

121st Infantry The "Gray Bonnet" Regiment

These chapters are reprinted from *THE GRAY BONNET - COMBAT HISTORY OF THE 121ST INFANTRY REGIMENT 1810-1945*.

The Beginning

In January, 1944, while the men of the 121st Infantry shivered in the log-bunker defenses of the Huertgen Forest, Colonel Thomas J. Cross, the Regimental Commander, conceived the idea that a courageous band of fighting men who had conquered the Huertgen Forest where others had failed were worthy of a history of their own.

The Commander summoned me to spend my time not actually devoted to composing public relations releases to the detail of collecting data and incidents for that project. The result is herewith presented with due apologies of an amateur in the art of writing history.

The tactical action of the book is based on "After Action Reports" of the 121st Infantry Regiment, and the 8th Infantry Division. The human element of the story that means so much more to the men than the cold tactics of a military operation was provided by scores of interviews with G.I.'s of the regiment from Huertgen to Schwerin.

I hope with Colonel Cross, the originator of the project, that the chapters which follow will renew the spirit of pride that all of us experienced who were members of the fighting Gray Bonnet regiment in those trying days of combat.

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Fort Leonard Wood, MO
October, 1945

Baltic Finale



Chapter X Link-up With A Russian Ally

The days of the Wehrmacht were numbered as the Gray Bonnet regiment prepared for its final mission. Arms and ammunition from the Ruhr were no more; armored units had broken loose in the south cutting off reinforcement from Italy; British armor was moving past Hamburg; and most portentous of all, Russian armies were grinding down all opposition on the road to Berlin. The noose had tightened in the Ruhr pocket operation; the hangman was ready to pull the trap door.

Col. Lerette's charges were now attached to the

82nd Airborne, an old comrade in arms, for the impending attack in the Baltic. The paratroopers were present at the jump-off in Normandy, as relief in Huertgen, and now they joined the Gray Bonnets again for the final jump-off.

At 0800 hours on April 27 the regiment moved by motor to the northeast. Units flowed into the assembly area by midnight. The regimental command post was set up in Munster, a former army training base. In March, the Bonnets made their way through the levelled towns of Wuppertal

and Paderborn. It was evident that friendly air power had taken a heavy toll on the town farther north and on the western approaches to Berlin.

Several hours after the official attachment to the 82nd Airborne on April 30, the Gray Bonnets hastily packed and moved on once again for the town of Bleckede on the western bank of the Elbe. Arriving in the early hours of the morning, the regiment's convoy waited in frosty weather as unit by unit they moved across the narrow pontoon bridge to relieve the 505th Parachute Regiment. The 13th Infantry, the 740th Tank Battalion and the 644th T.D.'s were attached to the Bonnets for the final drive.

At H-hour, 0600, Lt. Col. Adams' 1st battalion jumped off on schedule for Gothman, a road net nearby, and for Neu Gulze. The 3rd battalion encountered little resistance in seizing Besitz, Tinkenberg, Amholz and Preten in short order. A knocked out bridge in the vicinity had momentarily halted Company L but the unit shuttled across and later made contact with the 82nd Airborne. Combined with the 3rd battalion of the 13th Infantry, Lt. Col. Hogan's men secured Damerez and Derzenow to secure a line of departure for the following day.

Resistance melted before the advance of the tank infantry force. By 1200 hours on May 1, the force had taken all assigned objectives after an advance of from 30 to 50 miles. The juggernaut awaited the hectic final day of battle —May 2.

Leaders conferred until late in the evening on last preparations for the final blow. It was decided that the Gray Bonnets would have the honor of leading the attack to break through the German lines for a link-up with the Russian forces to the east.

Combat Team 121 was divided into three task forces: Task Force Adams, Task Force Kunzig, and Task Force Hogan. The former two were to serve in the main assault with Lt. Col. Hogan's men moving to the rear on motors to aid the advance and protect the right flank.

Task Force Kunzig jumped off at 0600 hours on May 2. Only a few fanatical members of the Wehmarkt dared to oppose the heavy fire power of

the assaulting forces. They paid dearly. Tank destroyers leveled homes to the ground when snipers made the mistake of firing on the attackers. The assault grew apace as it neared its final objective. Roads were littered with abandoned vehicles; prisoners marched unattended by guards along the left-hand side of the road, dazedly looking for some one to take them in tow.

Schwerin, capital and oldest city in the province of Mecklenberg, fell to Task Force Kunzig before noon. The doughs of the 121st Infantry were the first foreign troops to set foot in the town since Napoleon's legions under Marshal Bernadotte had conquered Mecklenberg in 1806.

