

XIII

Rhineland

(The Battle of the Bulge and The Belgian *Fourragère*)

Antwerp is Belgium's second largest city and, more importantly for this narrative, one of Europe's largest and best ports. Recall that one of the principal disadvantages of the Normandy site for the Allied invasion was the distance between Normandy and the Rhineland, and the inadequacy of the ports along Normandy. The Allies consumed huge quantities of supplies in the 1944 offensive, and these supplies had to be offloaded in Normandy and trucked across France. Recall also that the Allied offensive stalled, after August's Dash Across France, in part because of inadequate supplies at the front.

The Allied capture of Antwerp in September, and opening the harbor in November changed this situation dramatically. Allied ships could now sail directly to Antwerp, and be offloaded within miles of the American and British armies.

The Germans, of course, were fully aware of this. The recapture or destruction of Antwerp became high on the German wish list. And, the pathway to Antwerp was through Liège. (As a side note, prior to World War II, this city was generally spelled Liége, with the acute accent. You might notice this on some older maps and documents.)

On October 7, 1944, a range-finding V-1 hit Antwerp. On October 13th, the barrage began. On average, the Germans launched four V-1s and three V-2s each day against Antwerp through the rest of October and through November. The pace picked up dramatically in December and January. Two of the worst days were November 27th, when 126 died and 309 were injured, and December 16th, when 567 died and 291 were injured. In late November, the Germans added Liège to the target list.

None of the 784th batteries were in Liège in late November. (In fact, there weren't any AAA units in the city itself). Battery C was at Chièvres, and the rest of the battalion was back in France. HQ and batteries A and C were quickly moved into Liège to assist in the defense. Battery C defended Meuse River bridges in Liège, and Battery A moved to an airfield, A-93, two miles northwest. With this dispersion, the four 784th batteries were spread out over 180 miles.

The move put these 784th batteries right in the middle of what became known as buzz bomb alley. Over the next few weeks, Battery C was twice bombed out of its command post, and the rockets made several direct hits at A-93. The 784th's medical detachment were extremely busy treating civilian and military casualties, and four members of the detachment earned Purple Hearts in the process.

In early or mid-December, on the eve of the Battle of the Bulge, Battery B was moved to an airfield north of Liège. Battery D arrived at the same airfield on December 31st. Both batteries joined in the fight against the V-1s and V-2s immediately upon arrival.

Two American technology innovations assisted the 784th (and the AAA units in and around Antwerp). One was an enhanced radar system used to track the incoming rocket, used in conjunction with an analog computer to calculate range, distance, and the required lead. This may have been one of the first uses of computers in warfare.

The second innovation was a radio proximity fuse. The fuse allowed a shell to explode when it came to a specified distance of the target. Previously, antiaircraft shells were detonated by timing fuses, set to explode a specified time after firing.

It took some time for AAA units to gain comfort and experience with the new technology. But as they did so, they became more and more proficient. In 1944, AAA gunners shot down approximately one-half of the V-1s fired at Belgium (and this ratio improved in 1945). I do not have a number of successful "kills" of V-1 rockets by the 784th. AAA were largely unsuccessful in shooting down V-2s in 1944, but this too changed as the war progressed.

Thousands of Belgian civilians died in the rocket attacks. Certainly, many more thousands would have died but for the able defense by the AAA units.

During and after the war, the Allies tended to discount the effectiveness of the German rockets in Belgium. Most notably, they pointed out, Antwerp remained open as a port throughout the attacks.

But the V-bombs did curtail the amount of supplies brought into Antwerp. Much of the Allied army remained supplied from the longer, Northern France route. In the face of Allied air superiority, the rockets may have been the only means available to the Germans to slow the flow of supplies prior to, and during, the Ardennes offensive.

In recognition of the defense of Liège, the Belgium government, in an official “order of the day”, cited the 784th AAA Automatic Weapons Battalion for bravery and valor in service of Belgium. This was the 784th’s first “order of the day” citation.

While in Liège, or in route to Liège from France, and perhaps in between German rocket attacks, Private Boyd celebrated his 20th birthday.

Germany was in dire straits in the Fall of 1944. The Americans and British had advanced to the German border on the west, and were threatening further advances to the Rhine and Ruhr industrial heart of Germany. The Russians were advancing steadily on the eastern front and were approaching Germany’s eastern border. The Italians dropped out of the war, and the Germans were left to defend Italy by themselves. On all fronts, the Germans suffered huge losses in men and materials. And, the relentless Allied bombing of German industrial centers made it difficult to replace the materials. The men, of course, could not be replaced. Germany tried, though, by reducing the draft age to 16.

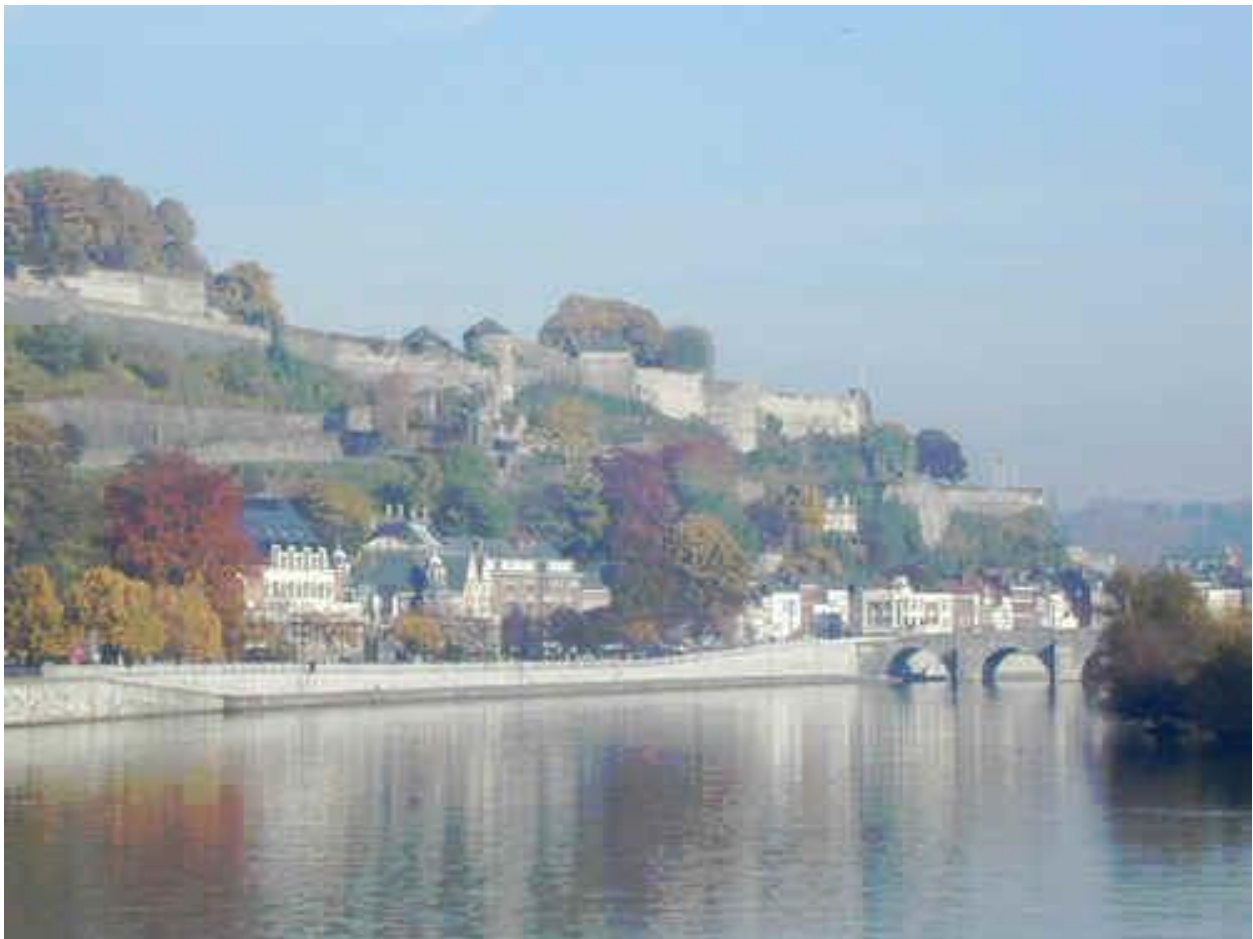
The Germans decided to gamble with one more offensive on the western front. Throughout the fall, German troops, tanks, planes and other equipment from elsewhere in Europe were, as secretly and quietly as possible, moved to the west. By early December, the Germans amassed an army of 20 divisions for the offensive.

The objective of the offensive was Antwerp. If the Germans could capture Antwerp, they would cut off the Allies’ principal port of supply. They would also divide the Allied forces (principally British) to the north from the American forces to the south. Once divided, the Germans would move forcefully against the Allied soldiers located north of the Bastogne-Brussels-Antwerp line. They could also re-establish V-1 and V-2 launch sites nearer to the coast, and resume the rocket bombing of London. That, at least, was Hitler’s hope. His specific orders were “*Forward to and over the Meuse!*”

The Germans planned to create a 60 mile front through and north of Luxembourg in the Ardennes, move rapidly to the Meuse River, seize the bridgeheads to cross the river, and then move northwest to Antwerp.

