

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.

DANIEL M. BURNS
1st Lt., Infantry

Fort Leonard Wood, MO
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Tightening the Noose...



Chapter IX The Ruhr Pocket

In tracing the final breakdown of the Wehrmacht, most military tacticians will point to the operations of General Courtney Hodges' First Army in forming a death-like grip on the Ruhr industrial sector as the beginning of the end.

Once the lifeline of guns and ammunition for the Nazi war machine had been cut off, it was a matter of time before the final collapse. The 121st Infantry added much to the role of the hangman tightening the noose.

The operations of the regiment in this engagement from March 30 to April 17 encompassed extremes

of battle. At first the slow, dogged push of the foot soldier through woods against superior armor; the break before an offensive that would not be denied; and finally, the chase of a beaten and disorganized enemy. The regiment witnessed scenes that few will forget; scenes filled with humor and pathos of a once mighty military power crumbling before a civilian army hardened by a desire for an end to long months of war. The goal was in sight and no enemy could withstand the driving spirit it engendered.

The Gray Bonnets vacated their defensive positions

at Longerich on March 30 for the move across the Rhine in the vicinity of Bonn. The main body passed over the historic waters shortly before noon:

“If ever we weakened in our resolution not to think the war was coming to a close it was then. We had read so much about what the Krauts would do when we attempted to cross the Rhine. We had been keyed up since winter for a terrific struggle. Here we were moving across that ‘watery grave’ like home folks on a Sunday excursion.”

“On the east bank we saw Jerry tanks knocked out all along the road. There were a few of ours, too. The fighting ahead seemed a cinch. We renewed our resolution to doubt all signs of a quick armistice shortly after we hit the town of Netphen. The krauts still had some fight left in them.”

The 8th Division, as part of the First Army’s VII Corps, had been assigned a mission to drive north in the Sieg River sector, swing northwest and contact the Ninth Army forces driving south in the Ruhr industrial district.

After relieving elements of the 1st Infantry Division late on March 30, the regiment with the 2nd and 3rd battalions committed initially, attacked early the following morning for objectives on the north and east banks of the Sieg River. The immediate mission of the division was to push across the river and establish a bridgehead protecting a road running east and west along the river line.

The bulk of pressure was necessary against the natural defenses of the town of Siegen, a German Ground Force Training base on the left flank of the regimental attack. The 1st battalion which had been held in reserve initially in the vicinity of Hainchen was pushed into the breach to the left of the 2nd battalion the day following the jump off. The battalion now had a new leader, Major Willis J. Adams, former Regimental S-2 and Executive Officer of the 3rd battalion. The small, wiry leader from Barnesville, Ga., seemed to have the touch of a military Midas.

“Take a peek at the record of our (the 1st) battalion in the Ruhr pocket. I never saw anything click so perfectly as the football plays that Major Adams

began calling shortly after we jumped off for Flammersbach. Don’t forget, we jumped off on the right flank, shifted to the left flank, and finally attacked through the center. We suffered the lightest losses and gained the most ground.”

Lt. Col. Kunzig’s 2nd battalion pushing to the northwest had taken the towns of Gernsdorf, Irmgateichen, Salchendorf, Deuz and Grissenbach. With the possible exception of Deuz, the objectives provided weak resistance to the rapidly moving doughs. It was in the 3rd battalion sector that the bitterest fighting was encountered.

Terrain reminiscent of the Huertgen Forest faced Lt. Col. Hogan’s battalion as it drove towards the town of Lanhof. A series of road blocks guarded the narrow passes through the hills in the Sayn Forest. Devastating fire from earthwards aimed 20-mm. ack-ack guns peppered the avenues of approach. A cold penetrating rain soaked the foot soldiers who waited in vain for reinforcement by heavy armor.

Spearheading the attack of the battalion was Company K under Lt. Francis D. Linse. The 3rd platoon led by Lt. Robert Lazarie with S/Sgt. Charles Carroll was halted after a few hundred yards advance by machine gun fire covering a road block of felled trees. Lazarie quickly moved his men to cover and sent sleepers to the flanks of the road block. Sergeants Frank Voccaturo and Simon Lutz dispatched the defenders with a few well-aimed hand grenades. The company was thrown back as it reached the edges of town by fire from three enemy tanks. Friendly artillery pounded the town and the infantry moved in doggedly on the objective.

Pfc. Henry Whittle scored a hit on the lead Mark IV which turned in flight. Heavy house to house fighting brought the town under control late March 31. The drive of the 2nd battalion in this sector was marked by similar trying conditions.

Major Adams speedily led his forces through the towns of Flammersbach and Feursbach on the initial drive to Siegen.

During the tussle for the town of Hermulheim in the Roer-Rhine drive, Pfc. Felix Hill, Jr., of Company C

had helped to break up a German counterattack with a direct hit on a Mark IV tank. Evidently, Hill did not believe this was a sporting thing. He desired a more difficult target.

In the attack on Feursbach, Hill spotted an enemy motorcycle scooting hell-bent down the main thoroughfare in a desperate attempt to escape the onrushing infantry. The dough took up a position about 50 yards from the motorcycle and let go with a round from his bazooka. The round hit dead center, mangling the motorcycle and killing the two occupants.

Company C headed by Captain Durward M. Kelton pushed on the right flank from Feursbach to capture Breitenbach. To the left Capt. Ethel S. Kinard's charges of Company B disposed of light small arms opposition to take Kaan. When the pressure relieved on the flanks, Company A under Capt. Howard T. Guyer moved swiftly through the center to take Volnesberg. The latter company received much heavier small arms resistance as it proceeded to high ground west of Volnesberg. Company C encountered similar increasing resistance directly west of the town of Weidenau.

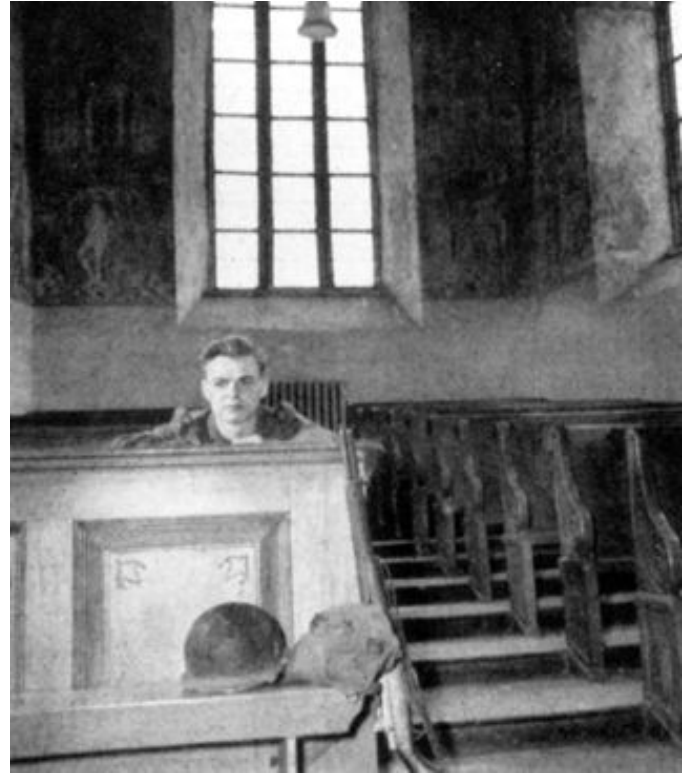
Colonel Cross now ordered the 1st battalion to coordinate an attack on Siegen with elements of the 13th Infantry on the left flank.

Company B jumped off at 1115 hours from Kaan-Marienborn and by 1300 hours had reached the outskirts of Siegen. Companies B and C delayed a concerted attack until early evening. Supported by fire from Company C positioned on high ground to the northeast, the two companies advanced 700 yards against moderate resistance consisting of small arms fire combined with rocket and artillery fire.

During the early morning hours of April 2, Captain Kinard attempted to move his men across the bridged sectors of the Sieg River. Enemy artillery and mortar fire increased in intensity with this move. Three platoons of Company A moved, under supporting fires from the stalled Company B, to cross the river farther north on foot bridges. Some were forced to wade the shallow waters as enemy artillery shifted its striking forces against the new

penetration.

By 0720 hours, the battalion had made a crossing in force. A platoon of Company B carefully guarded bridges to assure a safe retreat in the event of an enemy armored counterattack.



PEACE IN WAR: A G.I. waits for services to begin on Easter morning in 900-year-old church in newly occupied town in Ruhr pocket.

At the moment the most exacting struggle of the Ruhr pocket engagement was developing for the regiment before the town of Netphen. It was a battle of regimental proportions shouldered by a battalion minus the aid of adequate armor.

Company E had encountered only scattered opposition in taking the centrally located town of Breitenbach early April 1. As the battalion moved towards Netphen, three companies were committed to the attack: G, E, and F, from left to right. Heavy enemy armor retreating to the northwest from the town of Siegen sought refuge from the quickly encircling forces in the pocket. It was in the natural

defilade before Netphen that the enemy decided to make a last stand.

The companies butted against the town defenses with little success. Heavy flak, mortar and artillery fire was added to the continual poundings from huge SP guns. Tank-stalking teams were called into play as the few available tank destroyers proved no match for superior armament located in more favored positions. Companies G and E were shaken with heavy enemy counterattacks on April 3.

Early the following morning, the battalion made a successful breach in the defenses. Company E moved around the high ground near a church clearing out a dozen houses and capturing 20 prisoners. The momentum of the attack abated as quickly as it had begun. The enemy hurled a counter attack of seven tanks at the attacking force. Company G quickly came to the aid of the besieged company as Company F prepared for further assaults against its position in the southeastern sector of town.

The enemy hurled four more counterattacks at the battalion during the day. Only two of a complement of four attached destroyers were able to support the infantry now savagely protecting their gains in town. Late in the afternoon members of Capt. Cliett's Company F kept vigil in the cellars of Netphen as several huge enemy self-propelled guns moved down the main street methodically reducing homes and blasting cellars with H-E rounds.

The "fifth platoon," a unit composed of negro replacements which had joined the regiment shortly before the jump-off in the "pocket," was aroused by the rumbling approach of one of the armored monsters.

Pfc. Rudolph Prophet, on guard on the second floor of the building in which the platoon had taken refuge, gave the alarm to his mates below. German civilians moved alongside the mobile artillery piece pointing out houses in which they had seen the Americans hide.

Prophet dangerously exposed himself in the window frame, took aim with a bazooka, and fired a round that hit atop the turret and momentarily halted the

charging vehicle. He then ran to the floor below. Pfc. Ralph W. Dunlap and Pfc. Lacey W. Cox alerted by Prophet's call hurried to the first floor armed with Panzerfausts (German anti-tank weapons). Bracing themselves in the windows, the two let go with the powerful charges. Both rounds tore through the bogie wheels and crippled the ambling giant. Their mates now moved to their aid and deftly picked off crew members attempting to escape. Ordnance men examined the knocked out armored monster after the battle of Netphen had cleared. After much consternation, they decided the vehicle was a "Jagdtiger," the enemy's newest and most formidable armored assault gun.

The 76-ton monster mounted a 22-foot long, 128-mm. gun on a Tiger II chassis. It had succumbed to the daring and courage of three doughboys. Brigadier General Bryant E. Moore, 8th Division Commander, decorated the three men with Silver Stars and Colonel Cross elevated them to buck sergeants.

Enemy resistance continued to increase in the 3rd battalion sector on April 2. To lessen the pressure, Major Adams' battalion was pulled out of Siegen after being relieved by elements of the 13th Infantry to take up the attack on the right flank of Lt. Col. Hogan's stalled forces.

As the 1st battalion sped to a jump-off position for its new phase of operations, the enemy struck at the 3rd battalion with a force of four tanks, three half-tracks and several companies of infantrymen. Company L moved to the left of its objective, Company K to the right as friendly artillery crept up on the enemy from the rear. Company L was heavily hit with return SP fire from the enemy.

Infantrymen of Company L grew disheartened as their risks went for naught. Bazooka and A-T rounds bounced harmlessly off the heavy skinned German armor.

Sgt. James Delucas, Cpl. Layton D. Diehl and Sgt. Frank Voccaturo saved Company K from severe losses with their courageous attack against a Tiger Royal tank. The two moved within 25 yards of the tank and scored a hit with Panzerfausts on the heavy armor. Delucas was: knocked unconscious by a

grenade thrown by enemy, infantry but recovered in time to aid Diehl in holding off an attack against their position. The duo again scored hits on the Tiger Royal and broke up the enemy attack.

In short order the first battalion assault cavalcade was on its way. Capt. Guyer's Company A squashed enemy resistance in Benfe with marching fire that completely disorganized the enemy. The towns of Ludwigseck and Mad Alteneich fell shortly thereafter.

Information gained from prisoners taken by the 3rd battalion accounted for the bitter resistance to the drive on the town of Lutzel. Field Marshal Ernest Model, leader of the German Group B Army, had stationed his headquarters there. When our artillery hit an ammunition dump in the town, the leader pulled up stakes and took off to the north, the prisoners revealed.

Enemy armor surprised a regimental mine-laying platoon in the town of Brauersdorf. A friendly reconnaissance, car was put out of action and the platoon was temporarily:, disorganized. Late in the afternoon of April 4, Colonel: Cross was evacuated through medical channels.

The new Regimental Commander was Lt. Col. Earle L. Lerette. It was no baptism of fire or initial adventure in leading doughs for the short, stocky leader from Massachusetts. Lerette's fearless leadership of the 3rd battalion, 13th Infantry, had gained him recognition as one of the outstanding combat leaders in the 8th Division. He had been awarded the Silver Star and the Bronze Star before joining the Bonnets. They were soon to learn of his mettle in combat.

If one had not known the new leader, they would soon have sworn that he was a platoon leader instead of a regimental commander. Throughout every engagement that followed, he was up front much of the time with the leading infantry elements.

"I've driven for quite a few regimental commanders but it was nothing like this. In the 'pocket' he used to pioneer roads for an attack to follow. Some times I swear I could have read the serial numbers on the Kraut rifles we were so close."

The new leader's tactics were based on speed and deception. His double envelopment tactics had the enemy outguessed most of the time. Regimental headquarters was a mobile unit that moved right on the heels of the attacking elements. Closer communication lessened the strain on the front line units. The Colonel's policy was sound:

"They are the men who are actually fighting and winning the war. They suffer the casualties. If they run such risks why shouldn't all run similar risks if their movement closer to the line facilitates the attack."

On April 6, the 2nd and 3rd battalions began to move against an enemy that gave ground for the first time since opening attack. As Capt. Cliett's Company F cleared Eschenbach to relieve the pressure on Netphen, Companies E and G moved against tank resistance in the western portion of town. Companies K and L hit Lutzel from both flanks with marching fire and penetrated the town at 0830 , hours. The 1st battalion moved back prepared to take over regimental reserve.

Netphen was cleared late in the day and the 2nd battalion pushed Company F through Frohnhausen.

It was to be only a momentary reprieve for Major Adams' 1st battalion. The companies jumped off for Musen and Dahlbruch. It was a move that was to mark the breakthrough for the Gray Bonnets in the Ruhr. Both towns fell and the regiment was on its way.

Battalions moved in a column headed by two platoons of medium tanks and four tank destroyers. Foot elements followed protected by an A-T platoon. Reconnaissance elements moved forward checking routes and bridges along the way. Town after town fell without organized resistance: Littfeld, Stachelau, Listernohl.

There was concrete evidence the Wehrmacht was scraping the bottom of the barrel. Several hundred members of the Hitler "Jugend" were rounded up by the 2nd battalion. Then followed the deluge.

The town of Valbert fell leaving the bewildered men of Lt. Col. Kunzig with new problems. Two thousand enemy were herded into a large field.