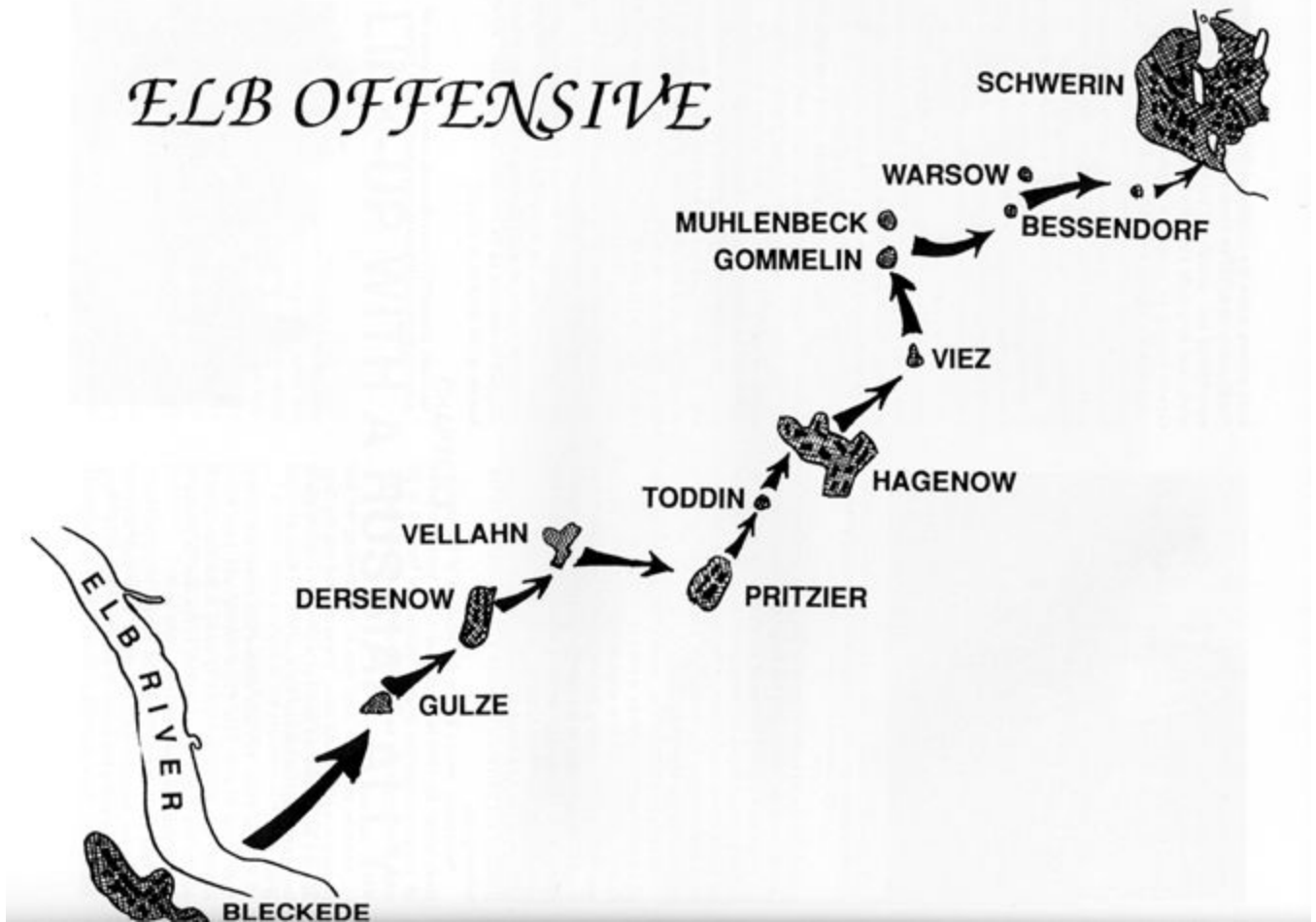
The town was a swirling mass of confusion. Prisoners came rolling into town on every conceivable type of vehicle. Slave laborers filthily clothed and half-starved roamed about trying to contact the Americans who had their hands full keeping on the alert for any uprising that might materialize.

It was part of the largest one-day bag of prisoners since the outbreak of the war. Approximately 55,000 discouraged German troops were herded into fields on the outskirts of the town. Hundreds of thousands of non-military paused before road blocks guarded by a handful of G.I.'s. There was one cry: "Are the Russians still coming?"

Within the next few days prisoner count had mounted to 244,000. It was a mass surrender of a badly beaten foe. But they formed only a portion of the problem facing the victors. Thousands of Russian slave laborers massed in the streets and moved in an opposite direction towards the Russian lines. Major Maxwell Pullen, Military Government attache with the regiment, accompanied by a few of his enlisted helpers, took over the job of tending to the needs of this mass of humanity. He pulled no punches in his policy of priority in care for the physical necessities of people who had suffered under Nazidom.