The Ardennes is a region of extensive forests and rolling hills, covering Luxembourg, eastern Belgium, and extending into France. The region has many steep sided valleys carved by fast flowing rivers. The Meuse runs along the western edge of the Ardennes. Although the river is shallow, it averages 120 yards in width. It is fed by many streams and its current is usually rapid, particularly in winter. There are a few level approaches to the Meuse, but there are also long stretches of steep banks, and some actual cliffs up to 300 feet high.

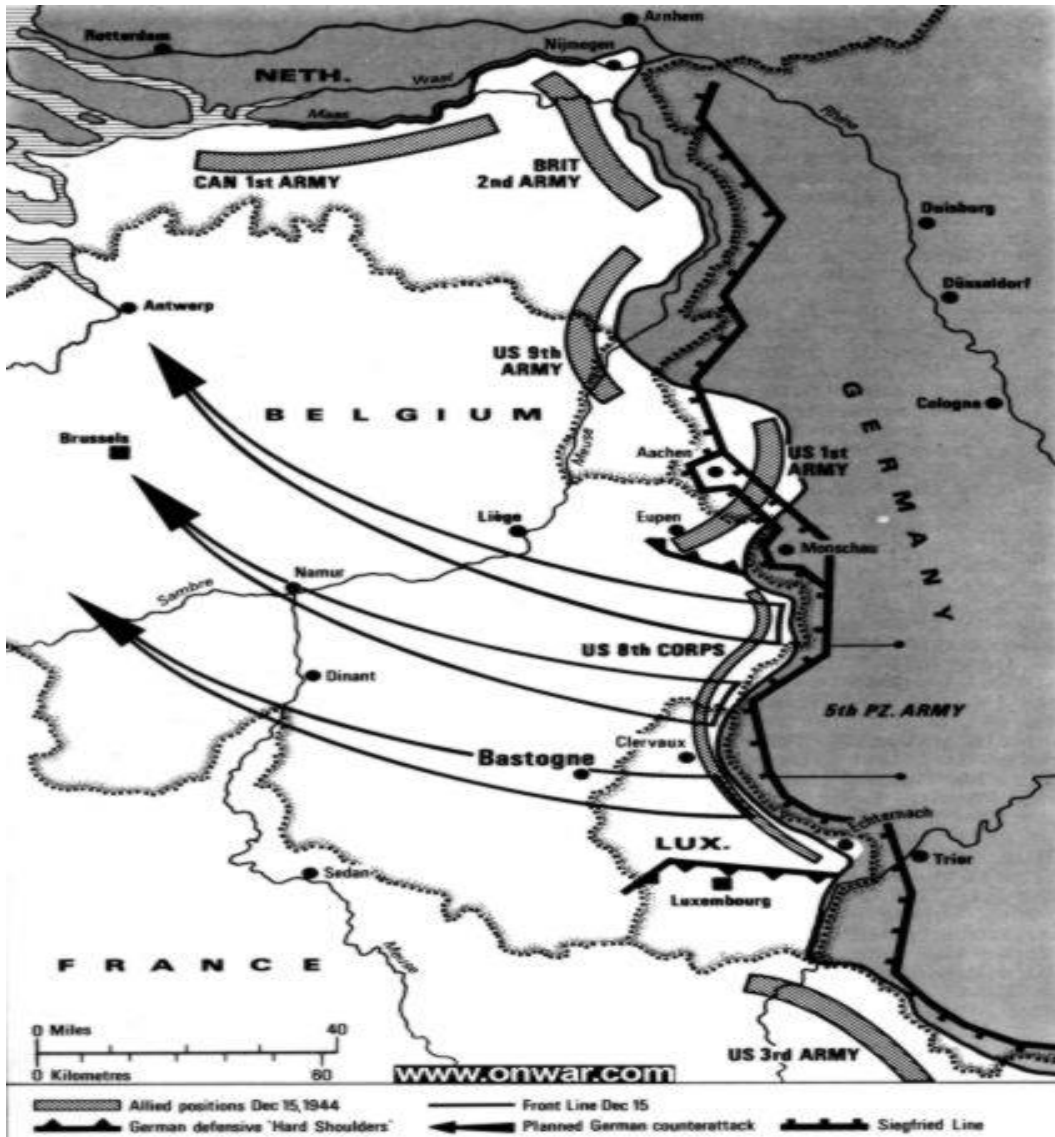
This is a current day picture of Dinant, with a bridge across the Meuse. This photo is used here to show Meuse and the steep river banks.



This is another view of the Meuse and the Ardennes.



This map shows the German plans for the attack. Note the location of Liège and the Meuse River.

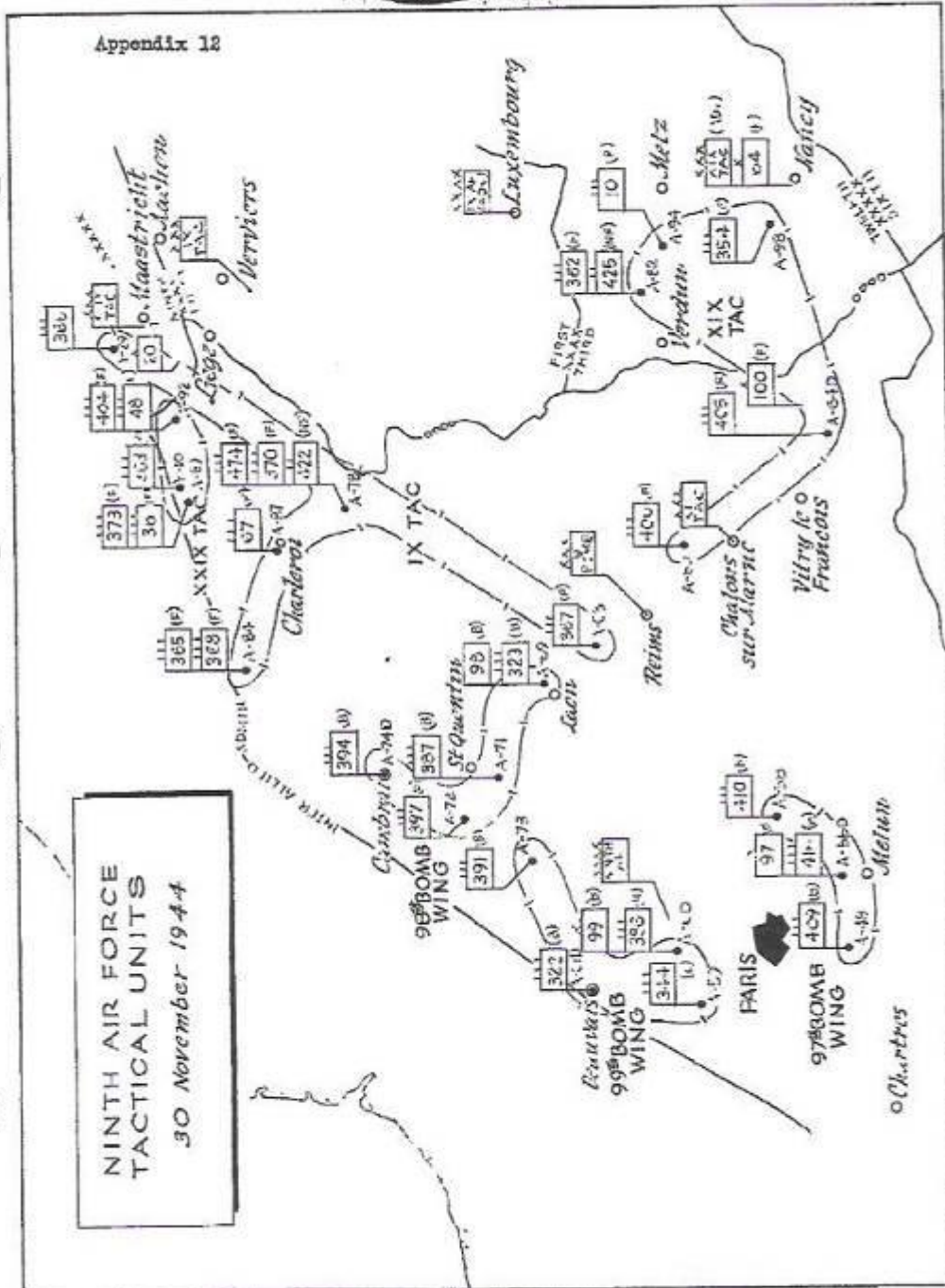


During the V-1 and V-2 attacks on Antwerp and Liège, Battery B moved to Airfield Y-29. At the time, Y-29 was the most forward of all of the American air bases in Europe.

A report I read from a pilot at Y-29 said: “The field was so close to the German lines that aircraft in the landing pattern was occasionally fired upon by German antiaircraft units”.

You can see the location of Y-29 on the next page. It is north of Liège, and is the furthest north of the airfields. It is difficult to make out the “Y-29” on the map, but it is the airfield with the “366” flag.

Appendix 12



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All records refer to Y-29 as in “Asch” Belgium. That was a source of considerable consternation for me, since I could not find “Asch” on any map of Belgium. I finally realized that Belgium is a bilingual country. It turns out that “Asch” in French is “As” in Flemish (or “Dutch”), and both “Asch” and “As” are shorthands for the real town name – “Niel-pres-d’Asch” in French, “Niel-bij-As” in Flemish, and, sometimes both, as in “Niel-bij-Asch”. This is why I was confused. To find this area on a map, it is north of the current town of Zutendaal, and not far from Maastricht. Maastricht is the Dutch city on the east bank of the Meuse.

Here’s what the Meuse looks like at Maastricht.



Conditions at Y-29 were primitive, as best. I didn’t learn this from AAA men. Rather, it came from a report of pilots who were also moved there in December. These pilots were stationed in England in the Eighth Air Force. While they flew regular, and dangerous, missions over the continent of Europe, they were used to flying “home” and living in a “real building” and sleeping in a “real bed”. The new base at Y-29 was a bit different.

December, 1944 was one of the roughest winters in memory, but the officers and men slept in tents with virtually no protection from the cold or deep snow. To quote one pilot: “We lived in tents hidden partly in the woods on the south side of the field, and it was extremely cold in those tents at night. Most of us were frozen stiff the first night, when we hit the sack without adequate cover, not knowing how cold it got there after dark. The morning found covers frosted, and the ground inside the tent covered with a layer of white frost. After the first night we went to bed in our heavy flying suits and wrapped ourselves in ten or twelve blankets. The last one to turn in would fill the stove with fuel until it was red hot and then retire in the same manner.” It’s funny that I read this report from pilots at Y-29, and not from any of the AAA men stationed there.

It was in conditions like these that Private Boyd and the rest of Battery B climbed into their tents on the night of December 15, 1944.

December 16, 1944, was a cold and snowy day in the Ardennes. Allied troops in the region may have been a bit complacent, and Christmas was less than 10 days away. There was a 500 mile front line from Netherlands to Switzerland, manned by the Americans and British on one side and the Germans on the other. Few on the Allied side of the line expected to see a German offensive, and no one in the Ardennes expected to see an offensive there.

For the offensive, “bad weather” was “good weather” for the Germans. The attack was timed to begin when visibility would be at its worst, and the American planes grounded. For the first critical days of the battle, the weather totally negated Allied air superiority.

That morning, 20 German divisions – 250,000 men and 950 tanks – poured into the Ardennes. Relatively, the Ardennes was lightly defended by the Americans – approximately 83,000 men and 420 tanks. The offensive caught the Americans completely off guard.

Over the next two days, the Germans advanced steadily and forced the Americans to retreat all along the front. By the 19th, the Germans reached Bastogne. But the American 101st Airborne got there first and mounted a vigorous defense. Over the next several days, the Germans surrounded Bastogne and the 101st, but proceeded to go around the city and advance further to the Meuse.

At first the Americans did not know the extent, or direction, of the attack. The Americans immediately suspected the goal as the Meuse and Antwerp. There were at least two other possibilities, though. The Germans might turn sharply at the Meuse, before crossing it, and trap all of the Allied soldiers on the east side of the river. Or, they might turn south and head for Sedan, France, and then even to Paris. Eisenhower was forced to guard against all of these possibilities, and sent reinforcements to all sectors near the advance. But within 48 hours, the Allies diagnosed the German intent as driving to the Meuse in the vicinity of Liège.

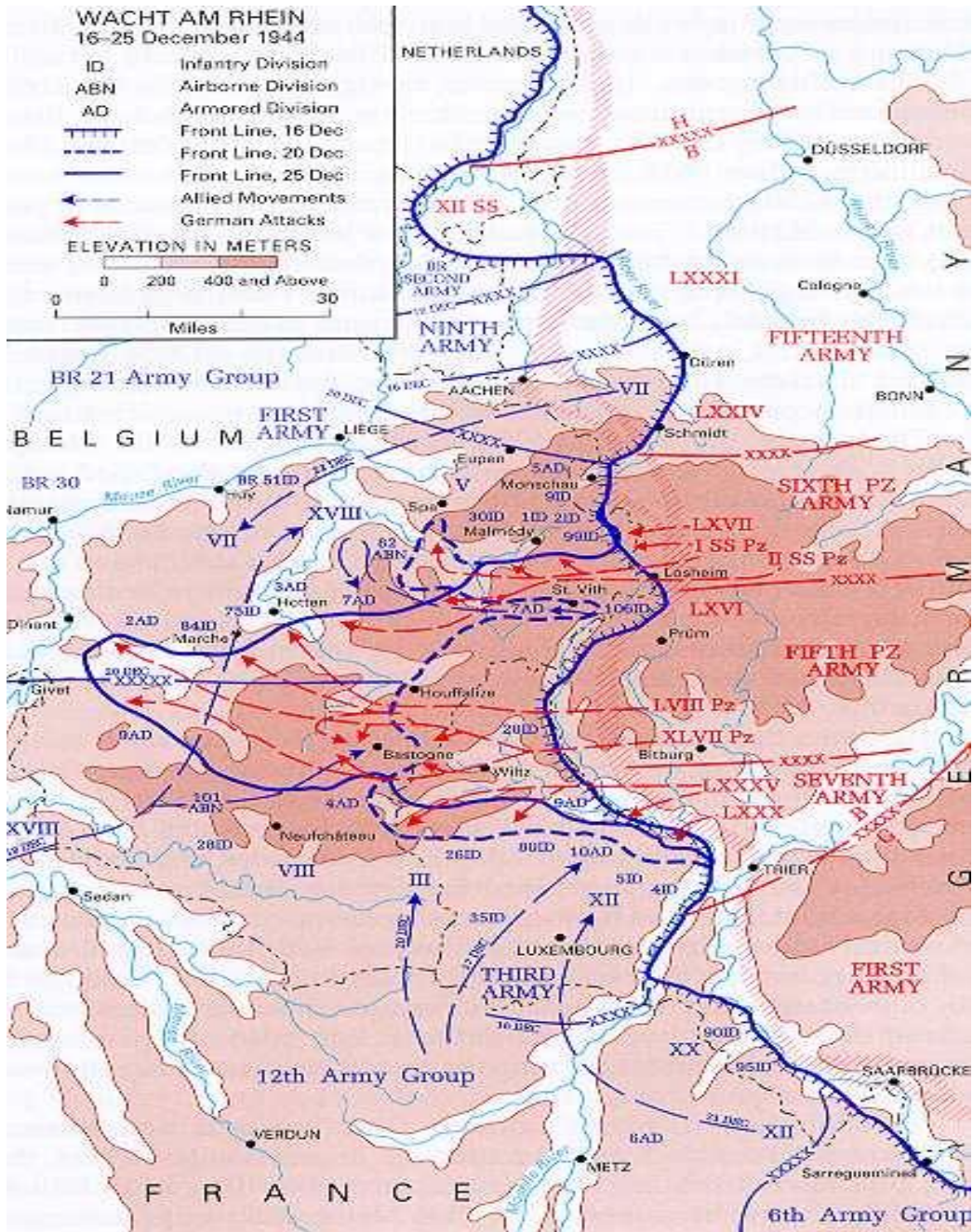
On December 20th, General Patton broke off his engagement with the Germans in Saarland, and moved much of his Third Army north to the Ardennes. The rest remained in the Saar to prevent German advances there.

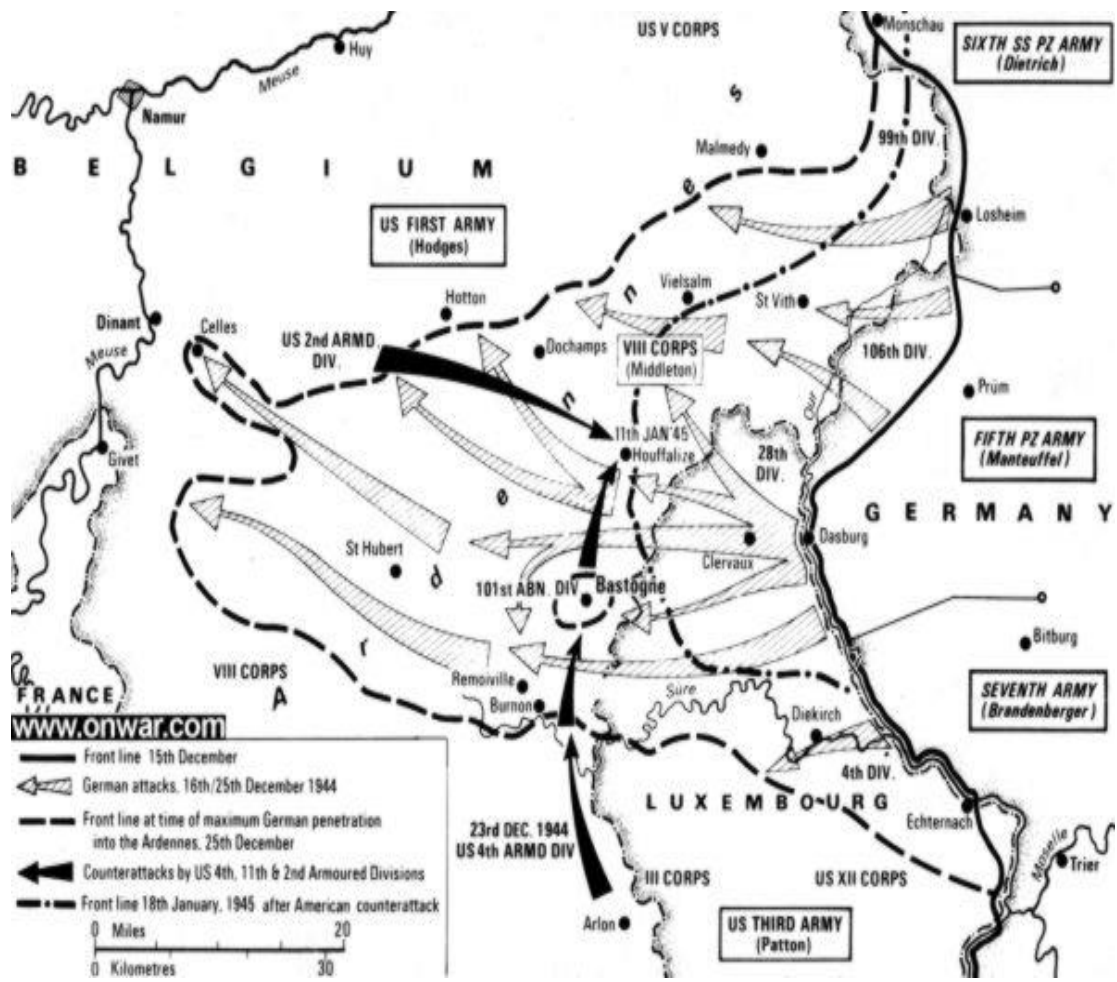
To further defend the Meuse, Eisenhower ordered two divisions, then training in England, to be directed to the river without delay. It would take them a week to arrive. Other available troops within general region were ordered there as well, and arrived sooner.

