

*This abbreviated history of the 70th Infantry Division is taken from the 50th Anniversary program book of the 70th Division (Training). The 70th Division (Training) has since been deactivated but the 70th's history and streamers are now carried by 70th RRC (Regional Readiness Command).*

"A brand new Infantry Division, the 70th Trailblazer, was revealed on February 23 to spearhead the Seventh Army's drive into Germany, south of Saarbrucken," the Stars and Stripes of February 25, 1945 reported. "The 70th, which first went into action on December 28 southeast of Haguenau, is fighting in Forbach, just inside the French border, six miles southwest of Saarbrucken, and was later reported in possession of most of the town," the famous Army newspaper concluded.

Activated as the 70th Infantry Division at Camp Adair, Oregon in 1943, the Trailblazer Division served throughout World War II in the European Theater of Operations but was deactivated in October, 1945, following its return to the United States. The Division was reactivated as a combat unit in 1952, and in May, 1959, reorganized as the 70th Division (Training).

Today the 70th Division (Training) is headquartered at the George A. Custer United States Army Reserve Center in Livonia, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. The red, white, and green shoulder patch worn by the current 70th Division (Training) is symbolic of its history. The patch bears an axe in recognition of the pioneers who traveled to the Willamette Valley, the site of Camp Adair. The snowy mountain represents Mount Hood, and the green fir is in reference to the 91st Infantry Division (the Fir Tree Division) from which the officers and noncommissioned officers of the 70th were drawn.

The 70th originated as a "triangular" division - a group of Infantry organized into three regiments. The regiments were the 274th, the 275th, and the 276th. Each regiment had three battalions, each with four companies. The 70th was one of the few divisions that had a cannon company, an anti-tank company and a service company as well as a medical detachment as part of each regiment.

Activation occurred on "Infantry Day," June 15, 1943. This was the first time the entire Division would "pass in review" before the top 70th commanders and distinguished Oregonians. However, for the "Trailblazers," a far more important day was "Organization Day," in September 1943. On September 11, 1943, the 70th was "officially" born in impressive organization day ceremonies.

Training began immediately. After the 13 week training period, the 70th Division members were tested by Fourth Army. Seven hundred twenty-nine tests were administered and the Trailblazers did well. Excellents were scored on 122 tests, and the Division received satisfactory scores on 569 tests. Lieutenant General William Simpson, Commanding General of the Fourth Army said the 70th compared favorably with any other division he had ever observed at this stage of training.

In July 1944, the 70th received word to move-out from Camp Adair to Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri. It took some 20 trains to carry them in average load of 800 men each. Although Fort Leonard Wood is 2294 miles closer to the European Theater than Camp Adair, there was still an additional 4262 miles to go to the Rhine. Major General Allison J. Barnett took over as the new commander, having just served in the Pacific Theater of Operations.

By mid-November 1944, Trailblazer units were preparing for movement to Europe. The 70th was reorganized for deployment. The fighting core was placed under the command of Assistant Division Commander Brigadier General Thomas Herren and named "Task Force Herren." Three regiments were moved to Camp Miles Standish outside of Boston. The Division headquarters went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. After being refitted with newly-adapted equipment, the units were ready for overseas deployment. The 274th boarded the "Mariposa," a former passenger

liner on November 31st. The 275th and 276th boarded the "SS West Point" on December 6th, and the Division Headquarters sailed on a victory ship, the "Marine Devil."

The Trailblazer's first day in Europe began at daybreak in the Port of Marseilles. Activity was intense. The troops were trucked to a bleak area on a plateau called CP 2 above the battered city. There was not a single building in sight; the only facilities were slit and trench latrines.

Normally, a division would get some time to acclimate and receive additional training before being sent to the front lines. Unfortunately, the 70th's schedule was affected by the fierce fighting up north. As soon as the task force regiments were assembled, they were sent to the northeastern area of France. The 274th, now identified as "Task Force Fox" left CP 2 on December 20 and arrived at Brumath, France, some 370 miles north, on Christmas Eve. The 275th and 276th left several days later. On December 26th, 211 men of the 274th were transferred to the 80th (Blue Ridge) Infantry Division which had relieved Bastogne. The 28th (Keystone) Division drew replacements from the 276th. The entire 275th was attached to the 45th (Thunderbird) Division of Anzio fame.

During this same time frame, the German 6 SS Mountain Division (Nord), an elite force, were ordered to return to Germany to take part in the Rundstedt Offensive. Arriving late, each mountain unit was committed to the action upon arrival, even if the entire division had not arrived. By December 21st, the German Army admitted that the Ardennes thrust had failed.

The Seventh Army held the line from Saarbrücken, southeastward to Strasbourg. It was spread thin. In one instance, the three regiments that made up "Task Force Harris" (63rd Division) were pulled from the line. The other two - "Task Force Linden" (42nd Division) and "Task Force Herren" (70th Division) took over that sector as well as their own. Knowing that the line was porous, Hitler planned to hurl all available forces at it. The German objective was to join with German troops breaking out of the Colmar Pocket, some 60 miles south, and to cut off the Seventh Army from its supply bases.

The Seventh Army's front was 84 miles long, from St. Avold (near Saarbrücken) to the Rhine, then south along the river for 40 miles. Task forces Herren and Linden guarded the right flank inside the German National Boundary.

In front of the 70th were three German Divisions; the 361st Volks Grenadiers in the center, the 257th Volks on the right and the 256th Volks on the left. The specific objectives were to seize the Bitche-Sarrensberg road on the right, take Philippsbourg and Dambach on the left, and capture Wingen, Wimmenau and Ingwiller in the center to block the exit to the Alsatian Plain. At Ingwiller, the Panzer Divisions would reinforce the Infantry, then link with Nazi forces from Colmar and the Black Forest across the Rhine, north of Strasbourg. The Germans picked New Year's Eve for the offensive, believing that the holiday spirit would lower the Americans' guard. One of their patrols had penetrated as far as Philippsbourg, almost 2 miles behind U.S. lines and found what they termed "a country-fair like atmosphere" among the Americans. This report made the German commanders so confident that they moved all troops off line for special training, except for security forces.

The Americans were busy, too. After months on the offensive, they now found themselves on the defensive. The G-2 information was explicit. The enemy attack would come on New Year's Eve. All along the line, soldiers huddled down for that long, lonely, frightening wait for something to happen. The waiting ended with a trip flare, exactly 10 minutes before the start of 1945.

The flare revealed a fearful sight. Only 50 yards away, a German patrol wearing white parkas that blended with the snow, was crawling towards the Americans. They pulled their weapons from inside their garments and opened fire. Operation Nordwind had begun.

The strength and ferocity of the attack hadn't been expected. The white-clad enemy, laying down heavy machine gun and small arms fire, were advancing relentlessly. The American forces were driven back at Bannstein, 3 miles northwest of Philippsbourg.

By 11:30 a.m., Bannstein was surrounded and small groups of GIs pulled out through the woods, seeking to regroup at Baerenthal. The vehicles were left behind and the fragmenting of Task Force Herren had begun. The remainder of the 275th's New Year's Eve was spent preparing to move to Niederbronn to be attached to the 45th Division. The 276th was moved at the same time and attached to the 79th Division. The regiments were now using code names; the 274th was "Wyoming," the 275th, "Wrecker," and the 276th, "Wriggle." First, second, and third battalions were designated as "Red," "White," and "Blue."

Wyoming was in a defensive position along the Rhine. During the day, new orders were received. Wyoming would relieve Wrecker on the left flank. This meant thinning the line to extend across some 21 miles of Rhine river bank which was the Regiment's new defensive responsibility. Wrecker was attached to the 45th Division on January 1st with its 1st Battalion held in reserve. 2nd Battalion went into position south of Baerenthal and 3rd Battalion was assigned a line north of Philippsbourg. The 3rd Battalion, 275th, reported its first casualties at 0930. Two officers were hit by shell fragments that destroyed a medical truck parked in front of the battalion command post. Wriggle was attached to the 79th (Lorraine) Division on January 1st. After the 274th had taken over Wriggle's Rhine position, the 276th traveled northwest by foot and truck to Camp d'Oberhoffen where it remained assembled on alert for the upcoming move to the Mouterhouse area. The regiment was now in VI Corps reserve and responsible for local security.

About two hours after Nordwind began, U.S. commanders decided to hold the main defense along a line roughly from Baerenthal to Philippsbourg to Dambach. Around noon, the 45th Division command post, the nerve center for all action in the central sector, couldn't reach its battalion in Philippsbourg. Adding to the confusion, German officers, wearing American uniforms and driving American jeeps, were issuing false directions and countermanded group movements. These were the same tactics they used so well in the Ardennes.

Regular communication lines were obviously cut. Liaison officers reported new locations by using telephones in rest hotels. Other forms of improvised communications were used throughout the area.

At 1755 Wrecker's 2nd Battalion was alerted to an enemy attack on Baerenthal and a 500 man German force was seen moving toward Reiperswiller. The 3rd Battalion was ordered to prepare for offensive action, and was to move north from Philippsbourg until it made contact with the enemy.

It was on this march that Companies I and K of the 275th were baptized in close combat ambush. Item Company was in the lead on the road to Bitche from Philippsbourg. The troops moved in single file on each side of the road with three to four yards between men. King Company followed immediately behind. The column stretched 600 to 700 yards. The winding northwesterly road was closed on the right by heavily wooded mountains. On the left was a small river, then railroad tracks and a valley of open fields with only a few scattered buildings.

Company I kept rotating its lead platoons approximately every ten minutes. The point platoon would drop off to the side, let the rest of the company pass through, then fall in at the rear. One of these changes had just taken place when, from the head of the column, came the order "Halt." There was just a slight accent in that word and Captain William Long instantly yelled "Hit the dirt!"

In that split second the column dove into the ditches on both sides of the road as German machine guns opened fire.<sup>1</sup>

The Americans fell back quickly, shocked but maintaining discipline. One rifleman described the action as "Fire, fall, jump, crumble into the ditch." Some 500 yards back from the initial confrontation, the 'Blazers set up a defensive position. A roadside store became the company command post. Three to four hours after the ambush, the company had reorganized. The wounded and dead were evacuated by jeep and ambulance.

It was now time for the Germans to taste an ambush. Approximately 100 yards ahead, a bridge crossed the stream on a side road. In the bright moonlight, a German patrol of approximately 40 men were clearly visible in their white uniforms. They were coming up the railroad to cross the bridge. They didn't know how far the Americans had dropped back but hoped to cut off further retreat.

Sleeping GIs were quickly awakened. All weapons were trained on the bridge. The enemy had almost crossed when the 'Blazers opened fire. The Germans took cover and for 30 minutes a fierce firefight raged. The Germans lost seven on the bridge. Company I had no casualties in this engagement; however, the earlier ambush cost them. Four were killed, six wounded, and thirteen missing.

Company K by now was way behind Company I, and had been hit by a separate ambush. The enemy had let part of the column pass before opening fire. Company K was pinned in the ditches. During the lull, the company tried unsuccessfully to make contact with the battalion to notify them of their decision to fall back to Philippsbourg. However, even the slightest movement caused the Germans to open fire. Eventually, the company eased out of the ditches onto higher ground. There they dug in and remained through the night into January 2nd.

New Year's Day was not a happy one for the 70th. The Germans were ready and able to exploit their early gains. Philippsbourg is a tiny village in a deep valley in the Hardt mountains near the German border. It was a critical town for it sits on an intersection of the important N62 French highway and is also on the railroad line between Bitche and Haguenau. This was the sole route on which the Nazis could move tanks and supplies to sustain the breakthrough they sought. The Germans were willing to pay a high price to gain control of the village.

The situation developing at Philippsbourg developed became primarily the 275th Regiment's show. The 3rd Battalion, 275th was northeast of Philippsbourg. Companies I and K were pinned down on the road where they had been ambushed during the night. The mission of the 275th was to close the gap between them and the 157th Regiment to the right. Part of this line had been covered by the 62nd Armored Infantry. As the 62nd withdrew, it had to fight off flanking and encircling attacks.

Company A was to cover its share of the two mile sector, centering on the Angelsberg heights, approximately one mile west of Dambach. Company B was one mile west of Company A, on the

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<sup>1</sup> From an email dated Aug 24, 2002 from Tom Cannon: "According to my Dad, 1st Lt. Fillmore Cannon/I Company, 275th, he was in the point position during the initial attack, and Cpt. Long was no where near the front and did not yell "Hit the dirt!" The principle mistake (p 5) was the fact that Cpt. Long was no where near the point when the company came under fire for the first time on January 1, 1945. It was my Dad who was at the point at the time of the initial German attack. He says most of the leading squad was either killed or captured which coincides with the History's report of four killed, six wounded, and thirteen missing. One of the those killed was Homer Hemmings. My Dad describes him as one of the largest men he ever knew. "He made a Garand rifle look like a toy in his hands," and "His uniform was too small for him. His sleeves were way too short for him." My Dad would always gesture to a point several inches above his own wrist when he described this. Homer Hemmings is buried at the Lorraine Cemetary and Monument.

high ground of Falkenberg. According to the original plan, Company I was to move to Baerenthal behind the 2nd Battalion. Company K was to dig in near the site where Company I had set up post ambush defenses. Unfortunately, Company K never received the order to move forward. At 0330, January 2nd, Company I was ordered to pull back to Philippsbourg. Wary of another ambush, the company moved with extreme caution. It took approximately three hours to get back to town. Shortly after 0630, the S-3 of the 275th told the 45th Division command post, "My 3rd Battalion reports that the enemy has infiltrated into Philippsbourg from the right."

The enemy had penetrated a gap between the 'Blazers and the 157th at Dambach. The Germans were determined to take Philippsbourg, which had been the only serious obstacle to its advance. The 476th Grenadier Regiment attacked from both the west and the north. Both attacks had failed. The terrain was as hostile as the German Division. The slopes were extremely steep and there were sheer drops threatening the unwary. The woods were incredibly thick and branches clutched clothing, equipment and helmets.