Scores of knocked out enemy vehicles lined the road. Horses freed of their military loads ran wildly through the fields. The only resistance to the attack of the Gray Bonnets came from a local source — lack of transportation. The drive was on all along the Ruhr front. Trucks to transport the infantry were soon at a premium.

The Division forces had reached the Ruhr River where contact was made with elements of the 79th Infantry Division. The noose on the Wehrmacht in the Ruhr pocket had been tightened. Armor from the 13th Armored Division was now added to the pulverizing power of the infantrymen. The regiment caught its breath on April 13-14 as the 13th Infantry moved to the front and took up the chase.

The following day the Bonnets passed through the rear elements of the 28th Infantry and attacked towards the west with the 2nd and 3rd battalions in assault. The 1st battalion supported the attack of the other two as they jumped off from the vicinity of Schwelm. Again the list of objectives read like a page listing of towns in a gazetteer: Landringhausen, Haslinghausen, Flockenhausen, Blumenhaus, Duellenberg. The list seemed endless: Sauerbruch, Linderhausen, Heide.

Town names differed but the over-all scene was much alike: the white sheets hanging from windows, the worried faces of the inhabitants half crying, half laughing, and waving weakly at the thundering cavalcade of tanks and trucks as it moved through villages they had promised Nazi leaders to defend to the death.

There was the familiar thud of German boots hitting the road... hundreds of Wehrmacht stretched in columns along the road. A few G.I.'s moved to the rear, growing quite accustomed and frequently bored with marching enemy companies to the PW enclosures.

The whereabouts of the once vaunted Luftwaffe had soon become evident. Company K uncovered 90 enemy ME 109 planes in an underground tunnel near the town of Sauerbruch early in the afternoon of April 15. Numerous similar hideouts were discovered along the route of advance in the Baltic drive of early May.

Lt. Col. Kunzig split his elongated forces into two sections: the battalion commander and Capt. William S. Freeman led a medium tank force while Major Frederick J. Baum led a light tank force to the rear. An enemy SP gun scored a direct hit on Capt. Freeman's tank but he escaped injury to continue the attack into Haslinghausen.

The following morning the 1st battalion moved out of Schwelm to relieve the 2nd battalion on its final objective, Herzkamp. Lt. Col. Adams' men encountered only light opposition as they moved through the turbulent streets of Neviges and Tonischeide. Company B led the convoy on tanks, followed by the doughs of Companies A and C on foot. The battalion rolled into the final objective, Rohdenhaus, in early evening.

The 3rd battalion likewise outsped all schedules of operation to reach its final objective. The town of Wulfrath presented only a crumbling resistance. Lt. Col. Hogan accepted the surrender of 1,700 enemy troops plus two regimental staffs at 2100 hours.

The battle of the Ruhr pocket had gone into history for the Gray Bonnets. It had been a remarkable demonstration of lightning-like tactics that continually and completely caught the enemy off guard. Much of the actual bitterness of the early fighting might be overlooked in a glance at the record of overwhelming victories after April 6. The 2nd and 3rd battalion doughs, who wore down enemy armor near Netphen and Lutzel, can recall it as high on their list of hard-won victories. The speed and deceptiveness of the 1st battalion was unmatched.

On April 17, the 8th Division received a new mission of security and military government from the XVIII Airborne Corps. The regiment was assigned the area in the vicinity of Ludenscheid in the Ruhr district as its zone of occupation. The following day a revision of orders changed the boundaries. The Division zone was extended farther east. The 1st battalion moved to Solingen, the 2nd battalion to Ruppichterath and the 3rd battalion to Ohligs. Regimental headquarters moved to the centrally located town of Mulheim to the north of Cologne on the eastern banks of the Rhine.

A new offensive action was brewing for the Division. On April 24 General Bryant E. Moore received advance information of a new mission for his unit as part of the XVIII Airborne Corps. Following the success of the Ruhr pocket offensive, the division was accorded this last mission to protect the right flank of the 2nd British Army in an attack across the Elbe River to seize Hamburg and cut off the Danish peninsula.

The final attack of the 121st Infantry was at hand. A Russian ally pushing from the East would soon join hands with the Gray Bonnets.