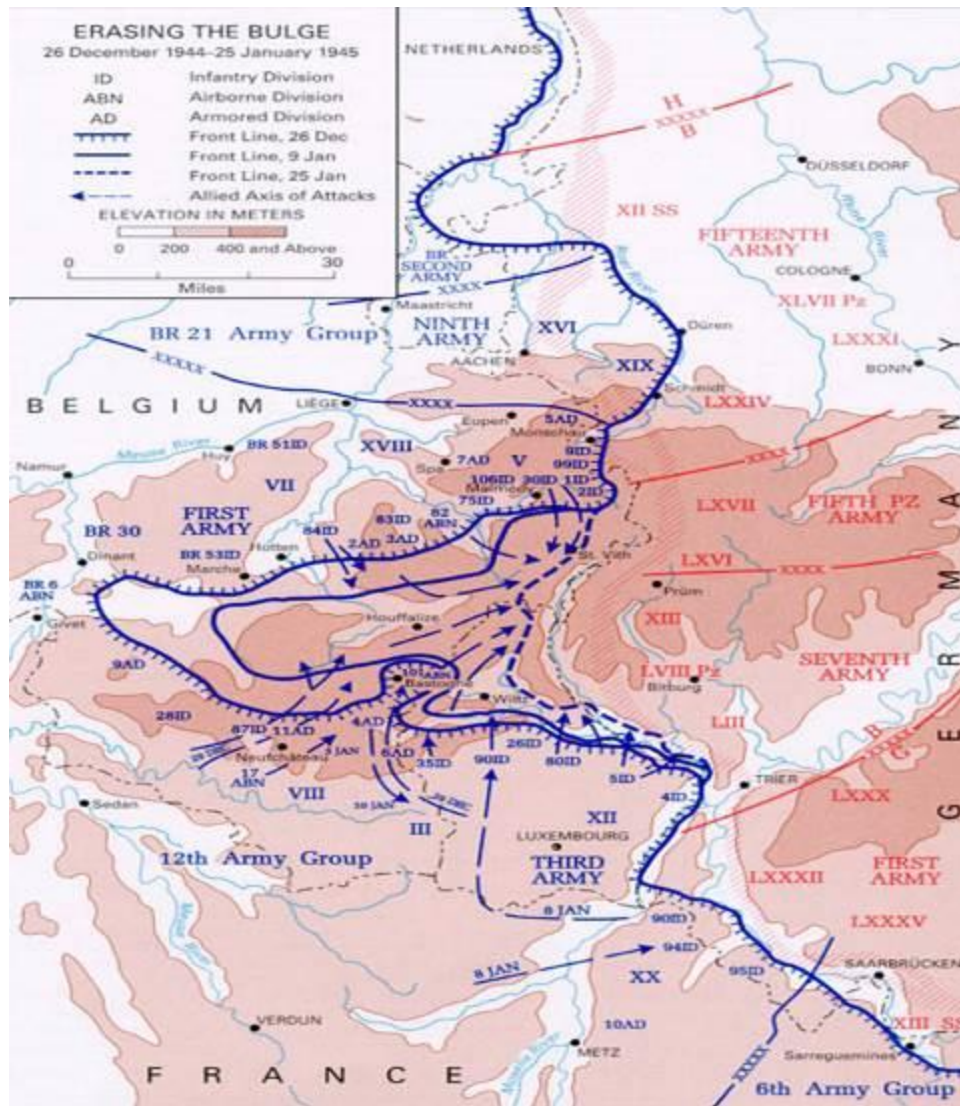
Until they arrived, the defenses at the Meuse were make-shift at best, motley at worst. Many portions of the river were guarded by troops brought up from depots, supply dumps, administrative installations, and headquarters in France and western Belgium. As late as December 22nd, several bridges had no organized defense whatever.

It was in this situation that the 784th AAA Automatic Weapons Battalion undertook the defense of vital areas along the Meuse River. Since two batteries were already in Liège, they were among first units to take a defense position.

The next three maps show the positions of the armies before Christmas, on Christmas, and after Christmas, 1944. Note the position of Liège in each map.







The battle quickly became known as the Battle of the Bulge, because of the bulging shape of the battleground area, as seen on military maps like the ones above.

As the German's advanced closer to the Meuse, the 784th was attached to the First Army to assist in the defense. HQ formulated plans to use the 784th as an anti-tank unit. Artillery guns from A and C batteries were moved to both sides of the river. Battery D was still in France, and was cut off from the rest of the battalion.

In the meantime, the rocket attacks still had to be dealt with, and had increased in intensity. And as visibility cleared, the *Luftwaffe* stepped up bombing raids,

especially at night. The 784th's artillery and automatic weapons fired night and day.

There were many areas of intense fighting along the perimeters of the bulge and (in the case of Bastogne) within the bulge itself. The fighting along the approaches to the Meuse were as intense as anywhere.

By Christmas, the German offensive began to lose steam, and many within the German high command saw no further opportunity for success west of the Meuse. They did, though, see possibilities for success on the east side.

But December 26th was the turning point at the Bulge. Elements of the First Army stopped the advance at Celles, east of Dinant. The bad weather, which prevented Allied planes from participating in the battle, cleared by the 26th. The Ninth Air Force strafed and bombed German positions throughout the sector. And the first elements of Patton's Third Army arrived at Bastogne, providing the 101st with much needed assistance.

Within a few days after Christmas, the German offensive was spent. The Germans were short on supplies, and had almost no petroleum at all. Many saw the futility of it all, and lost the urge to fight on. The British counterattacked the Bulge from the north, the Third Army from the south, the First Army from the west, and the air force from above. And the Germans began the long retreat.

The German commanders, though, had one more plan. And the target was Y-29 and the other forward airfields.

As the Battle of the Bulge progressed, the Americans moved more and more planes to these forward airfields. One of these was a squadron with new P-51 Mustangs that arrived to Y-29 from England on December 23rd. The P-51s joined the P-47s already there.

As the "bulge" in the American lines began to shrink, the 784th was able to move Battery D up to Y-29, to assist Battery B.

The German Air Force designed Operation Bodenplatte to combat the Allied air strength building up in Belgium. Bodenplatte was designed to be a surprise, all-out attack on the American frontline airfields. The ambitious goal was to wipe out the

Allied aircraft at these bases, and prevent them from harassing the retreating German army.

The *Luftwaffe* had been silent in Belgium for many weeks. But it was reinforced, and came out of hiding. Bodenplatte called for 10 German air groups to each commit 100 planes to the attack – for a total of 1,000 planes. The orders were to strafe 17 targeted Allied advance airfields – one of them being Y-29. (By one account, the number of targeted bases was 27).

The attack was planned for the morning of January 1, 1945 – New Year’s Day. The Germans hoped that the Americans might celebrate a bit too much on New Year’s Eve, and be a bit hung over (and late to rise) on January 1st.

Y-29 did have one tent which served as the airfield bar, but the base commander limited drinks on New Year’s Eve to one drink per man. He also ordered the pilots to bed early, with a mission planned the next morning.

By most accounts, the Germans weren’t able to get all 1,000 planes airborne on the 1st. The Ninth Air Force officially reported 700 or 800 German planes in the attack. Some unofficial sources put the number in excess of 1,000. At least 50 of the German planes were assigned to attack and destroy Y-29.

The German air attack was kept so secret, that German ground forces were not advised in advance. At least one, and probably more, German planes were shot down by German antiaircraft fire before starting the raid.

The pilots and ground crews of newly arrived P-51 Mustang squadron were up early on New Year’s Day. After breakfast, they got ready for that day’s mission. About 9:15 a.m., the P-51s were on the runway and began takeoff. At about 9:20 a.m., the German fighters arrived. Despite the fire, the P-51s were able to successfully take off. One P-51 pilot scored his first kill on takeoff, before he had retracted his wheels.

What happened next is sometimes called the “Legend of Y-29”.

For the next few hours, the P-51s and the German planes engaged in a dogfight over Y-29, with the 784th providing antiaircraft artillery support.

No one had an opportunity to take any photographs of the event, but the scene was re-created by an artist after January 1st. This is the recreation:





Depending upon how you look at it, and whose numbers you believe, Bodenplatte was either an astounding, but suicidal, success. Or it was a complete fiasco for the Germans.

Bodenplatte did not accomplish its mission, by any means, since it failed to destroy a sufficient number of American forward airfields. By Ninth Air Force records, the Germans did manage to destroy 127 American planes. By another account, more than 300 Allied aircraft were knocked out of action. And many of the forward airfields were in ruins.

The Germans, though, lost 160 planes to the American air force. And they lost another 300 to American AAA units! These German planes, and, more importantly, these German pilots, could not be replaced. The *Luftwaffe* was never again a force to be reckoned with in the war.

The “kill” ratio was the most dramatic at Y-29. The P-51 squadron (the “bluenose” planes in the middle re-creation above) reported 23 kills – at a cost of two damaged P-51s. There were no “kills” of any American planes at Y-29.

Of the 50 German planes which attacked Y-29, 40 were shot down. I did not find an exact count of AAA “kills”, but, doing the math, it must have been 17.

I have a notion of how many of those were shot down by Section Dog, Battery B, but I will let coming photographs tell that story.

To quote the 784th's official record:

“For our participation and success in the attacks, we received theatre-wide recognition in Air Force and Ground Force Operations and Intelligence Bulletins. The action at Y-29 was cited in numerous instances as the most perfect example of fighter aircraft and antiaircraft artillery cooperation on record.”

The 784th had yet another distinction at the Ardennes Offensive. The Germans introduced jet-propelled planes to the war in Belgium. The jets were much faster, and more deadly, than anything else flying at the time. Fortunately, the Germans didn't have many of them.

And they were not invulnerable – the 784th shot one of them down! This was reported as the first unit in the western front to shoot down a jet-propelled plane. (Evidently, a Russian AAA unit must have shot down a jet at the eastern front). I saw references to the jet kill in the records, but none of them identified the battery or gun section.

The fighting in and around the Ardennes continued through the middle of January, 1945, by which time the lines was restored to where they were before the German offensive.

The Germans engaged 250,000 troops in the Ardennes offensive. Nearly half – 120,000 – were killed, wounded or captured. The cost to the Allies was nearly as severe, with 77,000 casualties.

German equipment losses in the campaign were irreplaceable. The Allies, in contrast, replaced their lost equipment within a matter of weeks.

In recognition of the defense of along the Meuse River – at Liège and at Y-29, the Belgium government, in an official “order of the day”, cited the 784th AAA Automatic Weapons Battalion for bravery and valor in service of Belgium. This was the 784th's second “order of the day” citation.

Here are some photos of AAA and artillery units at the Meuse and the Bulge.

This a photo of a 37mm gun covering the approach on a road in Belgium on December 23rd. This is an example of the type of ground support provided by AAA units in the Ardennes.



The first photo is of an AAA gun at Rochefort, Belgium. The second is of a half-track with a mounted quad .50 caliber machine gun, taken at the Bulge.



These next two photographs are of artillery-damaged Rochefort.



The next several photos are from Chester Boyd's collection.

On the next photo, Chester wrote this on the back: *"This is in Belgium. The planes are four P47's coming back from a mission over Germany. That is me on the left*

side of the gun. The faint markings on the front of the gun are four swastikas, there for obvious reasons.”

I'm not sure what Chester meant by the “me on the left side of the gun”. The gun is facing in the general direction of the camera, so the soldier “on the left side of the gun” is the squatting soldier on the right of the picture. If you think of the gun as facing right, perpendicular to the camera, then the soldier “on the left side of the gun” is the soldier in the middle of the picture. If the soldier on the left side of the picture is “on the left side of the gun”, then the standing soldier is the soldier on the left. In any event, one of these three soldiers is Chester.

The photo identifies the place only as “Belgium”. Chester had other stations in Belgium, but I suspect that this was at Y-29, and probably in January or February, 1945.

The gun unit shown is a quad .50 caliber machine gun. Note the “semi-permanent” nature of the sandbags and the heavy jacket on the standing soldier.



This is a smiling Chester behind the same quad .50 caliber machine gun. Note the four swastikas – which signifies four German planes shot down by this gun unit at Y-29. I apologize for the quality of the photo, but the original was blurred as well.



By way, the “kills” of an AAA unit is not the only measure of its success. Remember that the mission of antiaircraft is to protect strategic positions – airfields, bridges, roadway, railroad junctions, etc. If enemy planes attack such a position, and are faced with intense and accurate antiaircraft fire, the planes might call off the attack and look for easier targets. In such a case, the AAA unit has accomplished its mission, even without any kills.

This photo was not identified, but that appears to be Chester in the back row on the left - the only member of this crew wearing sunglasses. From the layout of the sandbags, this may also be at Y-29. I recognize two of his crewmates from the "Section Dog" photo, but I'm not sure about the other three.



This is another photo from Chester's collection, which may also be from Y-29. This is not "his" gun, since it does not have the four swastikas.



This last photograph was taken a few years ago. The monument is at “Airfield Y-29”.



The U.S. Army does not ordinarily permit one of its units to receive a recognition from a foreign government. It made an exception, after World War II, to permit certain recognitions from the governments of France, Belgium, Netherlands, and the Philippines. (It made similar exceptions in Korea and Vietnam.) The *Fourragère* is Belgium’s special recognition, and thanks, to the units which served with special valor in Belgium during World War II.

The Belgian *Fourragère* may be awarded by the Belgian Government if a unit was cited twice in an order of the day. Award of the *Fourragère* is not automatic and requires a specific decree of the Belgian Government. The 784th became eligible for the award by its citation for meritorious service in the defense of Liège during the buzz bomb attacks, and in the defense of the Meuse River during the Ardennes Offensive.

The *Fourragère* is a cordon worn over the right shoulder of the army dress uniform. These are photos and drawings of the *Fourragère*. The last one is of the *Fourragère* battle ribbon.



The *Fourragère* has an interesting history and tradition. The origin is attributed to Flemish troops in the 19th Century. These troops had earned the wrath of their commander after a particularly poor battlefield performance. The commander threatened to hang everyone in the unit if performance did not improve.

In the next engagement – either for convenience or in defiance – each soldier entered the battle with a rope around one shoulder, fashioned in a noose on one end and a spike on the other. The spike and noose could be used easily to complete the hanging after the battle.

But the men performed so well in battle that the rope and spike (the “*fourragère*”) became a badge of high honor. Over the years, the noose was stylized into a braided rope, and the spike into a brass attachment at the end. This is another view of the “spike”.



I was unable to find a copy of either order of the day which recognized the 784th, or of the certificate awarding it the *Fourragère*.

This is the text of a certificate awarded to another unit of the Ninth Air Force, which gives a general flavor of the award.

*“Headquarters XXIX Tactical Air Command
Munich, Germany
Citation for The Belgian Fourragère 1940*

1. His Royal Highness and Prince-Regent of Belgium has twice cited the XXIX Tactical Air Command in Orders of the Day of the Belgian Army-Decision No. 717, dated 7 July 1945, for meritorious service in Belgium from 1 October 1944 to 15 January 1945 inclusive, in connection with military operations against the enemy.

2. The unceasing and heroic efforts of the Officers and Enlisted personnel of the units of the XXIX Tactical Air Command permitted this headquarters to organize and prescribe the missions so effectively carried out against the enemy. Yours was a decisive and

glorious part in the defeat of the enemy during the Battle of the Ardennes and you have helped immeasurably in the liberation of Belgium.

3. For these two citations, His Royal Highness the Prince-Regent of Belgium has awarded you The Belgian Fourragère (1940). This certificate authorizes you the right to wear this Fourragère as a visible token of your military virtue and the gratitude of the peoples of Belgium. The War Department has approved the awarding of The Belgian Fourragère (1940) with citation per War Department Cable (AG-WAR-WX 32845 dated 15 July 1945).

4. It is to be noted that having been an original member of your organization during the period 1 October 1944 to 15 January 1945 inclusive, you are authorized by the War Department to wear the Fourragère over the right shoulder when in proper uniform in any branch or echelon of the United States Army, Navy, or Marine Corps establishments.

*R. E. NUGENT
Brigadier General, U. S. Army, Commanding”*

The 784th remained in and around Liège and the Meuse through April, 1945. The stay was not uneventful.

Despite the failure of the Ardennes offensive, Hitler ordered more rocket attacks on Belgium. The attacks continued, almost daily, through March, 1945, and actually peaked in February. Several battalions of AAA men remained in Belgium through March to combat the rocket attacks.

Over time, Allied ground troops overtook more and more of the launching sites. Germany's ability to produce the weapons in greater numbers was also eroded by aerial bombings and the lack of resources.

And AAA success rates continued to climb. By the spring of 1945, AAA's kill rate of V-1s hit 98%!

Belgian post war researchers estimated that 12,000 V-1s and over 1,300 V-2s were launched against Belgium. Allied records indicated that only 2,500 of the V-1s got through. Most importantly though, the port of Antwerp remained open throughout the rocket attacks of 1944 and 1945.

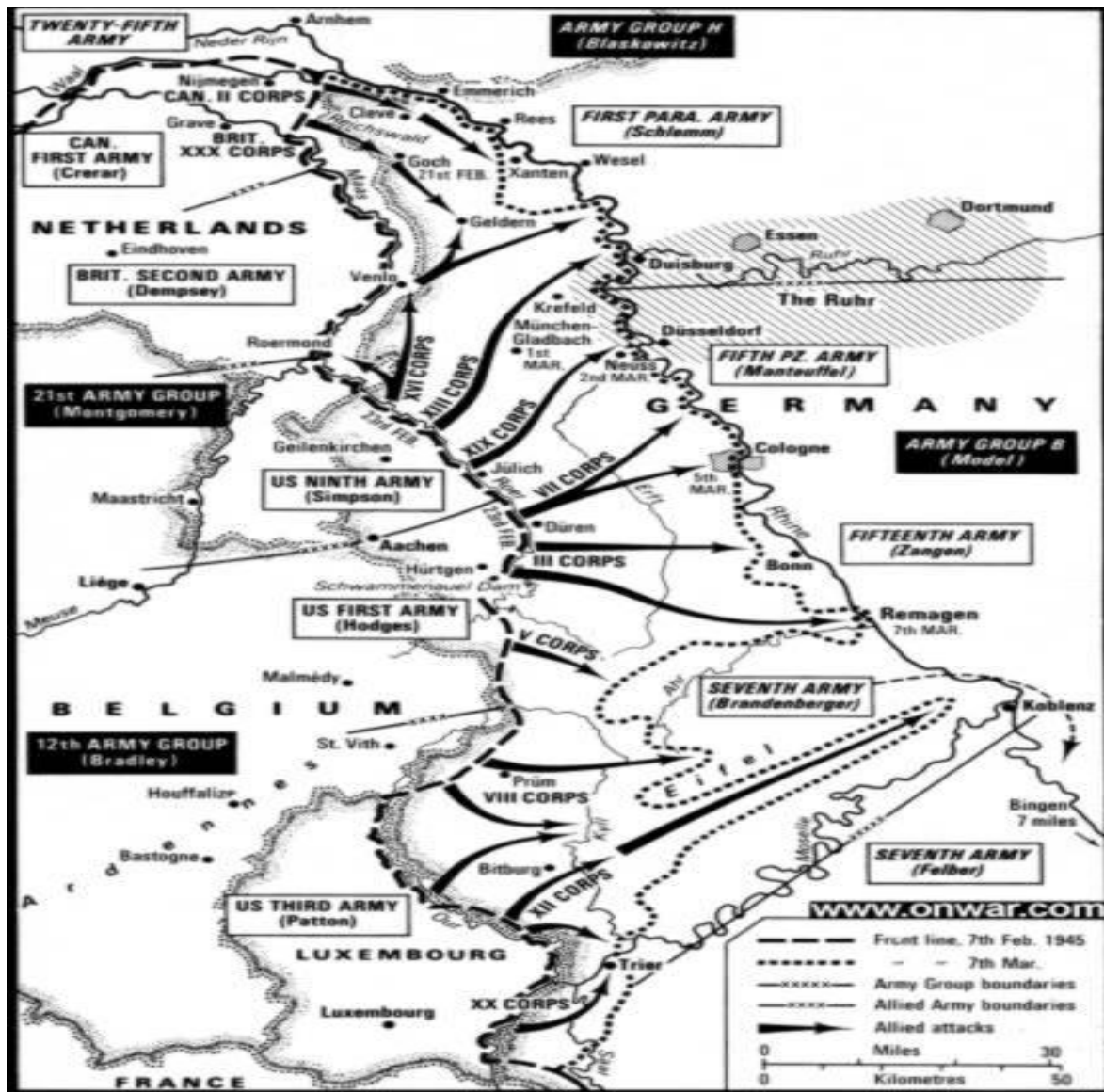
German resistance along the Rhine remained stiff during the next 60 days. The Americans crossed the Siegfried Line in early February, and Saarland later that month. By the 28th, Americans were near Cologne.

In March, the Allies opened a 150 mile front, from Trier in the south and Netherlands to the north. The Germans blew up every bridge around Cologne to prevent a crossing of the Rhine, but neglected a railway bridge at Remagen. Elements of the First Army poured over the Remagen bridge on March 7th and established a foothold on the other side.

Within a week, Patton and his Third Army crossed the Rhine at Nierstein, and Montgomery and the British crossed at Wessel.

With the Allies east of the Rhine, the Rhineland campaign was over!

This map shows the advances made in the early months of 1945.



Chester Boyd and the 784th did not cover a lot of mileage during the Rhineland campaign. But they did see more than their share of hard service.

This map of Belgium shows the travels of Private Boyd during the campaign.



Laon to Chièvres, back to Laon/Guignicourt, to Liège, to Y-29/Asch, and back to Liège.

It's possible that this journey took Private Boyd to Luxembourg as well. An Iowa newspaper recently included the obituary of a man who was a staff sergeant, in a motor transportation unit, of the 784th Antiaircraft Automatic Weapons Battalion. The obituary recited his places of service as "England, Wales, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany". The only place name here, different than that noted so far for Chester, was Luxembourg. I do not doubt that Chester was there as well.

XIV

Central Europe and the End of the War

German defenses crumbled after the Rhine crossing. In late March, Americans moved into Frankfurt largely unchecked. In early April, Allied soldiers entered the Ruhr Valley industrial heartland. By mid April, the British took Arnhem, Netherlands, and Patton crossed Germany and into the Czech border.

Meanwhile, the Russians pushed west. They crossed the Oder River and prepared to take Berlin with 2.5 million men. American soldiers moving east, and Russian soldiers moving west, met at the Elbe River.

The 784th no longer encountered German planes in Belgium, and made its move into Germany in April. The battalion (with the exception of Battery A) arrived in Handorf on April 10th, and immediately established defenses for airfield A-94. Battery A moved to support another airfield near Gütersloh in the Ruhr Valley.

Handorf was a former German airfield, and was the target of several Eighth Air Force bombing missions in 1944. In March, 1945, the Americans took over the air field, and used it for further missions against the Germans. Many fighter squadrons moved from Belgium to Handorf in April as well.

The role of the AAA units changed by this point. The emphasis was now on security. Barbed wire surrounded the airfields, and road blocks protected access.

While the forward troops were making advances throughout Germany, there were still pockets of resistance. A number of battles, smaller in scale than those fought previously, were being waged behind the front lines.

The personal recollections of a pilot in the Ninth Air Force, referred to his service at the airfield at Handorf beginning in March, 1945. The photo on the next page was taken by him in March at Handorf. (The pilot shown here was killed weeks later.) The plane pictured is carrying a full combat load – three 500 lb. bombs, four anti-tank rockets, and eight .50 caliber machine guns.



(During the Cold War, Handorf was used as a NATO missile base.)

Adolf Hitler committed suicide on April 30th, to avoid capture by the Russians. The Germans hastily formed a new government, which promptly surrendered to the Allies. The formal surrender was May 5, 1945 (“VE-Day”, for Victory in Europe).

The war in Europe was over, at least officially.

Pockets of resistance remained in various places, and the fighting continued for several weeks. The “peace” was not so easy either, as insurgencies erupted from time to time over the next months – which, incidentally, were put down forcefully and ruthlessly by the Allies.

The war continued in the Pacific as well. The battle for Okinawa raged in the spring and early summer of 1945, until the Japanese island fell to the Americans in June. The Americans prepared for the massive invasion of Japan, which was scheduled for late 1945 or early 1946.

As it turned out, the invasion was not necessary. The Americans dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima on August 6th, and on Nagasaki on August 9th. The Japanese surrendered on August 14th (“VJ-Day”, for Victory over Japan”).

Handorf is located near Hamburg. Here are two maps showing its location.



Handorf



This is Private Boyd, posing casually next to a rack of bombs. With his helmet tilted to one side, he looks a bit cocky as well. I do not know when or where this was taken (other than it was taken at an airfield). The bomb on the ground, at the right of the photo, suggests that to me that this is at Handorf, shortly after the Germans vacated the airfield in a hasty retreat.



I didn't know where to place this photo, since it is unmarked as to date and place, and the actual photo doesn't give me a clue. This photo is a little blurred, but that is Chester standing on the left.



For service within Germany prior to the end of combat, the 784th was awarded its fourth combat recognition – Normandy, Northern France, Rhineland, and, now, Central Europe.

Army records noted the location of every unit as of the end of the war – which the army defined as the Japanese surrender. These records note that the 784th was in Handorf, Germany in August, 1945. I think that this is incorrect. While Chester and most of the 784th was in Handorf on VE-Day, he was gone by July. He was on his way to Munich.

XV

The Occupation of Germany and the Return Home

The defeat of Germany left the United States and the other Allies with one more enormous task. That was the administration of a nation left totally prostrate by the war.

German cities were somewhere between 50% and 95% destroyed. The industrial infrastructure, educational systems, and communication systems were also destroyed. There were severe food and housing shortages. There was an absence of non-Nazi leadership to begin any orderly governance or rebuilding

Resurgencies within Germany needed to be crushed. War criminals needed to be found and tried. The entire nation needed to be “denazified”. Millions of “displaced persons” – mainly concentration camp survivors and forced laborers – needed food and medical care, and assistance to return home.

There were over 1.6 million American soldiers in Germany at the time of the surrender, and more than 3.0 million total in Europe. These Americans (and their Russian, British, Canadian, and French counterparts) spread over the countryside and took control of Germany.

The political leaders divided Germany into four different zones for administration purposes.

A map of the zones is on the next page. (The City of Berlin was likewise divided into four separate zones.)



The American zone included Frankfurt and Munich. Handorf, Germany, was located in the British zone. Private Boyd and the 784th moved from Handorf to the American zone sometime (I believe July) in 1945.

The next several photos provide a clue as to what the American soldiers had to deal with in the occupation of Germany.

These are German prisoners of war being led by American soldiers in Munich.



This is a Berlin street in March, 1945.



This is the main railroad station in Munich.



This is Nuremburg in April, 1945.



These next two photos of unnamed German cities were typical. Note the woman in the first photo doing her laundry in the foreground.



De-nazification required, among other things, changing the name of this street. Note that it is being done under the supervision of an American soldier.



This U.S. officer swears in a buergermeister and five policemen.



These Germans are digging a mass grave, under the supervision of American soldiers, for concentration camp victims at Nordhausen.



For the 90 days after Germany's surrender, American soldiers were also preparing for a transfer to the Pacific. Many of the soldiers in Europe would be needed for the planned invasion of Japan. Japan's surrender in August obviously ended this necessity.

After the surrender of Japan, the hope of most American soldiers in Europe was to return home – as soon as possible.

A few years ago, a daughter of WWII vet, then in his 80s, collected as many of his recollections and his military papers as possible. The papers noted that he was a private in the 784th. His papers and recollections, as told to her, generally matched our records for Private Boyd.

This other private had two recollections, though, that were in addition to those that we've already collected for Private Boyd. One is that he had seen Dachau concentration camp. He spoke to his daughter about what he had seen there.

Dachau was the first large-scale concentration camp in Germany, located 15 miles or so from Munich. The camp was liberated by American soldiers in April, 1945 (while the 784th was in Handorf). Since it was one of the first camps liberated by the Allies, it was one of the first places which exposed the rest of the world to the Nazi brutality. Since Dachau was in the American zone, it is quite possible that Private Boyd was also at Dachau later in 1945.

This is what Chester saw on his way to Munich. This photo was, in his words, *“taken from a truck in convoy in Stuttgart, Germany. Most of the cities look like this or worse – July, 1945”*.



Chester had other photos in his collection dated in July, 1945, Munich. Some of these were of other soldiers in his battalion. He also took photos of some German planes. One was identified as having a new push-pull design, and another as being jet-propelled.

Chester and his friends also attended a Jack Benny show in Munich, at the Statz Stadium, in July. He took a picture of the podium (too distant to make anything out). He also had a newspaper clipping of the show, with a picture of Jack Benny and Ingrid Bergman.

This all suggests that he left Handorf well before August, 1945.

Chester definitely was in Munich in October, 1945, and he took many “tourist” type photographs. Here are a few of them.

On the back of this one, Chester wrote: *“This is our barracks at Munich”*.



The back of this one reads: *“I don’t know what I was mad about. Ha! The building in the background is Germany museum. Oct. 1945.”* This is one of the few pictures found in which Chester is not smiling.



Hitler's favorite hideaway was in Bertchesgarden in the German Alps near Munich. Private Boyd took a tour of it while in Munich.

Written on the back of this photo, in Chester's handwriting, is: *"Hitler's Crows' Nest. Around on the other side of the building is a large window which he used to gaze out of and dream of world conquest. The mountain is straight down on the other side"*.



On the back of the photo on the next page, Chester wrote: *"This is the remains of Goering's home at Bertchesgarden. All of the barracks and houses in this vicinity look very much the same, or maybe worse"*.



I suspect Chester also took at least one side trip to Austria. There were two postcards with his papers. One shows a pre-war picture of downtown Linz. Chester's handwritten note on the back is "St. in Austria".

This is the second postcard, of a castle in Linz. Chester wrote on the back: "Blue Danube River".



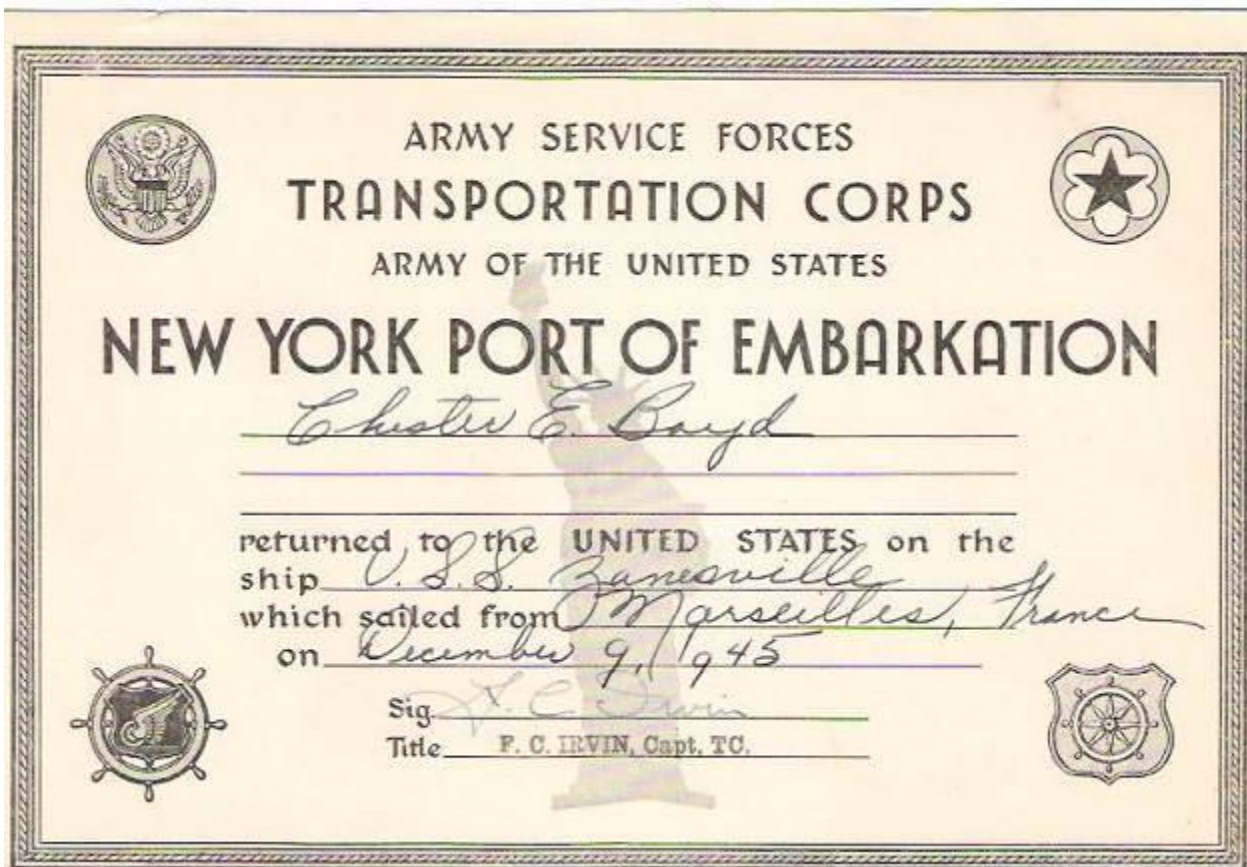
When all of this is linked together, here is the approximate path of Chester Boyd's European journey.



I color coded the lines: red is April, 1943, blue is May and June, 1943, yellow is July, 1943, white is August and September, is the remainder of 1943 and the first few months of 1945, and pink is the remainder of 1945. All approximate, of course.

Our other private recalled that he sailed to Europe on the *Queen Mary* (this was one of my sources of information), and that he returned to the United States on the *USAT George Washington*. His papers included an edition of *The Hatchet*, the *George Washington* newsletter, dated November 21-24, 1945. This was a clue to date the return trip to the U.S.A.

I nearly concluded that Chester returned home on the *George Washington* as well, until I found this document in his papers.



This looks fairly official, and conclusive. Chester Boyd left Marseilles, France, in late November or early December, and arrived in New York City on December 9, 1945. And he crossed the ocean on the *U.S.S. Zanesville*.

The correct name of the ship, by the way, was the *USS Zanesville Victory*. It was one of the “victory ships”, successor to the “liberty ships”. 531 of these vessels were built during the war. The name of every victory ship included the word “victory” in the suffix. The first of these ships were named after allied countries. Later ships were named after U.S. cities (like, Zanesville, Ohio). The *USS Zanesville Victory* was built by Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyards in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1944. It was scrapped in Portland, Oregon in 1976.

I was not able to find a photograph of the *Zanesville Victory*. Here, though, is an era- photograph of another victory ship.



Here, then, is the same map used earlier in this history, with the reverse voyage across the Atlantic.



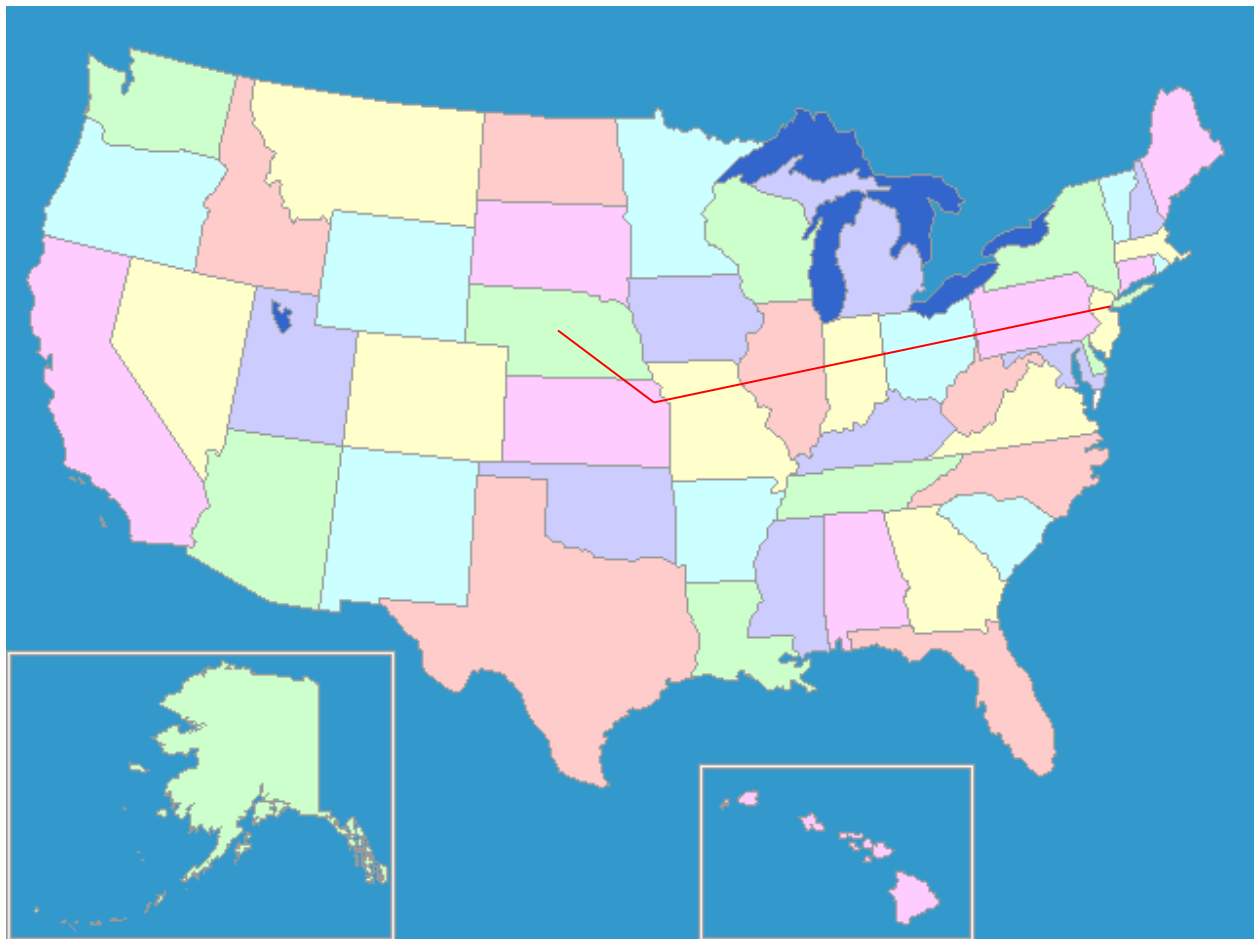
Soon after his arrival in New York, Private Boyd would have boarded a train bound for Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I do not know of the exact date of his arrival in New York or at Ft. Leavenworth. In one of those two locations, or perhaps

while en route, Chester Boyd turned 21. He would have, at last, been legally able to buy a beer.

The 784th AAA Automatic Weapons Battalion was formally inactivated as a unit within the U.S. Army by an order issued somewhere in Germany on December 31, 1945. (The 784th was, however, redesignated as the 26th Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion in 1948 and was active in the Korean War.)

Chester Boyd, though, was no longer in the 784th when it became inactive. He was discharged on December 27, 1945 at the Separation Center of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. One presumes that he was back in Elm Creek before the end of the year.

Here is the same map used earlier in this history, with the reverse trip across the country.



The stated reasons for Private Boyd's discharge was "convenience of the government (demobilization)". The war was over, and his services were no longer needed.

The honorable discharge notes "Arm or Service – CAC" and "Component – AUS". "CAC" in Army parlance can mean a variety of things. In this context, I believe it means "Coastal Artillery Corps." "AUS" in this context means "Army of the United States".

The discharge notes his total time of service – 2 years, 7 months and 27 days. This is divided between service in the United States – 0 years, 11 months, 11 days, and foreign service – 1 year, 8 months, 15 days.

The discharge was "honorable" and Chester received a good conduct medal. The good conduct medal was established in 1941. Under Army regulations:

"It is awarded for exemplary behavior, efficiency, and fidelity in active Federal military service. It is awarded on a selective basis to each soldier who distinguishes himself or herself from among his or her fellow soldiers by their exemplary conduct, efficiency, and fidelity throughout a specified period of continuous enlisted active Federal military service, as outlined in this chapter. There is no right or entitlement to the medal until the immediate commander has approved the award and the award has been announced in permanent orders."

At the time of his discharge, Chester was 6 feet tall, and weighed 170 pounds.

Chester earned "muster out pay" of \$300. The amount paid at discharge was \$100. He also received travel pay of \$15.10. The total amount paid was \$153.26. If you do the math correctly, you will note that these numbers do not add up.

Whatever the amount was, or should have been, I think Chester earned it.

XVI

Epilogue

The research for this personal history was collected in about three weeks. This is, quite obviously, not enough time to ensure its complete accuracy or thoroughness. I would have liked to have spent more time, but I had the Christmas deadline looming overhead.

There are many things which require follow-up – by me or by someone else. Chester Boyd’s discharge papers were step one in the search. This personal history provides a little more “meat” to the history and is step two.

I have several suggestions for anyone wishing to complete step three.

Volumes upon volumes have been written about World War II, including many volumes about the Battle of the Bulge. Much has been written about Mortain and Falaise. A careful review of these texts might provide more information about the 784th.

One text in particular that should be reviewed is the two volume set by James A. Sawicki, entitled *Antiaircraft Artillery Battalions of the U.S. Army*, published in 1991. I found references to this text, but it was not available at any local library. Another possible source, which I could not get my hands on, is a VHS film “Defense of Antwerp Against the V-1 (Flying Bomb)”.

I would have loved to have seen the orders of the day issued by the Government of Belgium. These are, I believe, recited in *Decree No. 300 of Charles, Prince of Belgium, Regent of the Kingdom*, dated March 26, 1945. I found this reference, but could not find a copy.

One of the problems I had in researching this history is the very nature of the 784th. While generally assigned to the Ninth Air Force, it was frequently attached, then detached, to units of the First Army and Third Army. But the 784th is not listed in the permanent “order of battle” of these larger units, and is not given credit for being part of these units. The 784th might be listed or described in a more specific history of one of the larger units. I would have tried this route if I had more time.

There are some gaps in my understanding of how AAA gunners fired and aimed the artillery. There was use of telescopic sights and miniaturized central tracer

control systems, although I understand there were problems with the telescope system. This could be researched further, and explained in better detail.

I would also have loved to know some details on the life of Chester, and other artillery men, in the 784th. A single “day in the life” of an AAA gunner would be fascinating. A thorough review of AAA field manuals would also be interesting.

This newspaper clipping was with Chester’s wartime papers. It is self-explanatory. I do not know where or when it was written. I wonder if Tojo ever made it to the U.S.A.

Tojo the Monkey Keeps 784th Happy


There's a lot of monkey business going on in section 1, A Battery, 784th Bn. these days. The cause of it all is Tojo, the monk, whose keeper, Pfc. Wesley Wall, tells us that the animal is a great mascot and the cause of much merriment. He is really one of the boys, too, especially when it comes to bending the elbow. He likes Schnapps and beer and sometimes gets tight. Cherries are another favorite and one day in Germany he stuffed 50 in his mouth at one time.

The section acquired Tojo in Normandy in July, 1944, from a port battalion which had brought him up from Africa. Several times he tore up foxholes searching for PX supplies to pilfer. Sometimes he can be seen chewing gum or tobacco. The boys tell us that he can put out a cigarette and field strip it. (And that is more than some GIs can do, too.) The monk weighs 10 pounds and is judged to be about five years old.

Strictly a soldier mascot Tojo will have little to do with women and children, and will never let them fondle him. A great entertainer the monk is never happier than when he has an audience to perform for. He will climb up anything, sometimes getting in such precarious positions he has to be rescued.

His keen sense of hearing enables Tojo to hear a plane approaching long before any of the men. He immediately raises a frightened chatter

and runs for the nearest hole. The theory advanced that he was under bombing in Africa. He has improved to the extent that small planes do not



frighten him any more but the huge C-47s still send him scurrying for cover. Keeper Wall is making plan to take the mascot back to Covel West Virginia, with him.

The biggest mystery to me in this entire history is three letters in Chester's honorable discharge. In the box labeled "highest grade held", the letters "Cpl" are typed in.

Somewhere, at sometime, in Chester's career in the army, he held the grade of Corporal.

Why and when, I do not know.