While an infrequent clearing seemed to offer easier going, the thigh-deep snow drifts hobbled the 'Blazers' movements. The entire time enemy fire continued in varying degrees of intensity and effectiveness. Sounds of firing came from all sides; the Philippsbourg troops could easily hear the firing at Baerenthal and toward Bitche.

During the early hours of January 2, the 3rd Battalion finally was able to get orders to Companies I and K to return to Philippsbourg, re-grouping after their ambush. Company I was approximately one half mile north of the village; Company K was on a mile long ridge extending east from the Bitche road and about 500 yards west of Company I.

The Germans had built an elite motorized force around the Fusilier company of the 256th Volks Grenadier Regiment. This handpicked force would make a lightning thrust to open the attack. The plan was to begin with a 5-minute artillery barrage. During this time, the assault team would move from its assembly area to the north edge of Philippsbourg. As the dawn attack continued, artillery would advance its fire in 200-yard steps into and through the village. The assault team would follow closely behind the barrage, remaining in their vehicles until they reached the south edge of town. There the engineers would set up a road block to seal off the approach for any possible American reinforcements. The rest of the Fusilier team would turn back to the center of the village hitting the 'Blazers from the rear. At the same time, two German assault battalions would hit. One with armor support would strike from the front (north). The other would come from the west. The German regiment would occupy the village and prepare for a counterattack after mopping up any American resistance.

The next objective for the Germans was Niederbronn and the gateway to the Alsatian Plain. The elite force did cut off the Niederbronn road, but only for a few hours. An American counterattack took out the roadblock. The elite force was almost totally wiped out in this action and never became involved in the second phase of mopping up the village. Pockets of 'Blazers, although disorganized and inexperienced, continued to fight valiantly and inflicted heavy casualties on the German attackers. 'Blazers were shuffled from crisis to crisis, but through all this havoc they maintained communications with the 275th's Cannon Company. The artillery provided such effective support of the foot troops that the Germans spent a huge amount of their artillery ammunition in a futile attempt to silence the 'Blazers howitzers.

Although this action was occurring, the 45th Division G-3 did not seem to have any serious interest in what was happening at Philippsbourg. Finally, at 1100 the regimental headquarters received word about the perils Philippsbourg. The village was in danger of capture. Suddenly, everyone up and down the chain of command knew, as did the 'Blazers on the line, that this was a major battle. The 'Blazer position was precarious. Mistakes are made in any battle. There were moments of panic when lack of discipline and total disorganization weakened the ability to fight

effectively. But the scattered troops rallied and joined whatever units were fighting at that location. These improvised commands fought well, and finally the remaining Germans retreated.

In the next battle the Trailblazers suffered their single greatest loss. A patrol, a machine-gun section, and a whole company were captured by the Germans. Falkenberg is further west, almost due north of Philippsbourg. A mountain with the same name stands there. To its right is Weiherberg with the Neuenhoffen road. Farthest right is Angelsberg. These features allow a natural defense against the German forces to the north.

The 1st Battalion, 275th had marched through Philippsbourg from an assembly area one mile to the south. After a short stop to check orders, Company B continued to its assignment in Falkenberg. The company was barely out of sight when radio contact was lost. This loss was a major factor in the tragedy to come. The attached machine gun section from Company D had lagged behind the main body while leaving Philippsbourg. It apparently missed a turn in the dusk and continued down the Neuenhoffen road. Here they engaged in a spirited firefight and captured 30 prisoners. The GIs turned back to find B Company. Instead, they found their own commanding officer who relieved them of their POWs. On his instructions, they went into temporary positions to await orders from B Company. Through the night they failed to make contact and vice versa.

About 1200 the next day, the 1st Battalion sent out a patrol to make contact with Companies A and B. The patrol reached Company A and was able to deliver the battalion orders. The patrol retraced its steps to the Neuenhoffen road. There they came upon a concrete bunker of the old Maginot Line and they dug in for the night.

At dawn on January 3rd the Germans mounted an attack on Falkenberg that came as a total surprise. The 'Blazers weren't sure where it came from and later reported, "They were all around us." At the foot of Falkenberg, the D Company machine gunners heard movement but thought it was Company B, the troops around them. They quickly discovered their error and opened fire. Thus began a major engagement between a section and a company of Germans.

By mid-day January 3rd, the patrol was still without contact and now hampered with several wounded German prisoners. They decided to make the way back to Philippsbourg. Hostile enemy shells were incoming frequently so the men walked at widely separated intervals. Unfortunately, this textbook solution brought catastrophe. Although the patrol expected German infantry as they walked through the woods, they did not see them until it was too late. At the edge of Mambach a handful of houses and an abandoned log toll gate straddled the road. As each 'Blazer came around the corner of a building, an armed German stepped out and ordered the American to surrender. Each 'Blazer was captured before the next came into sight. There was no opportunity to put up a fight.

Back up on the Falkenberg crest, punishment by both the enemy and weather continued through four days and nights. At least two major German attacks were turned back and an uncounted number of enemy probes were thwarted. Almost all the Americans suffered from frozen extremities. Ammunition was practically gone and the food supply was gone. The company could not hold out; the commander of B Company sent word to the Germans that Company B would surrender. Several German officers, escorted by GIs, came into the American camp to conduct negotiations. Leaving their equipment and disabled weapons, they were marched off the ridge. Exhausted and hurt, they had to plod 12 miles to Fischbach. They crossed the German border but not as victoriously as they had anticipated. It was about 2000, January 6, when the curtain fell on the Falkenberg drama.

In parallel lines, the Battle of Baerenthal was developing. The valleys of Baerenthal and Philippsbourg are almost indistinguishable from each other. Each town lies in a separate valley. Philippsbourg is about 3 miles west of the Rhine and 3 miles from the German border; Baerenthal

is one valley over and slightly farther west. The western thrust of Nordwind was in the Bitche Salient. The eastern prong came through the Trailblazer area. The main central attack was directed at the Baerenthal corridor from the Saar to the Alsatian Plain. The enemy's objective was to meet in the center with the Bitche attackers farther south in Saverne. The Philippsbourg offensive was to aid the Baerenthal columns and to protect the German left flank against an American counterattack from Niederbronn. The gallant American defense in the Bitche Salient made Nordwind's major thrust a total failure. That failure apparently caused the German high command to beef up the Baerenthal effort.

The German advance on Baerenthal made a dangerous Nordwind penetration. There, the 2nd Battalion, 275th, largely by its own resources, successfully defended its exposed position in its first battle. As the determined enemy actively probed for a soft spot in the Vosges barrier at Baerenthal, the corps was forced to continually change plans. Often the battalion was endangered by a breakdown of communications which prevented those plans from reaching all involved units. The resultant lack of support, especially from division artillery, intensified the hazard.

Baerenthal was the site of the command post for Task Force Hudelson. Original plans from Corps called for the 275th to relieve elements of the task force, then to attack toward Mouterhouse. Liaison officers from the 275th were assured that the line was quiet and that the relief could be effected smoothly. Nordwind would soon change the situation.

The advanced parties of the 275th arrived in their assigned areas on January 1st and began preparations for the drive west. German patrols were poking into the American lines looking for spots to exploit. One of these patrols got into a firefight with Company H, 275th, as they were setting up advanced observation posts and had their first KIAs (killed in action).

Baerenthal fell to the Germans shortly after midnight and the battalion remained under fire all night. Shortly after midnight, the Germans began a series of armored-infantry probes. January 2nd, the G-3 at 45th Division headquarters seemed to be unaware of the situation, and may even have misplaced the 2/275th (thinking they were already in the village). New orders to hold the Mouterhouse-Philippsbourg line seem to have been predicated on such misinformation.

By early morning, the G-3 finally read that the 2/275th was not in the village and started artillery fire into Baerenthal. At 0830 hours, the enemy launched an attack on the road from Baerenthal, spearheaded by tanks. As reported by the 275th to the 45th some ninety minutes later, "Our 2nd battalion was hit by tanks, supported by a battalion of foot soldiers. We killed one tank, possibly two, but lost an anti-tank gun. One company was badly disorganized and the battalion commander was trying to straighten it out, their reserve company is in position just north of the original battalion command Post position at Muehlthal. The right company apparently held during the night, but we've lost contact recently."

That daybreak, the German attack had moved down the Zinswiller road where it ran into Company F. At least two German tanks were damaged and were forced to pull back, along with their escorting infantry, leaving many killed and wounded in action. The intense enemy pressure had driven many GIs from their foxholes. As they drifted toward the rear they were collected by battalion officers and put to work on secondary defensive positions.

The 45th had been pressuring the 275th to make contact and to expand the efforts of their own patrols. Each regiment was to use elements of the 45th reconnaissance troop which the G-3 said "had been placed at their disposal." The reply from the S-3 of the 275th was, "We didn't know we had a recon troop with us; we haven't even seen them."

During the day, the 361st Grenadiers had struck past Baerenthal to the west, and around 1600 hours were as far south as Wildenguth. By 1900 hours, the Germans were moving into Reipertswiller. Hopes that this was just a patrol were soon dashed. It was an attack in force. An hour later, tank-to-tank combat began.

The Zinswiller road twists in tandem with the Zintzell creek. At Teufelsbrueckerhof, the road crosses the left bank of the stream on the Teufelsbruecke, the "Devil's Bridge." Here, the 2/275th was ordered to hold the bridge at all costs but to have a platoon of engineers ready to blow up the span should disaster strike.

As Edmund C. Arnold has stated in his book, *The Trailblazers*, January 3rd and 4th were relatively quiet, but it has to be considered in context. The battalion was still on the defensive. The mountain corridor it guarded was still vital to the Germans. The outcome of the battle, this campaign, indeed the whole war, was still very much in jeopardy. The enemy was fighting the same cruelties, frozen feet and hands as well as enemy action, and forces were being drained. Many of the companies were reduced to only 20 to 30 effective riflemen. They were inadequately dressed and had no prospect of re-supply. Their movements were often far off the roads and trails with many of these units utilizing hand-drawn sleds to carry their supplies. Through the steep mountains, their radios didn't work any better than did the Americans'.

The German Operation Zinswiller had begun at daybreak on January 4th. A battalion of the 952nd Infantry had started from the northwest edge of Baerenthal to spearhead a powerful thrust to the mountain exit at Zinswiller. It took the Germans some twenty-four hours of climbing the rugged ridges, wading through deep snow and threading between thickly growing trees to reach their first objective, just four miles away on the map.

On the morning of January 5th, the enemy set up roadblocks on the Baerenthal-Zinswiller road. That was the 275th's only supply route. The Trailblazers had already been introduced to this German battalion. It was the same unit that had attacked the 2nd Battalion upon its arrival at Baerenthal.

The German high command decided to concentrate Nordwind strength in the Task Force Herren area after its thrust in the Bitche Salient had been blunted. By mid afternoon, January 5th, the 45th Division had become aware of the mounting danger on the Zinswiller road. When the 45th asked for tanks, Corps refused, stating "The General feels we can't be piddling tanks away everywhere."

Late in the afternoon, 3rd Battalion units, (mainly Company I and parts of K and M) entered the 2nd Battalion sector. They had been cut off by the enemy attack on Philippsbourg and had traveled on foot most of the night and day to find friendly forces. They were quickly incorporated into the defenses with the primary mission of eliminating the roadblocks. One roadblock was a mile west of Zinswiller and the other about 500 yards further away, less than a mile from Muehlthal, the 2nd Battalion command post. At 1400 hours, January 5th, a 30 man patrol from Company I was sent out to clear the road. U.S. tanks were coming from the southeast to assist. All precautions had to be taken to avoid a cutoff of this solitary supply route. Ammunition already had to be rationed with only two rounds to a bazooka. Food was in short supply, with chickens and canned vegetables being foraged in the small deserted communities of the area.

The battalion commander decided to personally scout for an alternate supply route. There was a treacherous mountain trail that would eventually meet the Philippsbourg - Niederbronn road. He, along with his ammunition/pioneer platoon leader, hadn't proceeded very far when they happened to see an almost invisible wire stretched across the road. The wire was placed so it would slice the throat of a rider in a jeep and cut his head off. Another wire was noticed a few yards further. The search for a new route was abandoned. It would be too hazardous, not only for the two



officers, but for anyone making the supply run. It was later revealed that these trip wires were American booby traps. The unit that placed them is unknown, but it failed to record the danger spot and to warn other U.S. elements. By nightfall, the dangerous Zinswiller road was cleared, at least for the time being.

Various units that had been attached to the 3rd battalion were assembled at Muehlthal and marched as a unit to rejoin the outfit at Philippsbourg. They marched all night through the deep snow and drifts. Arriving at daylight, they had their first hot meal since New Year's Day. The reorganization of moving into the new forward and secondary defenses showed the toll the battles had taken. Company I had only 36 soldiers fit for duty. Other units were a little better off. Company K's "new" position was about where it had dug in on January 1, after its long round-trip that had begun with the Bitche road ambush.

At Baerenthal, units were being shifted based on the belief that the danger of forward positions should be rotated among all companies. This was done under constant enemy fire. The area near the battalion command post was continually hard hit. It was learned later that the command post was under constant enemy observation.

Although the Baerenthal front was described as "static," artillery fire, snipers and patrol thrusts, as well as the sub-zero cold took its toll. One name at a time the casualty list grew. This might be considered the end of the battle of Baerenthal, but remember that the whole von Rundstedt - Nordwind Operation was what would be called "interlocking battles."

The 45th Division sector was so thinly held that the newcomer "Trailblazers" were immediately sent to the front when they arrived in the Rothbach area on January 4th. This baptism into combat was by total immersion. The Americans were using every weapon in their arsenal. As darkness fell the Trailblazers wrapped themselves in blankets and slept in the deep snow. At midnight, the men were roused from their short slumber for the promised "hot meal." The mess trucks had been on the road all day and night. When they finally arrived, the food was frozen solid. The cooks had to hack off chunks of eggs and cereal with bayonets! Snow fell throughout the night. When the 'Blazers were awakened at dawn, there was two more inches of the white stuff covering their blankets. Breakfast of K rations were heated over small campfires. Although the enemy had not attacked in the battalion sector, firing was fierce on either side.

Orders from the 45th had been confusing. Most of January 6th was spent moving the battalion from the Schneitzwald forest onto the high ground above the mountain pass at Rothbach. The terrain was rugged and the darkness complete.

In the pre-dawn hours of January 7th, a skirmish line was deployed at the foot of the first hills around Rothbach. In small waves, the 'Blazers ascended the hills without opposition. The second and third hills were climbed without enemy fire, but at the foot of the fourth ridge, the situation changed. The Germans now laid in deadly fire. German mortars found the range with multi-gun blasts causing deadly tree bursts. This is perhaps the most devastating form of enemy fire. Foxholes give physical and psychological protection against artillery shells, but tree bursts cause the shrapnel to pour vertically, like rain, so there's no place to hide.

Casualties were heavy. Enemy machine guns ambushed the litter bearers who were continuing to move in a steady cycle. Many medics earned the Purple Heart that day. The Trailblazers killed Germans by the tens, took prisoners by the score and destroyed countless enemy machine guns. The Germans were killing Americans, too. Every time the 'Blazers made a gain, the enemy counterattacked. At one point, the Trailblazers not only had the German fire to contend with, they found themselves under friendly fire.

The plan to grind the enemy between two converging 'Blazer battalions was succeeding. The 2nd of the 276th was advancing toward the east. Around noon of January 7th, they appeared on the left flank of Company I of the 274th. In the heat of battle, the Trailblazer units mistook each other for Germans and began a minor engagement. Before the damage became more serious than just a waste of ammunition, the battalion commander of the 274th was able to stop this "civil war."

On January 8th, the Grenadiers attempted another attack. As the Germans themselves reported, "This second -- and final -- time the attack failed. There remained no hope of reaching the Moder river sector and relieving (our) battalions there." The two battalions -- Wyoming and Wriggle -- had not only stopped the assault by two of the enemy's crack units, they had also removed them from any significant action in the future. Bled by the Americans, the 361st Grenadier battalion was never again committed during Nordwind. Later, during the Saar campaign, some of the remnants of the 361st did take action against the 'Blazers but only because they had been absorbed into one of the two German divisions facing the 70th there.

On January 8th, the whole battalion assembled at Rothbach and Offweiler for a hot meal. Heavy snow was falling. The drifts were as deep as the eaves, as the long columns formed in the streets of the villages and moved out toward Niederbronn at 2000 hours. It would be another night with little, if any, sleep. Behind them lay the hills that they had taken with bravery and numbing casualties.

On January 1st, the German commander of the 361st asked that his division be pulled off the line for sorely needed rehabilitation. His infantry had lost 80 percent of its strength from Trailblazer actions and the merciless weather. All the 6th SS Mountain Division elements that had been attached to the Grenadiers for the Nordwind Operation were returned to their own command.

Wingen-sur-Moder, a little town buried in the brooding mountains, was the deepest and most dangerous penetration point of Operation Nordwind. It is the place where the 70th Division earned its highest honor. The 2/274th Infantry earned the Distinguished Unit Citation streamer embroidered Wingen, France. Although part of the Division was involved in the battle of Wingen, remember that other elements of the 70th are at Philippsbourg and Baerenthal and there was bitter action from the Bulge to the Colmar Pocket.

During the first minutes of 1945, Operation Nordwind had immediate success though the Trailblazers (Task Force Herren) blunted the drive at several important points. On January 2nd, the 70th's 276th Infantry regiment had moved from positions on the Rhine to Zittersheim, where it was attached to the 45th as a VI Corps reserve asset. Its mission was to prepare supplementary defensive positions along a eleven mile stretch from Volksberg to Ingwiller, which was sought by the Germans as an exit from the mountains.

Despite the addition of the 70th Division troops, there were still alarming gaps in the American lines. The Germans were eager to exploit that weakness. On January 3rd, at daybreak, the 361st Volks Grenadiers launched a heavy attack, upon Reipertswiller, supported by the newly arrived assault guns. Although the Americans had withdrawn from Baerenthal, one battalion of Germans with assault guns would hit from the north, and would encircle the town from the west. Another attached battalion would advance toward Wimmenau, east of Wingen, and cut the road which the American forces could be expected to use. Two battalions of the 12th SS Mountain Regiment would push toward Wingen. Each of these battalions had five companies, with a total strength of 900. The 12th SS Mountain Regiment was specially trained to fight in the mountains and woods. Although they were young, they were experienced from battling the Russians in Finland. Fortunately, the attack on Reipertswiller was a failure. The German division on the right was stymied.

On January 2nd, the 12th SS Mountain took their first objective, a key road west of Reipertswiller, and their first prisoners. The next day, the German forces received the order "Take Wingen." They decided to bypass the entrenched 179th to the east and instead march through the dense forests on the flank through one of the gaps in the American lines. The 180th regiment of the 45th Division had been trucked some 40 miles from various positions in Germany to fill the gap, however, it arrived too late. The 12th SS Mountain Regiment had already passed.

At approximately 1830 hours, the 276th Infantry Regiment was warned to expect an attack from the SS battalions which had finally been discovered after their surprise cross country move. The 1st Battalion of Wriggle was alerted. Its Baker and Charlie Companies were on line north of Wingen. Able Company was preparing positions on the high ground south of the village. Bravo Company was ordered to move eastward toward Wimmenau to set up outposts on the high ground northwest of Wingen -- precisely where the SS battalions were heading. The combat experienced Germans were advancing with methodical determination.

At the top of the flat, wooded ridge, the GIs were ordered to set up the command post tent but not to dig shelters for themselves or for their machine guns. The officers feared that the noise of digging would reveal their positions to the Germans. The men of Company B returned to town to recover the overcoats and shoe-pacs that were left behind earlier for greater maneuverability. They had barely returned to their hilltop positions before the Germans started psychological warfare.

"Company! On your feet!" came an order in English from the German side.

Some of Company B, cut off from the rest of the company, slowly withdrew down the hill. That brought them into the line of fire of the 179th's machine guns. "We're Americans," they shouted, "We don't know the password. We're Americans." Fortunately, the Thunderbirds recognized them and let them through. By now, most of Company B was lost as was their equipment. The Germans encircled the company and turned the captured weapons onto their former owners with fatal results.

Company C, 1/276th had also come under severe pressure from enemy mortars. Pushed from positions north of the town, the men had fallen back into Wingen during the night. The house in which some had taken shelter was surrounded the next morning by the Germans, who demanded surrender. Facing the inevitable, approximately 30 Trailblazers did. They were immediately pressed into service as litter bearers, picking up the wounded. The Trailblazers expected to be killed themselves as they had recently learned of the massacre of some 125 American prisoners at Malmedy in Belgium.

American POWs were treated as well as conditions permitted. German accounts report 10 American officers and 400 enlisted men captured. Always precise about protocol, they squeezed the enlisted soldiers into the main Catholic church and the officers into the parsonage. The church was frigid. A few empty buckets served as the only sanitary facilities. There was very little food or water even for the Germans; therefore, the prisoners went hungry. Prisoners were relieved of watches and cigarettes (a common prize of war for both sides) along with legitimate war booty: trench knives, scarves, gloves, and occasionally boots. A greater prize was the GIs rations that provided a feast for the hungry Germans. They also helped themselves of the American stores of socks, underwear, and any other clothing that could be worn without causing the wearer to appear as a spy in enemy uniform. The Germans marveled at how well the American soldier lived.

The commander of 1st Battalion, 276th had been evacuated as a victim of extreme shock. Without a leader, the battalion was split. Company C and the few survivors of Company B were

on the north side of the railroad embankment and were separated from Companies A and D by the German forces.

By 0900 hours on January 4th, the Germans took Wingen after two hours of heavy house-to-house fighting. A half hour later the Germans had crossed the Moder and dug in on the south boundary of the village. Even though the village was captured, the Germans were unable to report their victory. The mountains were smothering the radio signals. The commander of the 361st Volks Grenadiers learned of the capture of Wingen from an intercepted American message. Wingen-sur-Moder suddenly became the focal point of German strength. The high command was determined to exploit this penetration, especially since the Bitche sector had been declared futile.

A reinforced regiment of Grenadiers was added to the German division at Wingen. The Grenadier division at Baerenthal would relieve one of the 361st Battalions, thus making the 361st available for an attack toward the Zinswiller pass. More importantly, two additional SS battalions had arrived and gone into action immediately. The regimental commanders of the 276th and the 179th were stunned by the swift SS victory. They had believed that only about 50 Germans had filtered through the gap in the American line, so they couldn't understand the strength of the enemy attack. It became obvious that an immediate counterattack was required to rescue the trapped Americans and to stop the momentum of the enemy.

Unfortunately, by January 3rd, all of the 45th Division's troops were committed. The 276th would have to counterattack. It was to be strengthened by a company of medium tanks from the 781st Tank Battalion, attached to Task Force Herren the night before. The 276th was in poor shape itself. It was stretched from Volksberg to Wimmenaeu, where its 2nd Battalion was committed. The 1st Battalion was in a perilous position in Wingen, leaving only the 3rd Battalion available.

The counterattack was planned for 1330 hours, January 4th. One platoon of tanks was to move from le Petite Pierre, through Puberg, west of Wingen, then to the railway underpass that was the gateway to the village from the south. Here, the tanks would be met by the infantry and would attempt to penetrate the narrow tunnel. The tanks carried a handicap -- the roads were icy and barely passable. Worse yet, they could not use the heavy guns because of the possibility of hitting their own men since the location of friendly forces was not known.

When the American forces arrived at the underpass, they met fire from three directions. This hasty attack against what was thought to be a small enemy force was stopped cold. The 2nd Battalion of the 274th made the three mile journey in open trucks in a hazardous night move from le Petite Pierre to Puberg. The men had been cramped and frozen from the ten hour ride, but were essentially in good physical shape.

During midmorning of January 4th, 2nd Battalion, 274th, was ordered to dig in on a line from Rosteig, two miles north, to Volksberg at the left flank of the Moder. To complicate matters, the regimental commander, Colonel Samuel G. Conley, eager for combat action, decided to personally take companies E and G to clean out the woods between Wingen and Puberg, approximately two and one-half miles to the west. Both he and the commander of the 276th were still under the impression that the German force at Wingen was a small one, so both had agreed that the Wyoming Battalion could take care of the few Germans left in the wooded area.

With the information available, the mission seemed to be one that a single company could handle well. To have a full Colonel lead the troops seemed like unnecessary theatrics. In addition, his insistence to move out immediately did not consider the welfare of the men, who had not had a meal in some eighteen hours. Only one-half of the battalion was left to complete its assigned mission. In an effort to obtain additional information about the situation, Lieutenant Colonel William R. (Bob) Cheves, Commanding Officer, Wyoming (2nd Battalion), went to the 179th Battalion command post near Hochberg. From the command post, he saw Conley with his Echo

and Golf Companies, engaged in a sharp fire fight. It was like being in a stadium watching a football game. In a long skirmish line, his two companies struggled up the steep, icy slope.

The regimental commander's "couple of hours" to clear the area, now stretched from noon into the night. In complete darkness, the men of Echo and Golf Companies finally finished the mission and limped back into Puberg. They had been out of radio contact the entire time. One 'Blazer had been killed and three wounded. German casualties were estimated to be between ten and twelve.

As the 'Blazers sprawled in utter exhaustion, a telephone message from the Regimental S-3 warned that two battalions of reinforcing SS troops were moving out of Wingen toward Puberg. The companies, bone weary, were given the mission to set up outposts east of Puberg, with the rest of the battalion to organize a defense of the village. Then new orders arrived from Task Force Herren. Golf company was to plug the gap between Wyoming and the 276th. The men of Golf Company were not enamored with the idea of repeating the punishing trek to the very place they had been a few hours before but they struggled on.

Near the top of the sharp ridge, their progress was halted by German machine guns which were lying in wait in a patch of evergreens. After that long night of no sleep, no food, and no rest the 'Blazers were now pinned down in heavy snow by unseen enemy forces some 50 yards away. To add to their discomfort, their body heat melted the snow, which then soaked their clothing. Now they were wet as well as cold, hungry and bone tired. The feared attack by the two SS battalions had proved false so Golf Company shifted from the defense to the offense. Against the stiffest of resistance they inched their way forward with Hotel Company's mortars in support. They finally came to the edge of the woods overlooking Wingen from the west.

Bisecting the Wingen-sur-Moder was a high, steep, narrow railroad embankment. It was between the northern section and the southern section where the men of the 70th were imprisoned in the Catholic church. The road from Puberg and Bitche joined just above the underpass on the north side. The roads from Zittersheim and Wimmenau met at the mouth of the railroad tunnel on the south.

Golf Company of the 274th was due west of the underpass, looking down into a deep pocket with the village inside. The German defensive perimeter made a rough oval running from northeast to southwest. Companies of the 276th made a northwesterly arc. The plan of attack for January 5th was clarified. The main effort would be made by 3rd Battalion, 276th with Company C, 1st Battalion, 276th. They would move along the railroad in a southeasterly direction, then due east along the north side of the tracks.

Preceding the attack, Mike Company would lay down a mortar barrage. From the south, Alpha Company would attack along the Zittersheim road. From the high ground, a tank platoon would cover the advance. Simultaneously, Bravo and India Companies would attempt to enter the town southward through the underpass accompanied by a platoon of tanks. Wyoming's 2nd Battalion was ordered by General Herren "to give all the help it could" to the 276th. Help was definitely needed. The Germans, now reinforced to full two battalions, had the dominant lines of fire and were inflicting terrible damage on the 70th Division. The slightest movement by a 'Blazer brought deadly bullets.

In a hasty conference, it was decided that the 276th would continue their major thrust from the north and that the 274th would attack from the west. The going was slow, hard and ultimately unsuccessful. A sharp slope, almost a cliff, rose from the north side of the railroad and from that height, the Germans were in complete control. Snipers in the woods continued to harass the Americans. Meeting with his company commanders, Lieutenant Colonel Cheves outlined his simple battle plan: "Get into town any way possible."

The battle now surged to a new fury. Fire was coming from all directions. No one knew if it was friendly or enemy. One of the American tanks coming from the south stopped 300 yards away, swung its main gun, and started blasting away at Wyoming positions. Frantic messages to the 276th finally halted the fire before any serious damage was done. By the early afternoon of January 5th, a squad from Golf Company, 274th, had worked its way into the houses at the western edge of town. There they found several of the 276th men wounded. Fighting house to house, the 'Blazers suffered grim casualties. Ten men were either killed or wounded.

The 276th had begun their attack at 0800 and it was now late in the afternoon. From Golf Company's position on the high ground to the west, the officers saw an incredible sight. Across an open field at the southwest edge of town, a platoon of Trailblazers had formed a skirmish line with the men about five yards apart. They advanced across the icy ground toward the first row of houses. They moved slowly; there was no enemy fire. The men were halfway across when the bark of German machine guns came from the houses. The entire line fell. It was impossible to tell if they were killed or wounded. Moving with excruciating caution, the men crawled to the protection of some shallow ditches. However, three corpses lay in the shooting gallery.

January 5th ended in total frustration. It was the second day that the Trailblazers had failed to dislodge the enemy from the main part of the village and the dominating high ground. Not only was Task Force Herren in jeopardy, but the entire Seventh Army could be in danger. The stalled attack was no reflection on Task Force Herren for they managed to badly maul the Germans. The enemy they faced was the elite of the still formidable German Army. Handpicked and well seasoned, the mountain regiment had equally experienced commanders. And although the latest American Intelligence estimates had placed approximately 200 enemy in the village, there were actually 800 battlewise German soldiers in Wingen.

General Herren was orchestrating the Wingen operation so for the very first time, the task force was directly under his command. Late in the night of January 5th, General Herren called Lieutenant Colonel Cheves to the 276th command post at Zittersheim. Then General Herren made a very unorthodox decision. He placed Lieutenant Colonel Cheves in command of the entire Wingen operation. This no doubt was an insult to Colonel Morgan, commander of the 276th, who took no part in the planning being conducted at his own command post. Nor was Colonel Conley, commander of the 274th, chosen for this critical command perhaps due to concerns with his other two battalions, miles apart, at Philippsbourg and near Rothbach.

Both the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 276th were attached to the 2nd Wyoming Battalion along with a company of tanks. This was equivalent of a whole regiment reinforced, placed under the command of a lieutenant colonel. General Herren explained the mission by saying, "There are only a few Germans in the town, no more than 50, I'd say. You should have the place cleared by noon." General Herren also explained that the rescue of the American prisoners was a top priority. He cautioned Lieutenant Colonel Cheves against directing American artillery into the south end of the village, lest our men become victims of friendly fire.

The General continued with more precise instructions: all men were to have hand grenades; flame-thrower teams were to be organized; and showing his typical concern for the men, General Herren ordered that there be a hot meal before the attack. The plan for the assault on January 6th was reviewed. Cheves' battalion would strike from its present position west of town. The 3/276th would continue its present course of attack, paralleling the 274th and seeking to drive the Germans off the deadly high ground north of the village. The 1/276 (-) would stay in its present position south of town, on-call for offensive action, but would primarily be responsible to respond to a German counterattack.

One other crucial decision had to be made. In General Herren's opinion, there were only a few Germans left in the village so it would be best to attack with two companies abreast, simply overrunning the enemy. However, the opinions of the men on the scene were that the German

force was a much stronger one, so the most prudent tactic would be to attack with one company, learn the location of the enemy, then send in the rest of the battalion.

The latter plan was chosen, and Foxtrot Company, 274th was picked to spearhead the assault. At 0745, January 6th, a 15 minute artillery barrage would start the Wyoming's 2nd Battalion attack to the south side of Wingen. At 0800, Foxtrot Company would move with a platoon of Hotel Company's heavy machine guns in direct support. Additionally, one section of 81mm mortars from Hotel Company was organized into bazooka teams and attached to Foxtrot Company. Echo Company would follow behind, mopping up. The rest of Hotel Company was in general support directly commanded by Cheves.

One platoon of heavy machine guns was positioned to fire down the tracks and to protect the left flank against counterattacks from the enemy's high ground. During the battle, Herren ordered this platoon to move closer to the fighting. It did so, thus leaving the flank open and unprotected when the enemy counterattacked later that day. Foxtrot Company, staying in the woods as long as possible, would be ready to move up the Zittershiem road to the underpass. There the men would split along the two streets eastward through the main part of the town. This was the plan of attack.

As the clock ticked, at 0745 hours the artillery opened up. At 0800 hours the command "move out" was heard. At first, not a shot was fired. Maybe the General was correct in his assumption that the Germans were pulling out from the threat. Just then, the German machine guns sounded like jack-hammer staccato. The American guns, an octave lower, returned fire. For approximately 10 minutes there was heavy machine gun fire from both sides. Neither side won this round. As usual, the decision would come from the efforts of the riflemen.

Foxtrot Company had reached the underpass and turned right. As they reached the first house, a burst of enemy fire killed the platoon sergeant and wounded the company commander. As the tempo increased, the casualties were coming too fast to single out. House-to-house combat had begun. While the soldiers always feared the dreaded fire from high positions, here they found a new source of danger -- fire from basement windows.

With such close range fighting, it would have been most difficult for artillery to single out enemy fire from friendly. However, the Germans were still out of contact with their division and didn't have artillery support either. All radio contact with Foxtrot Company had been lost. Although there weren't any mountains to baffle the air waves, the radio set had become an enemy casualty. Another was sent down and contact quickly reestablished.

All the men in the lead platoon had been hit. The company commander was evacuated and his successor was killed. The men of Foxtrot Company were told to hold, and that they would be relieved with Echo and Golf Companies. For the moment, Foxtrot Company's work was done -- well done. The second wave of attackers were due to move out at 1300 hours. Golf Company would advance on the left alongside the railroad and Echo Company would parallel the move to the right. While the preparations were being made for the wave of the second attackers, there was no lull in the village. The battalion mounted its second attack promptly at 1300 hours and hoped to clear the town by 1800 hours that evening. The Trailblazers had already captured 50 German prisoners, the original G-2 estimate, but the Nazi resistance did not lessen.

The 2/276th had been unable to take control of the dominating heights to the north. Concealed by the thick woods, the enemy poured on murderous fire to the American left flank. The Trailblazers demonstrated a classic infantry tactic: lay down all the fire you can and keep moving. From the cemetery on the right and the towering hills to the left, cruel fire infiltrated Golf and Echo Companies as they moved. Golf fired and advanced but Echo became pinned down. Finally, the

armor arrived to give some support and, with mortar fire from Hotel Company to the west, Echo Company's attack proceeded.

Meantime, danger was developing in the north. The advance of 3/276th (actually one and one half companies, with Charlie Company attached) was so slowed by stubborn enemy fighting that its line was some 500 yards behind Golf Company, creating a gap that could become a disaster. The Trailblazers hadn't been able to use artillery support for fear of hitting their own troops. But now, all available artillery fire was brought to bear on the high ground in the north. The situation, which had seemed promising just before, suddenly changed.

General Herren was sure that the Germans were trying to reinforce their troops. He wanted the village taken before fresh troops could arrive. Golf and Echo Companies were ordered to hold up and organize defenses for the night. Before the troops could respond, the Germans took the initiative. A screaming wave of men came rushing down the hill, crossing the railroad and hurdling down the steep embankment. Hitting the 'Blazers' left flank, they cut off the advance elements of Golf Company. The village was now a scene of an apocalypse. Buildings were burning, tracer bullets etched the dark sky, and explosions literally rocked the ground where they were standing. From the hotel rose a tower of black smoke, a boxcar of coal residue that had been delivered a few weeks ago had caught fire.

The civilians, huddled in the basement since the battle began, were forced to flee or be suffocated. They dodged bullets as they ran from building to building before finally reaching the relative safety of a glass factory. The Germans strode up and down the streets, not knowing the Americans were hiding in the building. The Americans kept quiet. Any response would have pinpointed their locations and the Germans would blast them to bits.

By 2100 hours, January 6th, the battle had quieted; the battalion had held. The situation was still perilous, with both companies losing contact with their forward elements. Three sleepless nights and a lack of regular meals were starting to take their toll. The weather stayed sadistic and heavy snow felt intensifying misery and impeding movement. Neither side had won the battle, but the Americans were determined that victory would be theirs.

At 0900 hours, January 7th, jump off would begin. The enemy would expect an attack at dawn and might be surprised by a later move. There would be no preceding artillery barrage. They would proceed along the same route as the day before.

Golf Company's first objective was a house where some 20 fit and 15 wounded soldiers had been isolated all night. An effective coordination of armor and infantry was planned. Armor would blast a house, then the infantry would charge in, throwing grenades. House by house they advanced. German soldiers surrendered and were hustled to the rear. Echo Company stayed even with Golf's advance.

The attacking soldiers began to smell victory, however, the battalion commanders had little time to enjoy the optimism. The night before, a German courier had slipped through the lines, with an order for the two SS battalions to disengage and to return over the same mountains they had crossed to capture the town of Wingen. They would leave behind the wounded in the care of a medical officer who had commandeered American medics to help. The hundreds of American enlisted prisoners would be left behind, jammed into the church. Only eight to ten captured American officers would be taken back into German territory.

Under heavy American attack all day, the SS mountain battalions couldn't disengage until after dark. The retreat began about 2100 hours of January 6th and by 0600 hours the next day, the Germans were out of contact with American forces. As the SS battalions got themselves organized, the beating they had taken became apparent. The 3/12th SS Regiment had a combat



strength of 450 when it arrived in Wingen. Now its strength was only 110. All of its officers, except the commander and his adjutant, were casualties. One company only had one noncommissioned officer and seven enlisted men left. There was only enough ammunition to give each machine gun 70 rounds. The other German battalion was in just as bad of shape. It suffered some 650 casualties against the previously untested Trailblazers.

When they emerged from the woods at the road to Kohlbutte, the 3/12th SS Battalion marched to its new positions, just south of that town and the 1st Battalion moved eastward toward Rothbachthal. German intelligence proved to be as accurate as the Americans. The area was supposed to be free of American troops. The Germans quickly learned this was not true and retreated under American fire.

Against the relatively few Germans who remained in Wingen, Echo and Golf Companies were making steady advances. Unaware that the Catholic church held so many captives, the men from Echo Company advanced gingerly. Earlier, that building had been vigorously defended and Echo expected the same resistance. As the men poised for a grenade assault, the church doors swung open and Americans poured out. Just how many captives were released remains uncertain.

The Germans had estimated 400 prisoners, the Americans 250. Neither side had an accurate accounting. Most of the prisoners were from the 179th Regiment of the 45th Division, captured in the first surprise assault on Wingen. For three days and nights they were held without food or water. There were also many 70th Division men in the group. All joined in a jubilant liberation.

The 3/276th at the north had prearranged to send a signal flare every 15 minutes to show its location. This allowed artillery to blast the northern hill without endangering its own forces. The white bursts of the flares marked the steady progression being made without opposition.

By 1200 hours, the men of the 274th had reached the far end of the town and were closing in on buildings on the outskirts. Wingen is ours -- what was left of it! Only one building was undamaged; all the rest were in various stages of destruction.

After every battle, there are chores to be done. Before the 276th could pull out, they had to set up defenses in the north. Each house was searched for German resistance. Graves registration soldiers were identifying the dead. The wounded from both armies were being evacuated. Mail clerks were on hand to deliver the treasured letters from home to the men, still in full battle gear.

Wyoming's 2nd Battalion would be awarded the distinguished unit citation for its victory. All Trailblazers could take pride in the achievement, especially the men of the 276th who had fought at the White battalion's side as did the heavy weapons units who were effective in support. To quote a veteran commander of the 3/179th regiment, "I sure would like to have a platoon of Trailblazers. They're the damndest fellows I've ever seen in action for their first time!"

There was little time for celebration as they wearily trudged back over the hills toward Puberg. Totally fatigued, the men were lured on only by the promises of a warm meal, a bed in some type of shelter, a night's sleep unbroken by enemy fire, and time to rest. Little did they realize as they were marching through the snow, orders had come to 2nd Battalion headquarters. "Assemble your battalion in Puberg. Trucks will arrive. Proceed to Oberbronn, arriving there before daylight tomorrow."

What an ending for a momentous victory! For an outfit originally assigned to the expected quiet of the VI Corps reserve, the 276th saw a lot of French geography, a lot of different commands, and a lot of action.

On New Year's Day, 1945, the 276th began its musical chair routine. Now attached to the 79th (Lorraine) Division, the regiment moved by motor and by foot to Camp d'Oberhoffen. They remained there on alert to move into the Mouterhouse area some six miles west of Philippsbourg. On January 2nd, it was reattached to the 45th Division. One platoon from India Company was even further detached and assigned to the 180th Infantry Regiment, where it stayed during the entire battle of Wingen. Still in the Corps reserve, the 276th assignment was to hold a defensive line from Ingwifler to Wimmenau to Volksberg, an arc of roughly four miles from northwest to north of Wingen. During the night of January 2nd, Echo Company, which had been defending roadblocks on the Wimmenau-Ingwiller road, was hit by a strong force of Nordwind infiltrators. They suffered roughly 50 percent casualties.

At 0500 hours, January 4th, the enemy struck full force. An hour later word reached the regimental command post of the fate of Bravo Company. As it was moving into position, it was ambushed and attacked from the rear. Although Alpha Company was dispatched to assist, there was no trace of Bravo when Alpha arrived on the scene.

After Wingen was finally won, while the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 276th, and the 2/274th were engaged in the mopping up the town, the men from Bravo Company were successfully liberated with several other American prisoners. The 2/276th was attached to the 313th Infantry and had been ordered to attack the strongly held town of Litchenberg. On January 8th, the regimental headquarters moved to Mulhausen, a mile east of Ingwiller, where it regained its 2nd Battalion after the Litchenberg victory.

The next day, January 9th, the regiment launched an attack to take four hills southwest of Baerenthal. The attack started at 0700 hours. For three hours the men of the 276th struggled through the rough terrain without any enemy opposition. Then Charlie Company started to receive enemy sniper fire from Obermuehlthal, about a half mile southeast from Baerenthal, and the 2/276th ran into stiff resistance. Obermuehlthal threw a wrench into the machinery. Both the terrain and the enemy opposition made it impractical to bypass the town. Because of this stiff opposition, the American force was slowed down. The enemy made several counterattacks and at the same time threatened the command post of 1/276th. Because there were elements of the 275th in the area, it was impossible to lay in artillery fire. Again it was up to the infantry. They were able to clear the town by 1700 hours. Over all, the attack had been successful in its initial objectives. During the night both sides were actively patrolling the area.

At dawn January 10th, the attack resumed with 2nd Battalion on the left, 1st Battalion on the right, and 3rd Battalion in reserve. The assault continued for the third day against heavy artillery, and machine gun and small arms fire. The men of the 276th proceeded through a jumble of hills so indistinguishable that they didn't even have names. The fourth day, January 12th, began with the capture of Hill 415, at approximately 0030 hours. The main drive started at 0900 hours. The 2/276th was pinned down by enemy forces, but the 3/276th pushed ahead. This opened a gap at the flank. Company Lima, the reserve, plugged the gap. According to the regimental report, the day's progress was minimal. The 3/276th's attack took pressure off the isolated Golf and Foxtrot Companies which allowed them to break up heavy enemy resistance on Hill 403. Late on January 12th, came the order that the regiment was again to move to relieve units of the 157th Infantry and the 36th Engineers.

In this new position, the left flank of the 276th was at Jaegerthal and its right at Lembach. Regimental headquarters was at Woerth for two days and ordered to move again. Throughout the night of January 15-16th, the 276th (Bloody Axe) moved to the vicinity of Farebersville, where the regimental headquarters was again set up. Despite the devastating weather with constant snowfall and plummeting temperatures, the Farebersville mission was relatively quiet. On a line from Emmersweiffer to Busbach, the 276th strengthened defenses. Although the Germans were fairly quiet, the regimental S-2 believed they were just regaining strength to launch new attacks.

Active Trailblazer patrols were to keep them off balance, but the dug-in enemy was improving positions as he maintained his own harassing patrols. The road to the 276th's Saarbrücken victory was still long and foreboding. The Trailblazers got a bitter taste of retreat in late January 1945. Call it a strategic withdrawal, a shortening of defensive lines, or an advance to the rear, it's hard for a soldier to give back hard won ground. It's even worse when the bitterly contested areas are abandoned to the enemy in a decision made by far away commanders.

Mauled and decimated, German troops were still initiating attacks from the north. They now unleashed new threats -- to Haguenau from the north, to the Gamsheim bridgehead in the east, and into Strasbourg from the Colmar Pocket in the south. There was little rest and recuperation in Niederbronn for the Trailblazers.

On January 8th an alert came from General Herron, "Expect a strong attack from the northwest tonight or early in the morning. 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 274th prepare to counterattack towards P-bourg and Baerenthal." By January 9th, the crisis had defined itself. The Germans had broken through at Colmar at the American rear. North of Strasbourg, the SS mountain troops, the Panzers, and the Grenadiers were punching. Niederbronn appeared to be the ultimate target. The Trailblazers were given another hold-at-all-costs mission. Pausing briefly for a rare but hot meal in Niederbronn, the 3/274th left the town at 0500 hours on January 11th for positions to the right of 1/274th. The four mile march took five hours to complete. The trails were slippery and snow drifts were high. For ten days, Task Force Herren's worst enemy was the weather. Not since Valley Forge had an American army suffered from such cold as did the Trailblazers on the German front. This was Europe's worst winter in over 50 years. The average company strength in the task force was barely 50 percent effective. Despite these handicaps, the battalions kept making small-scale attacks that kept the enemy off balance and unable to launch his planned offense.

The gap between 1/274th at Phillipsbourg and 3/274th to the east was worrisome. A patrol from Bravo Company was sent out to make contact with Lima Company in their defensive positions. Before they found them, the patrol ran into a German patrol and a firefight broke out. This quickly developed into a full-fledged attack on Bravo Company. The assault was finally driven back but the enemy waited only momentarily before calling in a heavy artillery barrage. The enemy was far from quitting, proven by the Trailblazers losses of two dead, three wounded, and seven missing. The losses were more than 20 percent of the company's effective strength. Yet in the "big picture" there isn't any recognition of the engagement.

Shortly after 0900 hours, the Germans let loose with a battalion sized attack, however, Bravo and Charlie Companies met them with a generous amount of small arms and machine gun fire. After a long engagement, the stubborn Germans withdrew. The Trailblazers had held again. Encounters like this were happening all along the Alsatian line. They were demoralizing to the soldier. In combat in a town or village, one could usually see the immediate goal, like a building. In the wilderness above Niederbronn, it was like fighting through a room full of cobwebs.

In the dense woods, the enemy was invisible. There were no lines. The next round could come from any direction. Here, to the infantryman on the ground, there was no goal to attack, and no place to go. Where was the front? By this time on January 11th, the enemy artillery was rolling in wave after wave as the German Infantry was repulsed. Day after day, the enemy attacked; day after day, the Trailblazers held.

The conflict finally waned. The Trailblazers had won. Fighting on nameless hills on nameless ridges, the imminent danger to Phillipsbourg was averted, at least momentarily. The men of the 274th still had the Germans by the ears but Task Force Herren's position was perilous. Enemy pressure continued from the north, and the push upward from Strasbourg threatened to cave in the entire American defense east of the Vosges.

This possibility added importance to the front now defended by Trailblazer regiments. The corridors through the mountains that the task force now defended, could give the Panzers a side door to outflank the U.S. defenses on the Rhine river. The 274th couldn't push forward; it didn't even have enough men to mount an attack. Even if it did, any advance would leave unprotected flanks, unless everyone else moved up. On the other hand, any pull back would expose the regiments on either side of the 274th. The only thing left to do was hang-on!

Between patrols mounted by both the Trailblazers and the Germans, and heavy artillery fires, the 'Blazers strengthened the positions they had taken over from the 45th Division. Daytime movement was impossible. AR rations and ammunition had to be brought in at night and even this was a hazardous chore. German machine guns would fire unexpectedly at any hour. The weapons demanded constant attention, lest they be frozen when the enemy attacked. All moveable parts were constantly moved so they would not become immovable. Any trace of snow had to be removed before it became ice. Troops were being shuffled constantly to adjust to the changing situation along the Seventh Army front and rear.

The 103rd (Cactus) Division sent a regiment to take over the 274th positions. As soon as they arrived the orders were changed and the Cactus troops were diverted eastward to the threatened Haguenau area. The same thing happened when the 2/274th began to relieve the battered 1/274th. Some of the companies had completed the switch; others were awaiting their starting signals. Then came the order to hold everything! Then came another new order for the entire talent to pull back. As soon as the 274th started to pull back, it received new orders again to relieve the 179th (Thunderbird) regiment north of Wingen. By now, these "fresh" 70th Division troops were in worse shape than the men they were to relieve.

Two days later, January 24th, this procedure began again. The 274th would be relieved by a regiment from the 35th Division. In turn, they would relieve 45th Division elements in the Wimmenau area. Brand new men just arrived from Marseilles and the battalions finally received their first reinforcements. Not nearly enough men arrived to bring the units to full strength but were welcome nonetheless. After three days, the 274th began another of the exhausting moves. This time the regiment was to go to Walhambach to be attached to the 35th Division under General Patton's Third Army. This was not a normal move for the transport trucks arrived on time. After the 12 mile, it returned to normal. As the 'Blazers were unloading the trucks, there came the now familiar order; "Hold everything!"

The next order to withdraw was as much a surprise to the Americans on the line as it was to the enemy. The 274th was to pull back to Obersoultzbach. For the regiment, the move was miserable. The order was received during the day, but the move started at night. Snow began to fall and the wind increased. The trails and roads were frozen and slippery. The men were threatened by their own vehicles. This was mayhem in the daylight under the best of conditions, but on this stormy night, collisions were frequent and disabled vehicles were simply pushed into the ditches and abandoned. As usual, the promised trucks didn't show up to transport the men of the 274th. The march lengthened and lengthened. The 274th marched all night and some 14 miles before the transport trucks arrived.

It was broad daylight when the regiment finally reached Obersoultzbach. Without time for food, water, or rest, the men of the 274th, still attached to the 103rd, were ordered to dig a second defensive line. The blizzard still raged. The snow fell so fast it obliterated the landmarks used by the officers used to determine their positions. The rest of Task Force Herren was now in St. Jean Rohrbach, west of Bitche, in the XXI Corps area but the 274th stayed under the VI Corps command.

On January 21st, the 274th was attached again to the 45th Division. By this time, the Thunderbirds and Trailblazers were old buddies and were pleased to be fighting with each other

again. Unfortunately, "attached" units are military orphans. The new commanders look upon the attached as fresh troops, generally unaware or unheeding of the real situation.

Next, the 274th would be attached to the 100th Division. The new area was around Montbronn, which had been under air attacks and threat from enemy armor. Although the 274th was technically in reserve, it was taking the heaviest artillery fire it had yet experienced. When they finally had the chance to look at the map, they knew why. They were only a few miles away from the fortress of Bitche, from which the Germans had launched their massive January attacks. Bitche was a key in the French Maginot Line. The Germans had turned it around and made it a defensive hedgehog, bristling with artillery. The 274th found billets in the little villages about a mile behind the lines. This was a definite welcome from the foxholes and trenches but it wasn't rest and relaxation either. Of course, the grateful Trailblazers observed, "at least the 100th didn't shove us into the front lines to give their own troops a rest."

Task Force Herren had earned its first battle star in the Vosges for the Ardennes/Alsace campaign. They came into combat inexperienced and confused. In the cruel mountains and unrelenting weather, the 70th Division Trailblazers had proven themselves against the enemy's best. January of 1945 was the most costly single month that the Seventh Army experienced during all of World War II. The Trailblazers has sustained more than 1,100 casualties. Although battered, bloody, and badly understrength, they were now a confident fighting team, ready for new assignments in a new sector. They would go to the crucial Saarland, where they would earn two more battle stars.

The 70th found the terrain of the Lorraine province more reminiscent of Oregon than that of the Alsatian mountains. One thing that had not changed was the enemy. The 6th SS Mountain Division that had landed so many blows in the Vosges was now defending the Siegfried line that opposed the Trailblazers on the Saar front, both the 275th and 276th Infantry Regiments were under the command of General Herren. The 274th was still attached to the 100th Division in the lower Vosges. The two regiments under General Herren were assigned to the left flank of the Seventh Army, and were shoulder to shoulder with Patton's Third Army. The Seventh's defensive line ran nearly due east-west and roughly parallel to the Saar river.

Next to the Rhine, the Saar was the most formidable natural obstacle guarding the borders of the Fatherland. On its north bank was Saarbrücken, a German prize that Hitler would not give up without a struggle. Although Watch on the Rhine and Nordwind had been stopped cold, no one breathed a sigh of relief. The troops needed to be ready to fight an army that could mount the Ardennes offensive when Allied optimists had spoken about "bringing the boys back home by Christmas." The same army that could find men, materials, and the fighting spirit to launch the von Runstedt attack so shortly after Bastogne might at the very moment be coiling to strike again in the Saarland.

On January 16th, both the 275th and 276th, after relieving elements of the 103rd, began to organize positions from which the 70th would launch its drive into Saarbrücken. The same day, Hitler moved his headquarters underground in Berlin, resolved to lead the German nation into final destruction rather than surrender. His generals, by tradition and by training, not to mention the threat of summary execution, obeyed his orders. The German First Army, facing the United States Seventh Army, was depleted. All of its reserves had been spent in the failed January offensive so it would now lie in wait, with "stand and die" orders in elaborate defenses. It was wounded, but still a deadly force. The Siegfried line was its back bone.

The regiments constantly sent out patrols trying to anticipate what the enemy might do. These patrols not only felt out enemy defenses but gave excellent training to the new replacements. The patrol's mission was to estimate the enemy's strength, evaluate the kinds, numbers, and condition of his weapons and equipment, and apply combat savvy to determine what was going on. With the mission accomplished, coming back was just as dangerous as going out. You may

be shot by jumpy Americans as easily as trigger-happy Germans. A patrol's departure and return were routinely coordinated with frontline units to minimize this risk but few things in combat are routine. Patrols were breath-holding moments for most GIs.

Meanwhile, the 274th hadn't given a passing thought to settling down. The men were pawns, constantly moving on the chessboard of the Vosges. For two days, they stayed in positions that the 179th had dug in the mountains north of Wingen. Then came the familiar and inevitable: move on to relieve another outfit! Elements of the 35th (Santa Fe) Division would relieve the 274th, which in turn, would take over the defenses near Wimmeneau from the 45th. As the month of February dawned, there was a change in the weather.

For several days, the men reveled in the fact that they didn't have to contend with the damnable snow and the cold of the past weeks. The snow had melted but it was still cold enough to inflict misery. As every infantryman learns, battles are never fought in good weather. It's always bad with the only difference being how bad. Now instead of snow, it was mud: deep, sticky mud. It was boot-top high, slippery and gluey. You had to pull your foot out with each step. For everyone concerned, the mud proved to be as formidable a handicap as the snow. Besides, it stunk!

With the new month came welcome news. General Barnett, the rest of the 70th Division staff, Division artillery, and special troops had arrived from the States. On February 3rd, Task Force Herren was dissolved and the 70th Division was to become a unit again. It took almost a week for the 274th to close out its responsibilities with the 100th Division. They finally arrived in the Trailblazers area around St. Jean Rohrbach on the 9th of February and the 70th was complete again.

The reunion made the line troops happy. They knew they would soon be going into heavy combat and it would be good to have the backing of the troops with whom they had trained and with whom they had developed excellent teamwork and esprit d'corps. They would no longer have to be shuttled around by absentee commanders, nor would they have to work with strangers. Now every man in the intricate mechanism that is an infantry division wore the same shoulder patch. "We are the 70th. We are a team again."

The Battle of the Bulge and Operation Nordwind were now just costly interruptions to General Eisenhower's master strategy. Everyone, from the newest replacement in the 70th's rear to Hitler himself knew that there would soon be another Allied offensive. The final thrust to the heart of the Third Reich was anticipated. However, massive attacks require massive preparation so until the assault could be mounted, the 70th and the other divisions would have to work side-by-side to keep up the military initiative and stop the enemy from mounting his own surprise offensive.

These were frustrating days. Hard-won territory was lost to the enemy, then recaptured, lost and recaptured again during the 70th's first two weeks together. In many ways, February 6th was typical of 'Blazer operations in this period for several independent actions took place simultaneously. The 'Blazers had two separate missions: one was to capture as many prisoners as possible for interrogation, and the other was to kill as many of the enemy as possible, one of the constant goals of combat.

Keeping those missions in mind, the 70th set out to take the German held town of Oeting, separated from the southeast section of Forbach by a mile of forest. In the first phase, the 70th was to take the high ground south and east of Oeting. The second phase was to take the heights to the west and north. Thirdly, they were to capture the town.

The slush and deep mud made progress difficult. Visibility was extremely poor and contact between the men was difficult. Each attacker wore a white armband as token identification. Within the first half-hour, the 'Blazers ran into the enemy's barbed-wire defenses which they blasted with

bangalore torpedoes. The first phase of the attack was successful. By 0200 hours, the companies were at the enemy trenches engaged in fighting hand-to-hand. By 0500 hours, Echo and Foxtrot Companies of the 276th had their objective and, in less than five hours, the rest of the 276th held the heights all around. The town of Oeting itself was defended tenaciously and enemy artillery pounded the attacking Americans. The Germans held. Meeting another of their objectives the attackers sent 35 POWs back for intelligence questioning.

At daylight on February 7th, the enemy at Oeting opened with artillery fire and the German infantry launched a counterattack on the Americans on the high ground. This was stopped with intense fighting but similar counterattacks continued throughout the day. As evening approached, barrages of artillery and rockets were fired. While the Germans had moved their defensive line some 300 yards north of Oeting, their counterattacks during the evening took back the lost ground. Oeting still belonged to the enemy and reinforcements were coming from German units in Spichern, three miles north. Although no real estate was gained, the operation was considered successful. The bold and aggressive raids obtained valuable information on enemy strength, disposition, and tactics.

All three regiments joined on the front line on the 9th of February. The 276th was on the left, the 274th in the center, and the 275th was on the right. On the 70th's left flank, southwest of Saarbrücken, was the 101st Cavalry Group, which was the western anchor of the XV Corps of the Seventh Army. It linked General Patch's Seventh Army and General Patton's Third Army. At the Trailblazers' right, in the Saargemines sector, was the 63rd Division.

The last unit to join the 70th was the 274th Infantry Regiment. They set up their command post at Farebersville on February 9th. Its first task was to train the newly arriving replacements, most of whom were sadly lacking the basic infantry skills. Armor and infantry coordination tests were conducted during this period and the regiment performed so well that the Army pictorial services documented the performance in both still and motion pictures.

The highest compliment that can be paid to a unit during combat is to receive the order to lead the attack. This honor was given to the 70th Division shortly after it was reconstituted in Europe. Some nations spearhead attacks with their poorest troops but not the Americans. They put their finest men at the cutting edge. For their brave exploits as Task Force Herren, the 70th Division Trailblazers earned the distinction of being the first to be committed against the toughest of German defensive complexes: the "holy ground" of Spicheren Heights, the Siegfried Line and the Saar River.

The 70th Division was to attack through the Siegfried Line and take the commanding ridges that overlooked Saarbrücken. They then would cross the Saar River and take the city. This would open the way to the very heart of the Third Reich, where the Seventh Army would make the final death thrust.

Elsewhere in the European Theater of Operations (ETO), the Allies were on the move. Farthest north, both British and Canadian forces were slowly pushing back a determined German army. The three other American armies were also pushing the Germans. The lines in the Ardennes were back to where they had been before the Battle of the Bulge. Only the Seventh Army was in a defensive stance. This was about to change.

The Seventh Army's immediate goal was "to rectify and shorten the present lines." This meant straightening out two prominent dents in the American lines: one at Welferding in the 63rd Division sector and the other at Gros Rederching in the 44th Division area. Both were to the east of the 70th Division. As these two divisions attacked to iron out the bulges, the 70th kept abreast by moving its entire front forward. All three regiments would be on the line when joining the XV

Corps offensive. This was a preparatory move to the Seventh Army offensive that would soon begin.

It began a month later, on February 15th, with the 44th Division jumping off at 0645 hours. On D+2, the 63rd Division immediately to the right, along with the 70th Division, would attack. As General Barnett stated, "The 274th will make the main effort, with the 276th at the left and the 275th on the right." A battalion of medium tanks was attached to the Division for the assault. A heavy artillery barrage on the afternoon of February 16th would set the stage for the jump-off the next morning.

The spearheading 274th was to capture the ridges of Kreuzberg and Forbachenberg, keys to the assault on Forbach and Saarbrücken. This was the strongest part of the Siegfried line. Surprise and speed were essential so that the ridges could be taken before the Germans could pull in reinforcements. The 275th was assigned to take the town of Etzlingen, but the line that divided the 274th's sector from the 275th's ran directly through the center of town. The two regimental commanders agreed that this was an unnecessary complication: one regiment should have the whole town. Reluctant as each commander was to volunteer to take the town, they agreed that dual responsibility was an untenable situation. Only one command should be concerned with Etzlingen. General Barnett agreed, but he did not make the appropriate assignment.

The council-of-war's decisions made on February 15th were kept a secret. It wasn't until after midnight that all of the formal orders were duplicated and sent by messenger to each of the battalion commanders. Staff members worked throughout the night, checking on the many details needing completion prior to a major offensive.

On February 16th, the Trailblazers' preparations were done at a quick yet controlled tempo. The last of the division artillery, a company of medium tanks, and an attached 4.2 inch chemical mortar unit were placed to give the needed support to the infantry. Many of the armored units had just arrived from the Colmar Pocket where they had helped liberate the last of the captive French cities and towns.

There wasn't much sleep the night of February 16th. The veterans of the Vosges knew what was ahead; the new men imagined the hazards of combat. All were afraid as every soldier fears his rendezvous with death, but they were ready and eager. The task of the 70th would be hazardous. The barrier of the Saar river was reinforced by the formidable Siegfried line, armed by the 'Blazers' old foe, the 6th SS Mountain Division. All of the enemy positions were connected by narrow trenches that allowed riflemen to move safely to any of the threatened points. As if this barrier wasn't enough, there were rows of surgically sharp wire entanglements and acres of mine fields.

Beyond lay the Saar, some six miles distant. This was the German border that Hitler ordered be defended to the death. Fog rolled in as the attacking companies lined up in the cold morning darkness. The heaviest American barrage the Trailblazers had ever experienced was roaring overhead for several deadly minutes before jump-off.

By the end of the first day, all the 274th's objectives were taken. The 1st Battalion of the 275th had taken its objectives in and around Lixingen and drove the enemy from the town into the Marchwald woods. The 2/275th reported success for the mission closing in on the Brandenbusch woods. The 3rd Battalion had cleared the forest. By late afternoon, the towns of Lixing and Ruhling were shelled heavily but the road from Lixing to Grossbliederstroff was cleared of mines so it could be used for the next morning's attack. The 276th regiment was fighting in familiar territory around Oeting. Bravo Company had gained a small foothold in the village. The 1st Battalion, after its initial success in taking the Kleinwald-Fahbert-Kelsberg Hills, was pinned down by a battery of four self-propelled 88s. Late in the day, the 88s forced Bravo Company to



withdraw from Oeting and dig in south, where other companies were also preparing defensive positions. Intense patrolling was carried out all night across the regiment's front to keep the enemy from attempting any type of counterattack.

By February 18th, a wide gap between the 274th's right flank and the 275th became a problem. It gave far too much freedom of movement to the enemy tanks coming out of Etzlingen. They rolled back and forth, pouring damaging fire on the entire length of the American line. All during the day, transportation of ammunition, weapons, and supplies was both difficult and hazardous. The roads were cratered by the constant shelling. Crossing the deep antitank ditch of the Siegfried Line was a major undertaking. Finally, the 70th Division engineers were finally able to bridge it under enemy fire.

When the 3/274th had gained its objective atop Kretzberg by 1200 hours, it had a perfect view of two towns which would become famous names in Trailblazer history: Forbach and Stiring-Wendel. At its right, the 2/274th had much rougher going. The mud was so deep that the men didn't know if they should walk, wade, or swim. The trees were thick and the enemy fought with deadly determination. The battalion's right flank was exposed to enemy tank fire from Etzlingen. Twice the 88s drove the Americans back and twice they returned. By the evening of the 18th, the battalion's objective was still a long way off. The enemy had to be driven back so that the 'Blazers could drive down the north slope and cut the strategic Metz road that ran along the base of the ridge.

This was just another day in the life of the combat infantryman but in actuality, it was a series of firefights and countless acts of heroism. During the day, the 'Blazers took almost 200 German prisoners. Among them were men from a bicycle platoon and from a battle training platoon of the 861st Volks Grenadier Regiment. This indicated that the enemy had no appreciable reserves in the immediate vicinity and had to draw its replacements from a considerable distance. The high ground of the Kretzberg was so important that the whole night of the 18th was spent in preparing for another push the next morning.

There was little change in the dangerous daily routine. The troops were up before dawn and jumped off for another ridge. To the left, the 3/276th aimed at Schiossberg and started that push at 0830 hours. The 1/276th, assigned to take the first two rows of houses on the outskirts of Forbach, moved forward at 1300 hours. As the 3/276th moved forward, overcoming pockets of resistance, an old German barracks in the Kleinwald was a major obstacle to Lima Company. It was a well defended complex of several masonry buildings enclosed by a high stone wall with only one entrance. India Company bypassed the barracks and moved on to the tower. According to the report, the barracks proved to be a more serious obstacle than the tower itself. By 1335 hours the tower was surrounded, and two hours later, it was cleared of the enemy.

As the 19th of February ended, 2nd Battalion of Wyoming had lost all contact among its companies. The spearhead troops were momentarily cut off by the enemy closing on both flanks. The 276th's Golf Company occupied Grossbliederstroff in a day of fighting that had relatively few highlights.

Daylight patrols of the 3/276th found the enemy well dug in on the high ground north of Etzlingen. The Battle Axe Battalion was attached to the 274th and was given the responsibility for the attack. It began the assault in midafternoon and was able to take its objective in one and one half hours. When the evening came, the Germans were dropping artillery shells onto Grossbliederstroff at the rate of one every three minutes.

The drive continued on the next day. During the night, the tower of Forbach was the center of one of the 276th's most told actions. All during the day the enemy resisted fiercely. The 276th Battalions attempting to break into Forbach were repeatedly stopped and the armor-infantry

teams couldn't maneuver sufficiently to mount an effective attack. Late in the afternoon, the 3/276th was moving into the 1st Battalion area to help eliminate nests of small arms and automatic weapons.

February 20th started badly in the center sector. The 3/276th was deploying for its attack on Gifertwald when the Germans launched a strong counterattack. Preceded by an unusually heavy artillery barrage, the enemy charged up the slope of Pfaffenberg Hill and the tide of the battle was turned, at least momentarily. Not only was the American attack stopped, the town of Etzlingen was in grave danger of recapture.

The enemy was finally driven back but it took the rest of the day for the 'Blazers to reorganize. The 274th made little progress in its move to the Metz road, although company after company slashed its way through the forest. If the 274th thought they had their hands full during the day, they underestimated the situation. That evening, the regiment was assigned more frontage and was ordered to capture Spichern, a mission originally assigned to the 275th.

On February 21st, the 276th fought house-to-house as it slowly penetrated Forbach. The Germans had brought in about 300 reinforcements during the night. They were relying on mortars, which were painfully effective, and small arms fire. The grinding advance continued into the dark. In addition to taking real estate, the 70th Division took 100 prisoners, their highest one-day catch. The weather continued to be "good" as it had been after the first day of the offensive. Early morning fog gave way to generally fair skies. The temperature was above freezing so the melting snow kept the mud thick. For the 274th, the target was Spichern, "the holy ground" of Nazidom. Because of its symbolic value, Spichern was defended with every technique the Germans had developed during the long war. There were innumerable pillboxes, armored in steel and concrete, often as thick as six feet. These took artillery fire with little to no damage.

There were interlocking rows of trenches and barbed-wire entanglements as thick as weeds. Artillery and mortars were zeroed in on every square yard. Counterfire from the America's big guns were ineffective and no immediate air support was available. Spichern was strictly a job for the Infantry.

Foxtrot on the left and Alpha on the right maneuvered to encircle the town despite machine gun fire. Alpha, making its way through the maze of deserted trenches, was closest to the town. It observed a white flag raised on the church steeple. A patrol from the attached 275th India Company was already moving into town and so was a similar group from Alpha Company. As the two groups met, two American planes suddenly zoomed over the town. One dropped a "bomb" and the patrols dove for cover, waiting for the big bang. There was none. Instead a shower of leaflets fluttered to the ground, asking the German soldiers to surrender, promising safety and good treatment. This offer was a bit late. The defenders had already correctly read the American strategy and decided their position was hopeless. They needed no extra incentives to surrender. The Trailblazers didn't pause to celebrate the capture of the "sacred ground" for the attack must go on.

By midafternoon, the advance was stalled and the 'Blazers decided to reorganize for the next day's assault. The 2nd Battalion had cut the Forbach-Saarbrücken highway in two places, and therefore was handicapping the flow of enemy reinforcements from Saarbrücken. At the 276th's right flank, its 3rd Battalion had moved into position along the edge of Stiring-Wendel.

On February 21st, Alpha Company, 275th was hit by two tanks, one from the front and one from the rear. Momentarily disorganized, the company was reinforced by Bravo as it paused to regroup. At about 0800 hours, the 3/275th took Alsting. At 1230 hours they were hit again by tanks. Overall, the regiment had advanced across its front and bedded down in familiar surroundings.

The next day in Forbach, the Americans used a new technique during the night. A huge searchlight pierced the darkness and allowed the observers to locate targets. All through the day, the 276th slugged its way into Forbach. By nightfall, they reached the railroad tracks that ran through the city from northeast to southwest. During the afternoon the attack was aided considerably by an air strike on the city.

The Trailblazers ran into an advance party of the German's 559th Infantry Division on February 23rd. The Germans were moving into the zone to mount a counterattack in the Kreutzberg. That German division was really needed to help stave off Allied advances elsewhere, but the Nazi high command put top priority on the defense of the Saar.

With a complete and fresh division at its front, the 274th knew it was in for a tough day. Holding positions would be difficult and trying to make any real significant advance was not realistic. Realistic or not, the 1/274th moved onto Spichen Heights and surprised an enemy battalion as it was deploying for a counterattack. The German were almost all killed or captured.

Now the Americans had armor support but the lead vehicle couldn't see the antitank mines that the 'Blazers discovered and couldn't hear the warning shots. A mine exploded and the tank was disabled. The road was blocked so the attack was now bottlenecked. By early afternoon, the Heights, Hitler's "sacred soil" was taken with all its defenders either casualties or prisoners of war.

It is now March, 1945. The relative quiet gave an opportunity to prepare for the inevitable allied attack on the Saar and the Nazi heartland. Each regiment provided intensive training to its replacements, most of whom were fresh from the states and actually eager for more instruction. The momentary relief from combat did not allow for complacency. The Trailblazers knew that they faced two German battalions capable of...

...fierce battle. As a reminder, two enemy planes strafed both Kilo and Lima Company of the 275th on March 2nd. The enemy threw in two furious, but unsuccessful attacks in the 274th's sector. After about one and one half hours, all was quiet again.

The logical target of the German attack would be one or both flanks. On the right, the 275th was ready for either defense or offense. On the left, the 276th knew that taking the rest of Forbach was high on the American agenda. March 3rd was D-day for the 70th attack. H-hour for the 276th was at 0817 hours. After a division artillery barrage, the attack began on the northern part of Forbach with the railroad tracks as the line of departure. The 3/276th was on the left, the 1/276th on the right with attached French troops from the Lorraine Division. The 1/276th was in reserve. The 'Blazer assault had, in two hours, moved some 150 yards north of the tracks. The 2/276th was now sent into Forbach. The infantry fought through buildings, and was occasionally pinned down by heavy automatic weapons fire.

Enemy artillery was shelling Forbach and holding up the advance of forward 'Blazer troops. At the end of a reasonably successful day, India Company, 276th was on the outskirts of Marienau, a hamlet just west of Forbach. The 274th's objective for March 3rd was Stiring-Wendel and the road from there to Forbach. One company was to stay and hold the Kreutzberg Ridge. After a minute of artillery barrage, all three battalions crossed the line of departure at 0825 hours.

Enemy artillery fire was heavy, especially onto the 3/274th at the left but a supporting air corps mission retaliated effectively. As the main German forces slowly pulled back under the 70th attack, some of the enemy remained in bunkers and resisted strongly until their capture. By 1700 hours, the 1/274th had reached its objective south of Habsterdick. By 1900 hours, the 2/274th had taken a third of its assigned sector. The 3/274th, with a company of French attached, had captured Sophie and part of Neue Glashutte, villages at the southern edge of Stiring-Wendel and one block of buildings in the city itself.

By 2100 hours the battalions were ordered to "button up". The 274th had cleared the Metz highway and held the southern portion of Stiring-Wendel. The attached French troops occupied the captured blocks, mopping up and taking prisoners of war to the rear. The 275th's orders were to hold its Heights.

March 4th was a hard day from the very beginning. The Trailblazers now encountered a new obstacle -- pillboxes that could be elevated and rotated. Around such a bunker at a radius of 50 yards was a circle of mines about 6 feet wide. The enemy field of fire was now expanded and the mines increased the difficulty of reaching the jugular of the pillbox- At 1500 hours, enemy mortar and artillery fire were so devastating that the 2/274th called for an air strike on Schoeneck where the German's big guns seemed to be located. However, a low ceiling prevented an immediate response.

By 1600 hours, the 2/274th had taken its objective and was ready to tackle the two blocks that had just been transferred from the 3rd Battalion's goals. At 2000 hours, the troops were told to call it a day but prepare to continue the battle in the morning.

The importance of the action was emphasized when Lieutenant General Alexander Patch, commander of the Seventh Army, came to the regimental command-post in the afternoon for a personal look at the situation. Before the major part of Stiring-Wendel was finally taken the afternoon of March 5th, all the assault units met stubborn resistance in house-to-house fighting. Enemy reinforcements kept coming in small numbers and by the end of the day, there were still some 450 to 500 enemy soldiers at the 'Blazer front. The air strike on Schoeneck requested the day before was finally completed at 2000 hours on March 4th. On March 5th, just before 1000 hours, the 276th reported that all of Forbach was captured.

On the right flank, Golf Company, 276th was still taking fire from the Simon Mine area to the east. In the left sector, the 3/276th cleared Imbruch and continued into the woods beyond the university. All positions were secure enough for a fairly still night. Early the next morning (March 6th) at 0520 hours, the enemy north of Forbach reversed gears from a delaying action to an attack of its own. It was an all-out battle but the original American lines were restored shortly after 1200 hours. At 1630 hours, with an attack conducted with the 2/274th, they were able to take their second objective north of Stiring-Wendel.

The 3/274th started two hours later and attacked the Simon mine, which included a large factory. For several days, it was the prime target for bombing and shelling, but it showed no signs of weakening. After heavy fighting, the troops finally reached the wall that surrounded the mine. Late in the evening, General Barnett cancelled the attack plans for all regiments and directed that they keep probing for weak spots in the enemy defenses.

The 274th probed all during March 7th. There was no major engagement but the Germans continued their heavy barrage of fire. It is estimated that some 450 rounds of artillery and mortars fell on the 3/274th sector. More than 700 rounds were counted in 1/274th sector and as one of the 'Blazers remarked, "and they tell us the Krauts are low on ammo ... I'm glad I'm not here when they're loaded". The 276th was receiving incoming fire at the same time and the same rate. All three of its battalions were on line. Several patrols were sent out by each battalion during the night of March 7th, looking for weak spots and gaps left undefended in the enemy lines.

On March 8th, the weather worsened. It became much colder. Snow fell in the morning, then turned to rain which continued through the day. That complicated the 274th's problem of the Simon mine. The ceiling was too low for air strikes but the weather was not a handicap to enemy artillery. They increased the high intensity from the day before, and the 2/274th received some 1,500 incoming rounds. During the night, the Germans would sneak back into Stiring-Wendel, find

a vantage point, and set up snipers to knock down human targets the next day. The patrols were constantly checking. After heavy fighting, the troops finally reached the Simon mine.

A new order from division: individual soldiers should keep their gas masks nearby at all times! Information from captured enemies had raised the fear that the desperate enemy might launch gas in his last-ditch efforts. Most of the men had "lost" their masks. They were so cumbersome and heavy that most soldiers discarded them as they went into battle. The majority of the soldiers had to be issued new masks.

On the 12th of March, close to 2400 hours, the Germans began a general withdrawal. By 0600 hours, their rear guard pulled out of Stiring. The Germans were pulling back to Saarbrücken. The Trailblazer units pursued, keeping constant pressure on the enemy retreat. The pursuit continued through March 14th, maintaining constant contact with the enemy.

Schoeneck, Furstenhausen, Gersweiler, and Krughutte were more villages added to the list of the liberated. During the night of March 13-14th, 276th troops crossed the pre-war French-German border at the outskirts of Petite Rosselle. An anti-tank ditch stopped most of the vehicular traffic during the night. 'Blazer engineers working under pressure to build a crossing suffered several casualties from the thickly strewn mines.

In the early morning of March 15th, the 274th received orders from the Division, "attack, capture objectives, and be prepared to attack to the southeast, reducing Saarbrücken south of the Saar River." The 2nd and 3rd Battalions would attack with 2 battalions in reserve, off line for the first time in a month. The assault units would reconnoiter for sites to cross the Saar and, if possible, cross the river and establish bridgeheads. Firefights were frequent that day as the enemy, falling back, would return for a brief stand. A counterattack began at 0630 hours. It took the 1st Battalion until 1300 hours to repulse. Despite this delay, the 1/274th mounted an attack on the Siegfried line at 1615 hours, following a heavy artillery barrage. The big guns blaze away for 20 minutes, stopped for 10, and fired another 20 minute volley.

The 1/274th was supported by two armor platoons, one tank destroyer platoon and several antitank guns. Without any cover or concealment, the battalion had to advance over ground completely covered by interlocking fields of fire. Large and small weapons laid down a thunderstorm of bullets and the battalion could only advance a few hundred yards before it had to stop and consolidate. The 3/274th moved out at 0700 hours and met the same fierce resistance. The 2/274th stayed in reserve. Although fighting was bitter through the first two weeks of March, everyone knew this was just a preliminary activity. Saarbrücken was the Trailblazer's tantalizing prize.

The 70th Division positions on land were so high that even while in their foxholes, the soldiers could see a wide panorama that focused their goal. In reality, before them lay one of the most heavily defended areas in Europe. Between them and the prize city, the river made a challenging natural barrier, and an unusually strong section of the Siegfried Line protected Saarbrücken in front of the 70th Division's right.

While few soldiers look eagerly toward battle, the general feeling was: "Let's get this dirty job over with." There were other pressures to get on with the job. On March 7th, the 9th Armored Division had seized the Remagen Bridge, a hundred miles to the north. For the first time, Americans were across the Rhine. The bridge collapsed just a week later, but by then the Rhine bridgehead was firm. Cologne fell on the 7th, and Coblenz 10 days later.

Patton's Third Army on the Trailblazer's left had pressed northeast to reach the Rhine near Bonn. A few days later, they crossed the Moselle to threaten the Siegfried Line from the rear. The western front deployment now had the Canadian First and the British Second Armies on the far

north, working out of Belgium and the Netherlands. Attacking central Germany was the American Ninth, First, and Third Armies. The 70th's parent Seventh and the French First Armies had the responsibility for southern Germany.

The 70th Division had a tough and critical assignment in Operation Undertone, the great U.S.-French assault south of the Moselle. The Seventh Army faced the formidable west wall from Saarbrücken to Lautenberg. For most of its length, this comprised the toughest set of frontier defenses ever built by the Germans. Operation Undertone would send all three Divisions of the Seventh corps against this foreboding barrier. The main effort would be the XV Corps attack at the center toward Zweibrücken, some 20 miles east of Saarbrücken. The XXI (Trailblazers) corps on the left and the rest on the right would support the thrust of the XXI advance which was designed to outflank the bulwark at Saarbrücken.

The 70th was to exert intense and constant pressure on the defenders in the city, keeping them in place and preventing movement against the flanks. Then the 70th had to take the city and the Metz highway that ran due east into the German heartland. The 63rd Division on the Trailblazers' right and the 65th Division on the left would then exploit the 70th's success. Both Seventh Army and XXI Corps headquarters were pressing for immediate action and the 70th passed along the orders to the 274th to attack the city before dawn on March 20th.

The major part of the city lies north of the Saar, but there is a small section south of the river. The river runs generally east through the city to the Metz highway, then loops southeast to St. Arnual. There, stiff in great curves, it runs south. The Siegfried Line runs basically southeast along the city boundary and crosses the Saar about a mile west of the Metz Highway. The main defenses of the Siegfried Line were south of the river in front of the 275th. In front of the 274th and the 276th was a strip of open ground about 300 yards wide that sloped into the steep southern bank of the Saar. On the opposite shore, the equally steep banks were lined with a double wire fence, as well as several rows of parallel interlocking bunkers. Short trenches connected the bunkers to round cement machine, gun nests on the river bank. To take this city would be a costly operation.

Many Trailblazers lived to become civilians again, thanks to their general's successful argument with Lieutenant General Alexander Patch, commander of the Seventh Army. Under pressure himself, General Patch came to the 70th area on March 16th to press General Barnett to get his attack under way. Barnett argued that an immediate attack would result in the needless loss of life. He pointed out Patton's advance onto the rear of the Siegfried Line and contended that in a few days the Germans would be surrounded. There would be no need for this type of frontal assault. Apparently Patch was persuaded. His concern for the men in the foxholes was legendary; Barnett's, while not as well known, was just as real. The frontal assault was delayed.

By the morning of March 18th, the 274th received word that armor from the Third Army was sweeping around from Trier and Bonn, well behind the Siegfried Line and had reached a point 60 miles east and a little north of Saarbrücken. All 'Blazer units were to keep a lookout for friendly troops appearing at the front. Also that day came the first signs of the enemy's intentions. A report of a large German convoy of both motor and horse drawn vehicles had been seen heading east. Air reconnaissance was able to verify these movements which were interpreted as a general withdrawal. But the intensity of fire against the 70th caused skepticism among the Trailblazers.

Late in the night of March 18th, both the 274th and 276th received an order: "you are to push two combat patrols across the river tonight. It is thought that only a shell of opposition faces you. Alert the rest of the battalion immediately if the patrol is successful. Mission of the patrols to see if crossing can be made by additional troops to establish bridgehead."

The two patrols trying to cross by boat were driven back by excessive fire. At 0300 hours, March 19th, the division was ordered to attack across the river without delay. The 276th was to make the first crossing in boats, if possible, before daylight. The 3/276th would make the crossing at a time of its own choosing. Some 2000 rounds of artillery had been dedicated for this push. The 274th, at the center of the division line, was to take over the 276th's positions and prepare to attack the city from the southwest. The 275th was ready to reduce the section of the city south of the river, then cross the Saar at the Metz highway bridgehead. All commanders were cautioned by General Barnett to seek minimum casualties.

Around daybreak, direct-fire weapons opened up, trying to reduce the river front fortifications. The barrage was awesome and the marksmanship was admirable. The enemy was forced to use smoke to hide its position. As the 276th began to cross the river, many thoughts entered into the men's minds. What to do when the enemy opens fire? There was no ground to shrink into and no trees for shelter. How bullet proof were these boats? The boats were now closer to the German side than the friendly side. Finally they arrived on shore. There was no need for quiet. The enemy knew that the GIs were here but the men left the boats very cautiously. Where was the trap? When would it be sprung? It took a long time before the men of the 276th realized that there was no enemy. This was too good to be true.

During the early morning hours, the 274th had taken heavy small-arms fire, and was able to take two prisoners on the south side of the Saar. They revealed that their German units had received orders to get back across the river before daylight. It was learned later that the enemy had begun a general withdrawal around 2000 hours the night before. With the enemy on the run, the 274th pursued rapidly. In fact, it moved so quickly that it went out of the range of communications.

Saarbrücken was the grand prize of the day but there was another vitally important objective. The Metz Highway had to be cleared so it could become a major route into Germany. The road, coming from Forbach and Stiring-Wendel, runs northeast until, just across the Saar in the city, it turns almost due north. There the road simply disappeared under the mountains of rubble from the assault.

The German withdrawal was obviously well planned. Bridges were blown and nearly impenetrable barriers of wood and debris were piled high on the road. It was imperative that an alternate route be found for the vehicular traffic. The 70th had to find the detours to bypass the obstacles and reach the clear highway. Learning that the fleeing enemy was less than two hours away, the small party of the I & R platoon of the 274th decided to continue its pursuit.

The Metz Highway is the main street through a whole series of towns. As the 'Blazers clipped along at a good speed, they couldn't believe what they saw. Civilian trucks and cars passed the American vehicles, paying absolutely no attention to them. Streets were lit and stores were open. There were no visible scars of the war, a striking contrast to the deprived villages in France. People gathered at the curbs and stared in disbelief when they realized that these were U.S. soldiers.

In Sulzbach, a large crowd gathered around the men from the 274th. From them the men learned that another American vehicle had just entered the town from the opposite direction. It was a 70th Division armored scout car. By now, the men from the 274th were five miles ahead of any of the infantry. The prisoners outnumbered their captors and many potential captives were simply passed by. It was clearly time to turn around. As the big day ended, the advance Trailblazers from India Company of the 274th were at Fischbach, approximately five miles north of Saarbrücken.

The 276th had no contact with the enemy all day. The 1/276th and 3/276th were in Puttlingen and 2/276th was in Altenkessel. Every military unit prides itself on being "the first." Bragging rights are

cherished. For the 70th Division, there were enough firsts to share between the assault battalions. The 276th was first to cross the Saar; the 274th was the first to enter Saarbrücken. It had been a great day, the most satisfying the Trailblazers had experienced. The queen city of the Saar was theirs.

March 21st was a strange day. It was a mixture of the elation of victory, of the adrenaline of the chase and of the letdown of the anticlimax. All of the regiments stayed busy cleaning up the mementos the Germans had left behind. The first item on the agenda was to clear out Saarbrücken. All buildings still standing had to be cleared. Areas in and around the city were checked closely for any German soldiers who might have hidden, especially for those who shucked their uniforms and donned civilian clothes. In Dudweiler, an entire company of German soldiers had done just that. Their commander explained that their "stand and die" orders came from Berlin and not from the usual chain of command. They lost all their enthusiasm when Americans poured in from all directions.

During March, the 70th Division had captured 1,724 prisoners, mostly in the last two days. Late in the day, the order came putting the 70th Division in the Seventh Army reserve. It was off line for the first time in 86 days. The rapidly moving events would soon confirm that the 70th Division was through with active combat. Although the "occupation" didn't formally begin until the German surrender, the Trailblazers began occupation duties. Being off the line didn't mean that the hazards were over. Occasional civilian snipers still took a toll. Saboteurs stretched piano wire across the roads at just the right height to decapitate unsuspecting drivers of jeeps.

After its Saarbrücken Operation, the 70th moved into and mopped up the Kaiserlautern-Landstuhl area. Later the Trailblazers were scattered over several thousand square miles of the Rhineland centering on Frankfurt-am-Main, Weisbaden, and Mainz. On V-E Day, the Division Headquarters would be in Frankfurt. The last phase of the European war, the central Europe campaign, began with six Allied armies racing into the center of the Third Reich. When the Trailblazers were taken off line, the rest of the Seventh Army sliced across the Saar to the east. With the enemy retreating under pressure, the crossing was uncontested.

On March 29th, the Seventh Army crossed the Rhine at Mannheim. There it split into a pincer. The northern clamp reached Nuremberg on April 20th. This was the birthplace of the Nazi party, scene of frantic rallies, and the podium for Hitler's demagogic harangues. It would also be the scene of the historic trials where the Nazi war criminals were first brought to international justice. That portion of the pincer crossed the Danube into Bavaria at Regensburg.

The southern arm of the pincer drove on to Munich by April 30th, and it split again: one arm taking Salzburg and Berchtesgaden on May 4th and the other going due south to Innsbruck and the Swiss border on May 3rd. Trailblazers sought the local beergardens for relaxation. They engaged in the eternal recreation of the soldier of "standing on the corner watching all the girls go by." But there were strict rules of conduct. A Seventh Army directive stated there would be no fraternization with the enemy or with the civilians. By April 1st, the 70th Division was transferred to the Third Army and to Patton's reserve. Very few 'blazers were happy about it.

The regiments were soon further into Germany and spread out over a large territory. This was good duty. They were far away from the top brass and lived in what they considered luxury in many of the small towns they occupied. Military duties were mainly manning roadblocks and occasionally patrolling the forests in search of enemy troops. There were reports about small groups of German troops hiding in the woods. They carefully avoided the large areas where there were American troops, but occasionally they would come out into the small villages and demand food. There were many such small, safe places, and the army just didn't have enough men to 'occupy' every hamlet.



On April 12th, the regiments were ordered to keep a closer watch on these smaller towns. Platoon-sized groups would descend unexpectedly into a village and screen all the civilians. They would stay there a few days, then leave quietly to go to another town. A battalion of enemy troops had been organized to attack isolated U.S. units and to get American identification papers, passes, and insignia. These could be used for the same dangerous disruption that disguised Germans had sown in the Battle of the Bulge, or they could help Nazi war criminals slip out of the country.

The 70th Division area soon became filled with a great number of slave laborers and concentration camp prisoners who were freed by the advance of the Americans. Feeding, housing, and caring for them became major problems. The influx grew and grew. Where were they all coming from? A repatriation center was set up in some former German barracks and immediately housed some 3,000 displaced persons. Rations came from the Seventh Army quartermaster, captured German supplies, and the burgermeisters. Electricity, water, and heat came from jury-rigged systems. Food was the priority; next came baths and laundry. Medical aid was critically needed. There was one Russian doctor but he had no equipment or supplies. Trailblazer medics set up teams for 24-hour service. Finally a supply of hidden medicines and equipment was found.

The war in Europe was clearly approaching its conclusion. Churchill and Eisenhower watched American troops crossing the Rhine on March 23rd and three days later the entire Allied front was east of the river. The last V-2 rocket hit London on March 27th, the day the Third Army took Frankfurt. A somber interruption in this procession was the death of President Franklin Roosevelt on April 12th. The news hit the Americans hard. Tough veterans wept openly and many soldiers choked back emotion as the 70th Division Trailblazers honored their fallen Commander-in-Chief in solemn retreat formations.

On April 14th, the 70th Division took part in the opening of a 2,215-foot railroad bridge across the Rhine at Mainz. This was the only rail link over that river in the Third Army sector. The 70th Division troops guarded it all during construction. It was named for F.D.R., whose death two days earlier cast a pan on the ceremonies. When General Patton asked for a bayonet to cut the ceremonial ribbon T/5 Francis Dean of Foxtrot Company, 274th Infantry Regiment, 70th Division, offered his.

Also on April 14th, Eisenhower ordered the troops to halt at the Elbe River, rather than to continue on to Berlin, even though the capture of the capital by both American and British seemed now to be a simple operation. Eisenhower feared the Nazis were setting up a fortress in Bavaria and wanted to keep enough force in the south to effectively meet this threat. Also, Eisenhower contended, cutting Germany in half with a southern drive would be the fatal blow.

The "Alpine Redoubt" was hardly mythical. As the Germans fell back, a large number of combat worthy units gravitated to the south. Many of the Nazi offices had been moved from Berlin into Bavaria during the last few months. Forty of Hitler's inner circle from the Chancery, laden with sensitive files and baggage, had flown from Berlin to Berchtesgaden on April 22nd. It was obvious that the diehards intended to man the redoubt to a last ditch stand. However, the American offensive of March and the crossing of the Rhine thwarted those plans by hastening the disintegration of organized defenses. Berlin was obsessive to the Russians despite Stalin's deprecation to Eisenhower. They concentrated 20,000 guns to blast the way to the German capital and eventually sustained over 300,000 casualties in the taking of the city. By now, even Hitler must have realized that defeat was inevitable and imminent.

Churchill and President Truman, in office just two weeks, refused Himmler's offer to surrender to the Allies. How many soldiers would be lost in the next 14 days because the western leaders wanted to coax Stalin into joining the formal assault upon Japan, or because Churchill and Roosevelt had vowed to accept nothing but unconditional surrender? Now the climax neared.

There was a show of friendship that would soon turn sour as the Russians came up to the Americans on the Elbe River.

On April 28th, Mussolini was shot by Italian partisans. German forces in that country surrendered the next day. On April 30th, as Russian shells fell upon the gardens above Hitler's personal bunker, he committed suicide. Berlin surrendered. German armies in the north surrendered. Germany signed unconditional surrender papers at Eisenhower headquarters in Rheims, France, on May 8th, V-E Day!

The Russians are present at Rheims, where the Allies insist the surrender is not only to them but to Russia as well. The Soviets have their own surrender ceremony in Berlin the next day. Their propaganda machines roll out the story that it's the Red Army alone that brought down the Third Reich.

For the Trailblazers, the next three months between V-E and V-J Days were generally pleasant. The summer months had come to Europe and the flourishing foliage covered many of the battle scars of the war. The troops were given rest and relaxation in Belgium. Genuine American hamburgers, hot dogs, ice cream and coca-colas were served in Paris and the Dutch rest centers.

Memorial Day held special significance for the Trailblazers in 1945. It was not just a salute to the men who had fallen in the wars long ago; this was a tribute to their own dead. The six guns of the Cannon Company of the 276th that had fired in anger during the French campaign, now fired in celebration at Division headquarters with a 48-gun salute to the dead of all American wars.

June 15th, Infantry Day, was the second birthday of the 70th Division. In Weisbaden, a composite troop representing every unit paraded down the Wilhelmstrasse, the main thoroughfare. Independence Day, the Fourth of July, was packed with various activities from 0900 hours until far into the night. There were formal parades and fireworks displays, just like home. Sports played a big part in the Trailblazer life during the summer of 1945. They were encouraged by the top brass to participate because it kept them from mischief and kept them in good physical shape for potential service in the Pacific.

The atom bomb fell on Hiroshima on August 6th. From this point on, the world would live in fear of nuclear annihilation. For the moment, the Trailblazers could only celebrate that they would not be put in service on the beaches of Japan.

It was a cold and foggy September morning when the men of the 70th headquarters at Weilberg-am-Lahn loaded into trucks for the first portion of the trip home. Late in the afternoon, they arrived at Rheims and were surprised by the hospitality and efficiency of the permanent party at the transient quarters there. The 'Blazers crossed the English Channel from le Harve in small coastal boats. They were quartered in nearby Tidsworth barracks, built for Wellington Is troops during the Napoleonic wars. They swore that there hadn't been any maintenance since the construction. Food was typically British, leaning heavily to mutton. Most of the time was spent on roll-calls and informational formations. There was time for short sight-seeing visits to the famous Salisbury Cathedral, Stonehenge, and even to London, some 70 miles away.

The word finally came: "send advance parties to Southampton" and the famous HMS Queen Elizabeth, the world's largest ocean liner. The main body followed a day later and it took another day to load the great ship to twice its normal capacity. Half the men slept on the decks. With twice the amount of men on board, the mess halls stayed open 24 hours a day but could only serve two daily meals. The men, however, could make mutton sandwiches to fill the gap.

The Statue of Liberty looked benignly at the ecstatic admirers who laughed and cried as the huge ship sailed up the Hudson. From there it was only a few miles by familiar army trucks to Camp Kilmer, the point of departure for Task Force Herren headquarters the previous year. Huge steaks were the nucleus for a late night dinner. A day later, on September 11, the 70th Division was unceremoniously inactivated and its Trailblazers sent to posts throughout the country. It was all over but the memories.