues:

After losing 75 percent of our platoon in Holland we didn’t give a damn about anything and just wanted to have fun. One of our guys “borrowed” a car from the airfield and five of us piled into the tiny vehicle (still wearing working dress) and went AWOL to Paris. It was so cramped that one of the boys had to lie across our laps on the back seat. On the way we blew all the tires and had to hitch a lift from a passing truck. We hadn’t been in Paris long when we were stopped and arrested by the Military Police (MPs). One of the guys managed to get away but the rest of us were marched to a police station to be processed. While we were dozing in the waiting room, another MP walked in and asked if we were for the American Red Cross Club at Gare de l’Est? I looked up and said, “Yeah that’s us” and he replied, “OK boys, you are coming with me.” We followed the “Snowdrop” (all MPs wore white helmets) outside before bolting in every direction. Although we were “free” again, the only problem was that none of us had any money and we were still dressed in fatigues. After a few days on the “run” I was so despondent that I gave myself up and was promptly sent back to camp.

Previously Helen Briggs had been the American Red Cross representative for 3/506 in the United Kingdom. For the last few months “Briggys” had been assigned to the Gare de l’Est railway station:

There was a hotel at the station with about 20 rooms where we were billeted. Our job was to make donuts for the various organizations and serve the hospital trains. While I was in charge, our kitchen worked three shifts per day and more than two million donuts were produced by hand. In the hotel, which was also our American Red Cross Club, we had seven bathrooms where a soldier could sign in with a serial number and get a hot bath. Our place became very popular with the Military Police, who were constantly on the lookout for AWOLs. When the German offensive began the MPs collected all the guys on leave from the 101st and held them at the club until they could get transportation to Mourmelon via Reims. I managed to procure a bottle of Cognac for the 3rd Bn mail clerk, Pvt Richard "Swede" Stockhouse as a "thank you" for helping me distribute my "Poop Sheet" [a monthly current affairs bulletin] while the outfit was in Holland. I nearly got into serious trouble for allowing the guys to gamble while they were waiting for transportation.

Doc Dwyer had only been in Paris for one day when, like hundreds of others, he was recalled. "Luckily I had time to visit a French friend and his family who helped me and Joe Gorenc after we escaped from a German prison train in the Loire valley during the Normandy campaign."

Earlier that week, Hank DiCarlo had been asleep in the H Co sergeants' mess at Mourmelon when 2nd Lt Don Zahn entered the room around 2am and turned on the lights. Zahn (who had saved DiCarlo's life in Normandy) had been assigned to 1st Bn and came direct from a midnight meeting at Regimental HQ. "We woke to find him rooting around in Bob Martin's barracks bag for a set of binoculars he had loaned him several days before," recalls Hank. "When we asked what the heck he was doing, Zahn replied that the Germans had attacked our troops along the German border in Belgium and the 101st were being sent behind the 82nd Airborne [who were pre-designated as combat reserve] to plug the gaps made by the enemy tanks." It had not gone unnoticed by Hank and his buddies that the nearby airfield

had been unusually active for the last 12 hours with scores of P-47 Thunderbolts constantly landing, refueling, and taking off.

1st Lt Burton Duke (Bazooka Ptn) had been posted to 3 Ptn G Co when he returned from hospital. Immediately after the officers' meeting at Regimental HQ, Duke, accompanied by T/5 Russell Kerns, visited a nearby ordnance depot to obtain some much-needed ammunition. Initially the man in charge refused to comply but eventually he agreed to sign a requisition after certain threats were made against his establishment. The following day Duke was transferred back to the "Rocket Launchers" while first lieutenants Perrin Walker and Lawrence Fitzpatrick were posted into G Co to fill the gap.

Shortly after 2200hrs on December 17, the 101st began to mobilize and prepare for movement. All available equipment and supplies were secured and placed on transport provided by the logistical center at Oise near Paris. Nearest to Mourmelon, Oise was one of several enormous support bases belonging to the Southern Command Section – run by BrigGen Charles Thrasher. "The following morning we awoke to discover that the 506th PIR was going back to war," recalls Hank DiCarlo. "The company was due to go on leave in Paris and to say we were disappointed was an understatement."

The divisional advance party, consisting of B/326 Airborne Engineer Bn, 101st Reconnaissance Ptn, and a detachment from Divisional HQ were first to depart. The 506th PIR had less than one day to get organized for the mission and everything had to be done at the double. "Most of our weapons were still being repaired and many were issued a variety of other small arms still covered in Cosmoline packing grease," remembers DiCarlo. "They also gave us small cans of gasoline and cloth with which to clean off the grease. I had absolutely no ammunition for my Thompson submachine gun but at least it was something familiar to fight with." The 801st Airborne Ordnance Co was responsible for the repair of all weapons as 1/Sgt Robert "Bob" Higgins recalls: "Our small workshop had been overwhelmed due to an earlier decision by Division to assess and repair just about everything unless it was in near-perfect condition.

When the order came for mobilization we went into overdrive and took on 15 extra armorers and, during the next 48 hours, overhauled around 5,000 firearms.” Those soldiers who went to the front unarmed were told that their personal weapons would follow on within a few hours. When that did not happen, many joked that they had been equipped with nothing more than a hangover and a pair of silk stockings.

Before the battalion left Mourmelon, two soldiers from a quartermaster unit arrived and began distributing the ammunition ordered earlier by Burton Duke. S/Sgt Ralph Bennett recalls, “At most my rifleman had no more than 12 rounds each and 100 rounds per machine gun.” The following day, at 1500hrs, un-briefed and still with only a pitiful amount of small-arms cartridges, the regiment (accompanied by the 321st Glider Field Artillery [GFA] Bn) clambered aboard 40, 18-wheeler semi-tractor units parked in front of Divisional Headquarters. Every rear-wheel-drive vehicle was towing an open trailer weighing 10 tons. Each combination was commanded by an officer or senior NCO and had a driver and co-driver. In total 380 trucks were used to transport the division.

The order of departure was as follows: 501st PIR (less I Co – who were held back through “personal” issues) plus 907th GFA Bn and B Battery from 81st Airborne Antiaircraft (AA) Bn, closely followed by the remainder of 81st AA Bn, 101st Divisional HQ plus Signal and Artillery HQ, 506th PIR plus 321st GFA Bn, 326th Airborne Engineer Bn (less B Co), 502nd PIR plus 377th Parachute Field Artillery (PFA) Bn, 327th Glider Infantry Regiment (GIR) plus 401st GIR, and 463rd PFA.

The 326th Airborne Medical Co and, not surprisingly, the 801st Airborne Ordnance Co were the last to depart. The 801st convoy was towing a miscellaneous array of equipment, including two 75mm howitzers and several generator trailers full of spare tires.

“Sitting back to back for warmth, we set off and headed northeast across the battlefields of World War I such as the Marne, Verdun, and Sedan,” recalls Hank DiCarlo, “before continuing into Belgium and the freezing hills of the Ardennes.” The silhouettes of the men looked somewhat downtrodden as they huddled together in the darkness. As

the vehicle lights went on, some people tried to sleep, some talked quietly, while others stared into the night lost in their own thoughts. At one point part of the convoy was stopped and the occupants ordered to de-truck when an Allied night fighter buzzed the vehicles several times before disappearing into the darkness.

Originally heading for Werbomont, 30 miles north of Bastogne, the movement order was changed en route and the 101st Airborne redirected to Bastogne. Lacking any form of “snow chains,” the rear-wheel-drive prime movers were not suited to the icy road conditions and the 107-mile journey to Bastogne was fraught with delays. The vehicle carrying the 81mm mortar platoon had to stop due to a crash, as Bob Dunning recalls: “One of the lead trucks skidded off the road in a small town and went through the front of a house blocking the road. Since we couldn’t get around the wreck, S/Sgt Morton told us to find shelter as best we could in local houses until the road was reopened.” Nineteen-year-old Pfc Ewell Martin, from Mississippi, had joined G Co in late November, and been assigned to 1 Ptn. He recalls: “During the journey, we opened a bottle of champagne that I’d purchased in Reims and passed it around. It wasn’t long before I needed to use the latrine (a 5-gallon oil drum), which was full to the brim by the time it got to me.” During one stop in an unknown French village the inhabitants came out with food and bottles of wine. “It felt good to have a couple of drinks in my belly,” recalls Manny Barrios.

Finally, during the early hours of Tuesday, December 19, the 506th and 321st GFA de-trucked at a crossroad in the village of Champs, 3 miles northwest of Bastogne. Half-jokingly the drivers were told, “We’ll be right back so keep the engines running.” Attached to the 506th were a team of four specially rigged evacuation jeeps from the 326th Airborne Medical Co, whose job was to transport casualties from the front-line aid stations to the divisional clearing hospital at Herbaumont.

It was an unusual way to begin a large-scale combat operation but this mission would write the most brilliant and courageous chapter in the history of the 506th PIR.

“Ghost front”

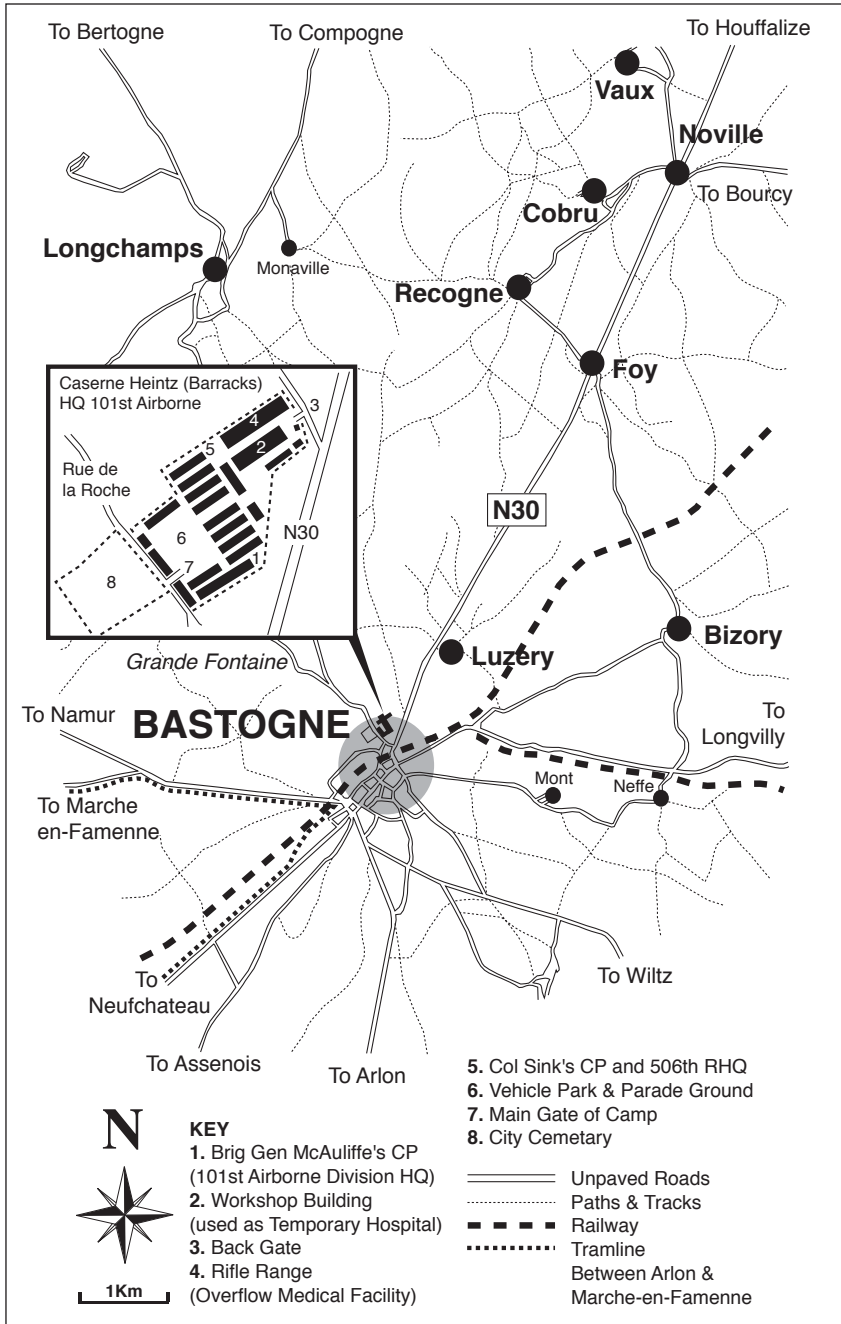
December 17–19, 1944

Nicknamed “Hitler’s Fireman,” German Feldmarschall Walter Model’s Heeresgruppe B’s (Army Group B) unexpected thrust northwest across the German border into the Belgian Ardennes on December 16, 1944 jeopardized the entire American First and Ninth Army front. In December the Allied footprint across this part of Europe was maintained by three main US groups: First Army (LtGen Courtney Hodges), Third Army (LtGen George Patton), and Ninth Army (LtGen William Simpson). Part of the battle group in the central Ardennes was the 4th, 28th (aka the “Keystone Boys”), and 106th infantry divisions plus the 9th Armored Division constituting VIII Corps, led by LtGen Troy Middleton, which along with V Corps and VII Corps collectively formed First Army. The 9th Armored was on its first deployment and had never been in combat, while the 4th and the 28th infantry divisions would be reduced by around 50 percent after two weeks of bitter fighting in the Hurtgen Forest.

It was to be the most serious defeat of US armed forces since Japan invaded the Philippines three years earlier. The breakthrough, supported by 1,000 Stug self-propelled guns (SPGs), Mk III, IV, and V Panther (aka “Panzer”) tanks, penetrated over 50 miles in three days.

The idea was to drive a wedge between the British in Holland and Americans in France, and to capture the Belgian seaport of Antwerp. Known as Operation *Watch on the Rhine*, the “Last Hope” offensive was the brainchild of Commander-in-Chief West, Feldmarschall Gerd von Runstedt. The 88-mile front, running due south from Monschau

Bastogne Overview 1944



(in western Germany) along the Belgian border to Echternach (in eastern Luxembourg), encompassed a total force of 250,000 troops who had over 2,000 artillery pieces at their disposal. Heeresgruppe B, together with 5.Panzer-Armee, formed the central core of the attack. The 6.Panzer-Armee, commanded by SS-Oberstgruppenführer Josef “Sepp” Dietrich, and 7.Armee, led by General der Panzertruppen Erich Brandenberger, were tasked with the north and south. MajGen Norman Cota’s 28th Infantry Division (ID) had been fighting a rearguard action to the north, allowing the 10th Armored Division time to occupy Bastogne and deploy its tanks. With a population in 1944 of 4,500 people, the town of Bastogne was, and still is, a central hub. Located in the southeastern corner of Belgium, Bastogne is situated in the province of Luxembourg, close to the independent Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and the border with Germany. Comprising seven major roads, the network was vitally important to the Germans and their ultimate goal to capture the seaport of Antwerp.

From the important road junction at St Vith (18 miles northeast of Houffalize) the “Keystone Boys” were initially assigned to defend a 21-mile front extending south along the German border to the confluence of the rivers Sûre and Our. At the same time the 106th ID fought a bloody six-day battle in and around St Vith against 5.Panzer-Armee alongside the 7th and elements of the 9th armored divisions. Several days later on December 22, the commander of the 106th ID, MajGen Alan Jones, suffered a serious heart attack and had to be replaced by his deputy, BrigGen Herbert Perrin.

The 2nd and 99th infantry divisions from MajGen Leonard Gerow’s V Corps carried out another essential blocking maneuver at Elsenborn Ridge. The battle caused serious delays to 6.Panzer-Armee and their attempt to reach the river Meuse beyond Verviers in the west. Despite the overwhelming situation facing V and VIII Corps, the troops from First Army did an incredible job, and their actions made a valuable contribution to the successful deployment of the two US airborne divisions.

Caserne Heintz

At the time, 46-year-old BrigGen Anthony McAuliffe (divisional artillery commander) was in charge of the 101st Airborne, after Gen Maxwell Taylor had been recalled to Washington, DC for an urgent conference with the War Department. It is a little known fact that Taylor and McAuliffe had pet names for each other – “Major Killer” and “Minor Killer.” However, when word reached Taylor of the German breakthrough, he immediately made plans to return. Taylor’s assistant, BrigGen Gerald Higgins, had just arrived in Belgium from the United Kingdom and sensibly acquiesced to Tony McAuliffe who had a better understanding of what was happening.

The previous morning (the 18th), while on his way to Werbomont, McAuliffe decided to visit Bastogne and get an impromptu situation report from Troy Middleton at his HQ in the Caserne Heintz (Heintz Barracks) on Rue de la Roche. The barracks had previously been in use as a “boot camp” by the Hitler Youth, and when liberated on September 10, the main gate was still decorated with the German national emblem. On the other side of the main entrance, lined by a neatly trimmed row of small conifers, was a tar macadam vehicle park and parade ground. Adjacent to a pair of tall radio antennas (belonging to VIII Corps Signal Co) and facing the square were eight oblong-shaped accommodation blocks. Situated behind the two-storey barracks were several larger buildings, comprising of garage, saddlers, and carpentry workshops plus an indoor rifle range 100 yards long. These barracks would become McAuliffe’s HQ for the next two and a half weeks. Opposite the caserne, across Rue de la Roche, was the cemetery. During the ensuing battle this would see much use as a temporary burial ground.