"Major Pullen was really all there that day. He set up his offices on the second floor of an office building—the former home of the Bourgemeister. Early in the afternoon a German General walked

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into the office to surrender all of his men. He was the typical arrogant German leader. Police officials snapped to attention as he marched into the room. Pullen looked at the display in disgust.”



BARGAIN BASEMENT: Gray Bonnets examine equipment left behind by Wehrmacht in its hasty retreat near Schwerin, Germany.

“A peppery Irishman, Cpl. Arthur Ryan, told the General to wait outside until the ‘new Mayor’ was ready to receive him. Then the Major set about a plan for taking care of the repatriated American soldiers who had been released from the local prisons. I returned four hours later and the General was still waiting in the hall. The ‘new Mayor’ was inside talking to some doughs who had been taken in the Ardennes bulge. Rank hath its privileges all right. But it depended on what side you had played.”

Colonel Lerette and Brigadier General Charles W. Canham, Assistant Division Commander, set out the following morning to meet the Russians. Cpl. Marvin Johnson, the Colonel’s driver, reported the meeting.

“We placed a small American flag on the radiator of the jeep and took off for the lines. Where there used to be roads, there were thousands of Germans surging ahead. We had to pause every couple of minutes to push the Krauts and slave laborers to the sides. There were covered wagons, giant trucks,

anything that could carry those frightened people away from the onrushing Russians.

“If we believed the ripe rumors going through the German ranks at the time, we never would have taken off on the trip. The Germans kept repeating that the Russians were ready to take on the Americans next. We knew it was strictly hooley.

“We finally met the first Russian. He was on horseback. He seemed to be overjoyed at the sight of the flag on our jeep. He kept yelling, ‘Americanos! Americanos!’ A bunch of Russians gathered about the jeep and soon guided us to the Russian division headquarters.

“A minor riot broke loose there. The Russians had liberated a large quantity of vodka and champagne. They kept toasting us. The Russian leader offered to give us an honor guard back to Schwerin but Colonel Lerette and General Canham declined the honor. It was quite a day — at least for a Corporal.”

There were busy days ahead for the occupying forces in Schwerin. For a week a search for enemy soldiers in hiding continued. Battalions took turns at operating the packed prisoner of war, refugee, and displaced personnel camps. Surrounding towns in the division area housed a population: of from two to seven times normal.

War in spite of its horrors and destruction had its rules. All of them were broken at one time or another by the enemy but there was still some semblance of a competitive game. This aspect faded shortly. The men of the regiment received their first real insight into the utter baseness of Nazism when companies of men were rotated to the nearby town of Wobbelin to inspect two concentration camps. One camp contained women and the other men — 2,500 weak and starving human beings. It was a pitiable, horrible sight that left men who had gone through ten months of bloody agonizing battle sick to the stomach.

The men prisoners were the more oppressed. Investigation uncovered a common burial plot containing 321 bodies. Approximately 200 unburied bodies were discovered in pits nearby.

“It was the most disgusting thing any of us had ever

seen. Cells were stacked with what were once human beings, now a crumpled mass of fleshless bone. On the evening we visited the place, the Military Government brought along the commissioner of police from Schwerin. A young German Jew who had been a prisoner in the camp lectured the Commissioner on the tortures the inmates had endured.

“The Commissioner was terrified as every G.I. stared with burning eyes at him. After the young Jew had finished his talk, the Commissioner gathered enough nerve to answer him. He told him that he did not know a thing about the presence of the concentration camp in the vicinity. He faced an unfavorable jury of glowering G.I.’s.”



“Here lie the bodies of — victims of Nazi atrocity from Poland, Russia, Greece, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Holland and Germany who died of starvation and brutality in the Wöbbelin concentration. camp. Buried under supervision of the 8th Infantry Division, U. S. Army, by whom the surviving prisoners of the camp were liberated. ‘God is our refuge and our strength.’”

PUZZLE SOLVED: The Gray Bonnets learned the whereabouts of the vaunted German Luftwaffe. Hundreds of planes destroyed on the ground by our own air force were found along the route.

Villagers from the surrounding towns of Wöbbelin, Ludwiglust, Hagenow and Schwerin were required to remove a portion of the number of all the bodies, including those in the pit, and to bury them in cemeteries in their towns. All of the prominent citizens of the towns were ordered to dig graves for the desecrated bodies. Army chaplains of the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish faiths conducted the burial services.

Blanched with fear and horror, the citizens heard the order to erect a Christian, cross or, a star of David over each grave. A stone surmounted each mound with the following inscription: