

Chapter 13: To the German Frontier

The pillbox that dominated the beach was now an ugly-looking object protruding out of the sand. The machine gunners were gone, as well as the men in the trenches who were defending the beach. A road was now cut into the sand dune by tanks and other vehicles going inland. On the beach and on the high ground were piles of supplies, ammunition and food. Tents dotted the high ground. The Evac. Hospital was gone and had moved further inland to be near the front. A replacement depot with tents filled with men stood in its place. Men and supplies were needed badly as the sweep of the Allied armies began to move across France. A military highway dubbed 'The Red Ball Highway' was established to move men and supplies from the beach to the front. This was first priority as the truck drivers moved supplies day and night in shifts to supply dumps in the forward areas.¹ It was surprising to see supplies stacked in piles as far as the eye could see. No enemy aircraft was seen in the sky. The territory where the snipers had been was peaceful now, occupied by tents, vehicles and equipment. It took a lot of blood and lives to gain this land. Everyone was going about, unaware of the sacrifice, yet it was present with me. As each new dawn followed there was death for some in battle and life for others that followed. Fear vanished when the dangers moved out, as life continued in an easy slow pace. The scars of war soon healed and were forgotten.

At the town of Trevières, near Omaha Beach, the replacements, of which I was a part, went to a railroad siding and loaded into three flat cars. There were 40 men to a car.² Other cars were added till the count was about 120. Most of these cars were loaded with supplies, ammunition and rations. At 1600 hours in the afternoon, we were headed in a southern direction. The big engine labored throwing black smoke into the air as the cars began to move. Our ride on the flat cars was a rough one. The tracks were uneven at the joints, and jumped and swayed, making it difficult for us. Darkness was upon us as we traveled through the city of St. Lo. The city was in a rubble as I envisioned the bombing from the air starting the Allied thrust against the Germans.³ We were on a one-track railroad headed south, destination unknown. Our miseries were bearable, but we can't rest or lie in comfort. On into the night the train chugged. No lights anywhere, just a wall of blackness surrounding us. Our desires were to be back with our units and the men we knew. It was about 3 o'clock in the morning when we pulled into a town. No lights, of course, except for one in a big tent near the tracks. The train halted and 120 men unloaded at whiplash speed, ready to desert if we didn't get some answers. We didn't care if the train pulled out or not.

¹ Many of the transportation units involved in the movement of supplies forward were African American units, known collectively as the "Red Ball Express." Bad roads, overuse of equipment and drivers and hurried schedules led to large numbers of accidents and a good deal of waste, but it was the best the Allies could do until the French rail net was rebuilt. Atkinson, *The Guns at Last Light*, 241.

² While Olexa mentions flat cars, which may be the case, since he comments on the smoke from the engine and being able to see what was around him, but the standard mode of transportation of men was in boxcars, which were more secure and offered overhead shelter, the same 40x8s that Olexa had ridden in in Africa.

³ St. Lo was a major road junction in the *bocage* country south of Omaha Beach, and seizure of it was crucial to the American effort to break out of the hedgerows and into more open areas. To destroy the German defenses in the area, the Allies used their heavy bombers in a massive carpetbombing assault on the town, the effects of which were still visible as Olexa passed through. D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, 401-404.

A captain stood in the doorway of the tent. “Hey, Captain,” someone yelled, “where are we?” “You are in Avranches, fellows.” “Have any of you eaten?” The captain asked. “Hell no!” was the response. “O.K., line up in a column of twos and follow me.” I’ve never experienced such reaction as the men lined up following the men in the lead. Walking with the captain, I was told that they were waiting for us to arrive. We walked about ten blocks to a building where we were served a hot meal and coffee. We wolfed down the stew and French bread, which for a change was toasted. The captain told us that we would stay in town for at least five hours, then move on to Mortain. After the meal, we straggled back to the train to rest and sleep. Some of the guys took off again to see the town. Rations were given to us to tide us over till we reached our destination. It was about 0900 in the morning when the engineer tooted the whistle twice and began moving the train. About a third of the men were not back. As the train began to gain momentum, soldiers were running towards the train from the buildings along the way like cockroaches from a burning building. We cheered the fellows on, but many didn’t make it. As far as we were concerned now, Mortain and Argentan was [were in] the right direction to our units and friends. Mortain was heavily damaged because of the fierce fighting in this sector.⁴ The train didn’t stop in this town as we headed for Argentan.

Again, the scars of war were ever present as we looked out into the countryside. Evidence of fierce fighting could be seen, where men died fighting for a cause. The Germans for theirs, and the Allies, making sure the enemy would not succeed. Nearing the city of Argentan the train stopped at a siding and the men on the train got off. Trucks were waiting for us, and as our names were called, we climbed into the rear and sat down. Before the roll call was over, the train left on its journey to deliver the much-needed supplies to the forward troops. Eight trucks were filled to capacity, with our equipment laying in the center. Our convoy headed down the road west for a ways, then north for five miles to wooded area where there was a large mess tent, a headquarters tent, and three tents serving as officers’ quarters. Unloading from the trucks, we were assigned an area among the trees to pitch our pup tents. It was late afternoon when our chores were completed. Storm clouds were forming and gusts of wind began to gain strength. Lining up for chow at 1800 hours that evening it began to rain hard. We got soaked and the water was filling up our mess kits, making our food slush around like soup. We had a right to bitch and belly-ache, for our food was nothing but slop.

Our stay in the Replacement Depot was four days⁵, and everything we owned, including the pup tents, was drenched. Some of the men took off walking towards the town in the downpour. I didn’t blame them and I was going to follow them, but mud stuck to our shoes, so I

⁴ After the success of the attack at St. Lo in late July, the Americans broke out of the *bocage* country at Avranches, opening a narrow corridor into the open country beyond along the west coast of the Cotentin Peninsula. Hitler ordered an attack to close this corridor, striking at Mortain on the night of August 6-7. The attack was largely foiled by the stiff resistance of the 30th Infantry Division, and soon American counterattacks on the ground and in the air were pushing the Germans back, while American forces in the open country south of Mortain were threatening to envelop the Germans at Mortain. D’Este, *Decision in Normandy*, 413-419; Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 91-100.

⁵ One of the issues with the replacement system was the amount of time spent in replacement depots, which was often rather longer than Olexa spent in this one, and he had already put in time at two others, and had been ready to leave the hospital (at least in his view) for some time before that. The long waits tended to diminish the effects of training and physical conditioning, making the soldiers less fit for combat than they would have been if they had moved more quickly. Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*, 43-44.

stayed in my tent wrapped in wet blankets. My wounds began to ache and my left ankle began to swell. Throughout the night I was miserable and the rain kept falling. Water was running everywhere. I dug a trench through the middle of my tent to keep it moving through, although everything was water-soaked. Throughout the area men were yelling, cussing, and damning the rain. We were cold and there was not a place around to get warm. My thoughts went to Sicily where we had the same situation. The weather sure wasn't on our side, so we cussed the Germans too, who were the cause of our miseries. As one gets into the state of depression, it's exasperating to morale. Our gratification was nil, and fighting a war was the least on our minds. In these four days and three nights everybody from President to the Generals and Four F's⁶ got raked over the coals. The dampness made our wounds hurt continually. The medics gave us aspirins, which we ate like candy.

On the third night, a lone bomber droned overhead above the clouds. The night was pitch black and someone lit a candle. Without a warning someone fired a pistol in the direction of the candle light. Everyone thought a German or two had infiltrated into the camp. I grabbed my rifle and lay just outside my tent ready for action. A few nervous men fired their rifles into the blackness. The guy who lit the candle was yelling "don't shoot! Don't shoot!" Bullets zinged among the leaves in trees and then everything became quiet. About a half hour later someone from the depot yelled from the edge of the woods. "What's going on in there?" "Better get out of here," I yelled, as someone else fired a volley of shots into the air. "Germans!" came a yell out of the woods and the footsteps of the investigator was all that could be heard retreating in the opposite direction. No one in the detachment mentioned a thing at breakfast about the incident.

At 1000 hours the same morning, we were told to get ready to move out. The rain had let up some as we knocked down our tents. Everything was so wet that it was not possible to carry it in a proper manner for walking. Most of us put the equipment on a blanket and dragged it to the supply tent. The supply Sergeant wasn't happy to accept the wet equipment, but he had to. We kept our rifles and ammunition belts, and that was it. Loading onto some trucks again, we were headed towards the front in the direction of Paris. About 10 miles from our starting point, the convoy halted. The lieutenant in charge called off a few names from his list and the men were transferred to other waiting vehicles. These men were now [within] a short distance of their outfits. The convoy continued on, making two more stops. There were five of us left, headed for our units. I thought for sure that we would see Paris, but the truck turned northwest⁷ at an intersection with a sign pointing to Reims. We crossed the Seine River on a bridge built by our engineers and came to the end of our journey at the 26th Infantry Regimental Headquarters and unloaded.⁸

⁶ "Four F's" being a reference to those deemed unfit for service, and thus staying home while the soldiers were overseas.

⁷ Reims is northeast of Paris.

⁸ Olexa's account makes it seem as if he rejoined his unit in late August, but his last letter from England is dated Aug. 30, and his next letter, dated Sept. 10, says that he is "well on his way" back to his unit, so he likely rejoined them on Sept. 11, shortly before the advance into the outskirts of Aachen, Germany. The 1st Division crossed the Seine at Corbeil, west of Paris, on August 27, and moved on to Meaux and Villers-Côtterets, and then advanced rapidly across Belgium. Olexa's L company led an attack near Mons, Belgium, that resulted in the capture of large numbers of Germans, then pushed past Namur and Liège to the frontiers of Germany and the southeast corner of the

Looking around the area, I saw a tent with a sign “Co L” Mess. It was like old home week when I entered the mess tent. The cooks were busy making a hot meal to transport to the men of the company somewhere in the forward area. We exchanged greetings and handshakes, for we hadn’t seen each other since the day I got wounded. One of the cooks gave me a mess kit full of beef stew and plenty of bread. We exchanged news with one another as I gulped the food. I also got a piece of cake with chocolate icing on top to finish off my coffee. I managed to find our Supply Sergeant to get a blanket, field pack, a raincoat and some ammo for my rifle. My anxiety was high to get back with the men.

Helping the cooks at regimental headquarters to load food into the Jeeps, we headed in the direction of Reims. The men of L Company were to get Swiss steak with gravy, bread, mashed potatoes, string beans, and coffee. Dessert was chocolate pudding made on top of the stove in a massive pot. The cook let it burn a little, which was par for the course. Nothing like burnt tasting pudding to help the morale. I visualized every soldier spitting out the first spoonful that went into their mouth. I knew, too, that the cooks would get a tongue lashing as each man made their opinions known. This hot meal would be the first in three weeks for the men of L Company. About five miles from our starting point, we turned into a north direction at a crossroad and a faded sign read Sedan, Compiègne and Laon.⁹ I was in the second Jeep, helping to steady the two big urns of coffee. As we neared the forward area, the boom of artillery echoed in the distance. Within a short time we were approaching the area where the 33rd Field Artillery pieces were in position and firing. “Outgoing mail,” we called it, for the Germans to receive. “Incoming mail” from the Germans was for us to consider. Either way it was going, it made the enemy as well as the Allies sit up and take notice of its arrival. Two more miles down the rolling valley, we turned off into a muddy lane and headed for a patch of woods on a dominating hill about a half a mile away. The 3rd Battalion was spread about on the hill, dug in to counter any attack the Germans might launch. On our arrival in the company area, we had to abandon the Jeeps and hit the ditches. The Germans began shelling the hill with artillery, which lasted about a half hour. A few shells hit the trees, breaking off the tops and trunks which hit the ground with a loud thud. No one was hurt or injured, although the men laid in their holes for safety.

See material on pp. 242-244

The rain kept coming in sheets, kissing the earth with splashing rain drops. As we advanced, pockets of resistance had to be taken care of. Sometimes it would only be one or two men firing on the lead tank to make us stop, then they would disappear. Squads of infantry riding the tanks would then disperse and seek out the enemy. Small patches of trees or a farmhouse along the road had to be investigated. Sometimes the delaying force would be a squad of Germans with a heavy machine gun. Our tanks would cover the infantry advancing, firing a machine gun into the areas. Most of the Krauts would surrender, and then we would move on sometimes our column

Netherlands by Sept. 11. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 286-292. Olexa’s account references some of the places and actions along the way, but most of the details in his accounts of his specific activities fit better into a time frame that puts him back with his unit around Sept. 11.

⁹ He likely saw this sign en route, but well before he rejoined his unit, since the regiment went through this area on Aug. 29. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 287,

would advance as much as 12 miles in one day.¹⁰ It was hard going, but the combat soldier that knows how to bear unhappiness and with courage shows maturity. He overcomes fear which can sabotage the strongest heart. There is no doubt of defection, our goals are set – Berlin is our objective, we are again pressing for our mark and as we march the task will not be easy. The Hun may be on the run by still is a cunning enemy for he is still well trained and still fights savagely. My sparring with “Lieutenant Fried Potatoes” didn’t help with our relationship. I was ready to give up my stripes and become a rifleman once again.

See material on pp. 244-248

We started to walk around the house in the direction of our lines when the bleating of a sheep or goat hit our ears. Turning towards the shed, we saw a black and white goat running at a gallop towards us. Where she came from, we didn’t know. “Hey it’s a Nanny,”” Piccone remarked as he jumped up and down like a little boy. The goat seemed to be scolding us as she approached. She thinks we are the ones who have taken care of her and she resents being left behind, I guess. Whoever took care of her must have been an animal lover or she wouldn’t have been running to us like she was. The goat stopped in front of us, giving a couple of bleats and moving her ears back and forth. She had hazel eyes, a greyish white head and horns about an inch and a half long. “Let’s take her with us, Sarge,” was Piccone’s plea as he gave the goat a couple of cigarettes, which she ate. “No,” I responded, “we can’t fight and take care of a smelly goat. She stinks, can’t you smell her?” Popolowski began to laugh as the goat butted him in the leg. She eyed me, moving those ears of hers, lifted her front legs and charged me with a butt. I stepped aside just in time as her feet hit the ground. “Let’s go,” I said and started to move. “Don’t pay any attention to her,” I said. “Aw Sarge,” Piccone remarked, “let’s take her with us.” “We’ll call her ‘Nanny’ and I’ll take care of her, honest Sarge.” The goat began to follow us and began to bleat as she trailed behind. Piccone was in the rear, coaxing the goat. “Come on Nanny, come on Nanny.” “You don’t have to coax her, Piccone. We can’t take that smelly goat with us.” For a moment I thought the goat would go back to the farmhouse when she stopped following us. Popolowski and I laughed as the goat stood looking at us. Piccone was waving his arm and under his breath repeating ‘come on Nanny, come on.’ Gazing back over my shoulder, old Nanny began bleating and within seconds began to run in our direction. “That damn goat is persistent, isn’t she?” I said. Piccone was in his glory. “I’ll take care of her, Sarge! I’ll take care of her.” “I don’t’ know what the old man will say when he sees this goat.” “She found us and that’s that.” I admit that I began to like her myself, and I knew the company commander would say get rid of her. “You’re supposed to be hunting for Krauts and not goats, Sergeant,” would be his response.

Following the same route in the direction taken to the farmhouse, we were now approaching our line, with the goat tailing us. Looking at our defense lines, every soldier in the

¹⁰ Here Olexa may be jumbling things that happened while he was away with ones that he witnessed. The most rapid advance had already taken place, and the weather during that advance had been good. Between mid-September and early October, L Company did some moving around and worked with tanks, and the weather was worse, so those memories are accurate, even if the context is not. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 287, presents the advance in late August and early September as more rapid, and minimizes the effects of the rain, but confirms that large numbers of Germans were surrendering as the Americans cut off their retreat routes. Regimental records indicate that L Company played a leading role in capturing a large number of Germans in the Mons pocket in Belgium on Sept. 3. MRC 301-INF(26)-0.3, Reports of Operations 1 Jul 44-30 Sep 44, 498; Wheeler, *The Fighting First*, 288.

2nd Platoon was standing and gazing out at us. The center of attraction was Nanny the goat. The men couldn't restrain themselves any longer, charging into the opening and running to the goat. Nanny took everything in stride as the men hugged and petted her. The morale of the men was high as they poured their affection on a smelly goat like Nanny. Nanny disliked some of the men probably, because of their rough handling of her, and she butted them. News of Nanny spread quire rapidly around the company, and those who were curious came to see her. Reporting to the company commander, who was now curious himself of the commotion going on, [and] asked, "What's all of the excitement about, Sergeant?" "A goat followed us from the farmhouse, Lieutenant, on our return," was my response." "A goat, eh, get rid of it, we can't have a goat around to hinder us. Is that clear?" "Yes, Sir!" I remarked. "No one at the farmhouse, Lieutenant, not even the farmer. The Germans cleared out bag and baggage, taking everything with them." "Return to your platoon, Sergeant, and thanks for taking the patrol." Nanny was still the big attraction when I returned to the platoon area. Piccone was digging his hole larger to accommodate Nanny in case of artillery or mortars of aircraft. "Hi Sarge, what did the old man say about Nanny?" Piccone asked as he saw me coming towards him. "We'll have to leave her behind, that's the old man's orders, Piccone." "Aw, I'll hide her Sarge, honest and I'll take care of her." I didn't want to argue the point, so I left.

Trucks were brought up to help us move faster with the armored columns.¹¹ Nanny rode the tanks with us like a trooper. Piccone had a collar on her made from a canvas webbed belt. She'd jump off a tank as quick as any soldier and run. Our turn finally came for us to ride the trucks and rest, so we began to pile on. Two men lifted Nanny over the tailgate and on the truck. Everyone made sure that Nanny had room to maneuver in the center of the truck. The truck driver standing nearby showed his resentment and yelled that there was no room for the goat to ride. He said the wrong thing, because three men of the platoon jumped off the truck ready to clout him. "Hold it fellas," I yelled, "we'll leave the truck driver behind so Nanny can ride." "All in favor say, 'Aye'." Everybody responded and looking at the driver he was now bewildered. "I'm sorry," the driver remarked, "the goat rides," and he climbed into the cab.

I never saw a more crazier bunch as the men in the 2nd Platoon. They cuddled, hugged and talked to Nanny like she was a human. She strutted and butted anyone she disliked at the moment. Nanny was to become our radar unit and warned us of mortar shells coming into the area. The men took turns getting grass, leaves and biscuits for Nanny to eat. They also helped Piccone dig his hole to accommodate Nanny. Nanny was a part of us, and for some reason she didn't smell like she did at first.

As our column spearheaded into Belgium towards Namur, we ran into a column of Germans, moving east towards Luxembourg. We split the German convoy in half and a battle took place. The German convoy consisted of horsedrawn artillery, infantry, truck, tanks, and halftracks. Our tanks split the Germans at a crossroad, turning right and left, firing the artillery pieces and .50 caliber machine guns. It was a one-sided battle, for the element of surprise caught

¹¹ The 1st Division was working closely with the 3rd Armored Division during this period, and the tanks were likely from this unit. Wheeler, 290.

the Germans, who were unaware of our presence.¹² The attack on the convoy lasted about 4 hours, leaving an awful sight. Dead men and horses were lying everywhere in the road as far as we could see. Destroyed tanks and halftracks were burning inside. Our job was to protect the tanks but the enemy had no time to return the fire. After the battle, we moved on, until the city of Namur was in sight. All troops in our spearhead spread out in areas to defend the ground we had gained, awaiting a counter attack from the Germans. We were now well in the borders of Belgium.

Our casualties thus far were light but our losses in this little country [Belgium] would be enormous in men and equipment as we marched on to the German borders and the Siegfried Line. Nothing dramatic about the invasion, as the Allies began pouring over its border in pursuit of the armies that had occupied Europe for the last decade [four years]. This small nation is no stranger to war, with great battles yet to come which will make history. The Belgians are to be admired, for they wanted to share what they had with us, including cooked grass and mud, and tulip bulbs made into a soup. Our hearts ached for them and the suffering they had endured under the Nazis. They were jubilant when liberated, and hugged us as we pushed on through their towns. As usual, our rations were given to these people in need, which was from our hearts.

See material on pp. 248-249

Two patrols were sent into the city of Namur.¹³ The reports were that the city was lightly defended. We were glad to get the news that we would besiege the city at dawn the next day. Our moving out of the area was slow because of the mud. Nearing the outskirts of Namur, the ground was a little firmer, which helped. Fanning out, two companies hit the town and moved down the streets, hugging the building and walls as we moved. Nothing happened till we got into the center of town. A roadblock had been set up with a tank behind it. The gun was facing our way. The machine gunner on the tank fired at us and we scattered into the houses. We had a Sherman on the other street that went forward to the corner. Somehow the tank commander had the driver take off across the street before the German tank could fire. The Sherman traveled one block and got into the rear of the enemy tank and began firing. The German tank crew abandoned the tank and took off on foot, but were captured two blocks away. The other company ran into a machine gun, halting its advance. Another Sherman came into action, firing a salvo into the building which the Germans held. A platoon of men began working up to the building receiving no fire. In the building was one dead German and the rest gone. We advanced to the northern outskirts of the city, putting a defense perimeter on the roads entering in the city. Taking turns to guard our area, we managed to go into some of the houses to dry our clothes and blankets, and to get the

¹² This account best fits the action at Avesnes and Longueville, near Mons, on Sept. 3, and would have taken place before Olexa rejoined the unit. They did, however, participate in an attack in conjunction with the 3rd Armored intended to isolate Aachen in mid-September, which would have given Nanny the opportunity to ride a tank.

¹³ Here Olexa is confusing his locations. *Danger Forward*, 276, 422, notes in passing that the division passed through Namur, and that the divisional command post was there on Sept. 7. The regimental log does not specifically note patrolling into Namur, although locations for the advances in the period Sept. 3-11 tend to be in coordinates rather than place names. Divisional records indicate that a battalion from the 9th Division was in Namur on Sept. 5, and that the 3rd Armored Division had its command post there on Sept. 6. MRC 301-3.23: G-# Journal and File, 1 Sep 44-14 Sep 44, 338, 420. Given that Olexa did not rejoin his unit before Sept. 11, whatever personal experiences he relates here would likely have taken place near Liège or Aachen, not at Namur.

chill out of our bones. Within two hours the civilian population began to come out of hiding and return to their homes. They were overjoyed to see us, bringing out the wine and whiskey to celebrate. People began dancing in the streets until they became exhausted.

Sleeping in buildings where it was dry and warm helped us to forget the misery we experienced in the rain. The weather wasn't all that good yet, but we were warm. Liège, the big industrial city, was only twelve miles away [actually about 25] and the German border about 40. Monty's armies to the north [west] had pushed into Antwerp and had taken that city. The Germans for some reason pulled out in a hurry, leaving the city and its inland port [facilities] in good shape. Normally, the enemy would destroy and burn everything. These cities would soon be under siege by buzz bombs sent day and night by the Germans.

See material on p. 249

This city was large, and we moved to surround it then, mop up what enemy remained inside. Our tanks were with us as we moved cautiously, hugging the buildings and houses. It was late afternoon when heavy resistance stopped us cold. We deployed our men and set up our own defenses, for it would soon be dark. Patrols were sent out to test the strength of the enemy. Sporadic firing during the night could be heard as our patrols probed the enemy positions. Men were placed on guard duty at two-hour intervals. As the first rays of dawn were peeping in the sky, men began to move in the direction of the enemy once again. Our Sherman tanks were 'warming up' to move with us, for another day of battle was at hand. Moving six blocks, we were in the factory area. The buildings had to be searched, so a squad of men would be assigned to search the buildings. While men were inside, the outside column kept moving, for our drive had to keep going. The Meuse River had risen to almost overflowing its banks as the rain kept falling. Our concern was to get across the rushing waters in case of the bridges being destroyed. To our good fortune, one bridge in the northern part of Liège was still in one piece. Moving at a fast pace, our 3rd Battalion shot across that bridge with the aid of our tanks to the other side, right on the tails of the enemy. We pushed the Germans three miles beyond the city, hitting stiff resistance. The German artillery units began firing at us with murderous results. We had to pull back about a mile and take measures to defend our ground. Our company losses were about 50 men. We had to shift men to make 5-man squads, seven less than our normal amount. In the city proper, the civilians began to appear, and a celebration was to take place that lasted three days. The Belgian underground unit helped to rout the German resistance in the city, which was about three companies of Germans. They surrendered when all escape routes were closed, ending the hostility in Liège.¹⁴ The city of Liège was a prize for the Allies. It was a hub where the railroads, water and highways met which connected it with other cities. Supplies could be sent in all directions to fighting units without difficulty.

The Germans were well fortified and dug into the approaches of the Fatherland. Bunkers throughout the area and in the Hurtgen Forest would have to be taken. We had some 210 millimeter [8-inch] guns pulled by 5-ton trucks to fire on these stationary targets. The bunkers were eight feet thick, easily defended by the enemy and stopping any assault that would be made. The pine trees were thick. Only the infantry on foot could walk through. Barbed wire fences

¹⁴ Liège was taken by the 26th Regiment on Sept. 8. MRC 301-INF(26)-0.3, Reports of Operations 1 Jul 44-30 Sep 44, 511. This again predates Olexa's return to his unit, so here he may be relating what others told him of these events.

were 15 feet high and 20 feet at the base to stop any assault by the infantry attacking these strong holds. Bangalore torpedoes would have had to be used to blow holes in the wire. German artillery was already 'zeroed' in on the area where shells could explode on the attacking forces stalled by the barbed wire obstacles. The enemy would be up to old tricks, pulling out and laying down heavy concentrations of artillery shells, causing great casualties. As we held the commanding ground on the Northern outskirts of Liège, the Germans began to send Buzz bombs¹⁵ into the city. They were landing or gliding around the industrial area. The explosions were terrific and very terrifying, scaring the hell out of everyone within the city. This part of the city would be nothing but rubble within a short time. These buzz bombs were launched from the borders of Germany. I was well aware of the morale of those who were on the receiving end of these harassing and damaging instruments of war.

See material on pp. 249-253

L Company was ordered to resume the attack at dawn. We shivered in the early dawn air as we rolled the blankets into one large roll and left it beside the road. We were on our way before daylight. The wind was raw and blowing against our faces. Walking briskly over the frozen ground along the road bed, we were descending into the town of Eupen. The first rays of light were in the sky as the troops fanned out at the outskirts. The squads moved cautiously from house to house on both sides of the street. The advance was slow, for each house had to be searched. Some houses were empty, while others had civilians huddled together in fear. We had tanks with us for support, and when the enemy fired upon us, the tanks would open up on the enemy positions trying to delay our advances. The element of surprise was with us, because the Germans were retreating into Germany. They seemed confused because of our presence in this sector.

Down the street from my platoon was a large home. By the looks of the home, it belonged to someone of means. The house and its surroundings were in good shape. With men placed into positions to cover us, the first squad and myself rushed the house. When all of us were beside the house, we rushed in the front door, ready for action. To our surprise, the place was empty, with papers and equipment scattered all over the floor. In the back room was a table set for six men. Steaming food was still in the warmers placed on the table. Four bottles of French wine were at one side laying in ice. The aroma of food filled the air. The house was the headquarters of a German Regimental Commander. Upstairs were four bedrooms with beds so soft that it was like a dream. The Germans moved out in a hurry. While the men were wolfing down pig hocks, sauerkraut, cooked rabbit, homemade bread, and coffee cake, my eyes caught two objects behind a large curtain in a corner window. In two bounds the objects were in my hands. The prize I had sought for so long was now a reality. I couldn't believe my good fortune of having in my possession, two fine swords. One belonged to a General, with gold-sashed braids with diamonds, two rubies and an emerald embellishing the handle. The other sword belonged to a Colonel, nothing too fancy about it except on the blade near the handle were horses and an artillery piece. I now could fulfill my promise to a brother-in-law in sending him a sword. I was

¹⁵ "Buzz bombs" were V-1s, pilotless aircraft powered by a single jet engine and carrying a heavy load of explosives. They had a long range and were fast enough to be difficult to shoot down, but could not be controlled once launched, so they were used against large targets such as cities, especially London and Antwerp, and in this case Liège.

envied by everyone and began to get offers of sizeable sums of money. Refusing a thousand dollars from a gambler for the General's sword was a hard decision. The bid I received for the other sword was five hundred dollars. My worries about the swords would increase. I didn't want them stolen from me or to lose them. I decided to wrap them in the blanket roll, making sure that the roll was marked so I could identify it every night. Pondering my thoughts, I wondered how I was to get these swords on their way. At the moment I could not think of a way. Somehow, I believed there would be a solution.

On the northern outskirts of Eupen, the Germans were shelling the roads and everything that would move. I was surprised to see, in some of the better homes, electric and gas stoves, appliances and electric irons. These homes belonged to German citizens. In the cellars were provisions of canned rabbits, vegetables, pork and sauerkraut. The Belgians were already at work rounding up the Germans. They seemed to know where to find them.¹⁶ Some of the prisoners were cuffed roughly. I guess these Belgians remembered how they were beaten. The Bible says, "The Lord executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed." As for man, "his days are as grass and as flowers of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more." Difficulties are normal, but God sets the timetable.

Swinging in a northward direction, our armored columns headed for the city of Aachen, Germany. The city of Aachen is noted as the [most] religious city of Europe, because of its many churches. Fighting in this sector was slow, severe, [and] bitter, and we had many casualties. The German supply lines were much shorter, with replacements of fresh troops and equipment at their fingertips. The weather, too, was very cold, with the wind [chill] factor, which made another enemy to be considered. The Allied plan was to encircle the city and then mop up the troops within the pocket. The city itself was right at the edge of the Siegfried Line.¹⁷ Although precautions were taken, we still suffered casualties, some from the cold weather, others wounded by shell and rifle fire, and those killed outright. Our casualties within the company were as high as 50 men, depending upon the circumstances of fighting. Each company within the regiment was undermanned.

See material on pp. 253-254

¹⁶ Eupen was part of the original group of provinces that comprised the Netherlands in the Middle Ages, and was eventually taken over by the German state of Prussia and incorporated into the unified Germany in 1871. It reverted to Belgium in 1919, and the Germans reclaimed it in 1940. The population would have been a mix of Germans and Belgians, and they would all have known who was who and which Germans had behaved badly since taking over. The details presented here indicate that he really was in Eupen, and is not confusing Eupen with Aachen, or at the very least that they were still operating in Belgium rather than Germany.

¹⁷ Aachen is located in a small salient of territory that juts westward from the rest of the German border in the area, which mostly runs north-south. It thus projected out from the most defensible line, but the town was important enough to be included within the defensive system along the frontier. Wheeler, *The Big Red Onet*, 290.