Into the abyss

McAuliffe had left Mourmelon ahead of the divisional advance party with his aide, Lt Ted Starrett, G3 divisional operations officer LtCol Harry Kinnard, and driver Sgt Irwin Brown. During the meeting at

Caserne Heintz, LtGen James Gavin – deputy commander of the 82nd Airborne Division and now, due to the absence of Matthew Ridgeway, temporary commander of XVIII Airborne Corps (part of the First Allied Airborne Army) – appeared with vitally important news. Gavin had just come from Werbomont, where MajGen Gerow and V Corps were clearly in trouble. After some discussion it was decided to assign the 82nd Airborne to V Corps and deploy them around Werbomont.

Intelligence revealed that Heeresgruppe B and 5.Panzer-Armee, led by General der Panzertruppen Hasso von Manteuffel, were now well on their way. After advising Mourmelon of the change in plan, McAuliffe sent LtCol Kinnard to a crossroad, codenamed “X,” near Herbaimont, along the N4, 7 miles northwest of Bastogne. Here the road is dissected by the N826 that runs northeast to Bertogne and southwest to Libramont and Libin. Spanned by a pontoon bridge, the river Our was only 3 miles further west. Immediately upon arrival Kinnard instructed the MPs to direct all traffic belonging to the 101st to Bastogne, and not Werbomont as previously planned.

First to arrive, 1/501 were redirected to the village of Neffe, 2 miles east of Bastogne, where a number of German tanks were now massing. Their ultimate goal was the river Meuse and the garrison town of Namur in southern Belgium. The Panzer-Lehr-Division (an inexperienced training division), 26.Volksgrenadier-Division (“People’s Army” Division) under command of Generalmajor Heinz Kokott, and 2.Panzer-Division had already been forced towards Bastogne. Collectively these three main enemy assault groups made up the 47.Panzerkorps and would ultimately be tasked to capture the city, while further north 116.Panzer-Division supported by 560. Volksgrenadier-Division were targeting Houffalize.

Several makeshift tank forces had been formed by the 10th Armored Division (from Third Army) to defend the eastern approaches of Bastogne. The 10th Armored (known as the “Tiger Division”) was commanded by MajGen William Morris, who had dispatched two groups, codenamed Combat Command A and B, to the battlefield. Each command was

made up of around 50 tanks, one battalion of infantry, a company of engineers, and antiaircraft units equipped with “quad fifties” (a truck or half-track mounted with four .50cal machine guns).

Combat Command A went to the river Sûre on the southern flank of the German advance while Combat Command B headed to Bastogne. Led by Col William Roberts, Combat Command B was divided into three forces and initially deployed in a wide arc, facing east, 5 miles from the city. Task Force Desobry, led by Maj William Desobry (CO [Commanding Officer] of the 20th Armored Infantry Bn) was sent north with 15 tanks to Noville. Task Force Cherry, under LtCol Henry Cherry, headed northeast to Longvilly. Meanwhile Task Force O’Hara, commanded by LtCol James O’Hara, moved southeast to Wardin. The three armored groups established roadblocks in an attempt to stem the advance of the 47.Panzerkorps. Many of the personnel who made up the German Volksgrenadier, or “People’s Army,” units were conscripted and given the most basic of military training. Among the Volksgrenadier infantry were teenage boys, older men, and in some cases even women; others came from across Europe as prisoners of war, press-ganged into service under threats of retribution. It was a desperate attempt to turn the Allied tide, and now the 26.Volksgrenadier-Division, together with the rest of 47.Panzerkorps, would be at the very forefront of the battle.

The presence of Team Cherry at Longvilly actually influenced General Fritz Bayerlein (the CO of Panzer-Division-Lehr) into delaying his attack on Bastogne until the following morning. Bayerlein stopped briefly at Mageret after local intelligence reported a convoy of American tanks were heading his way. Fortunately for the Allies, this decision turned out to be a grave error of judgment, because at that moment, Bastogne was his for the taking. However, the early deployment of 1/501 turned out to be crucial and in fact coincided with the delayed attack at 0730hrs on December 19, from the over-cautious Bayerlein. During the first hour of the battle the Volksgrenadiers suffered 84 casualties and were unable to break the resolve of the 501st