



BEYOND THE BEACH

The 2nd Rangers Fight Through Europe

by Robert W. Jones, Jr.

Under the cover of a sunken road near a cemetery, two companies of Rangers waited to begin the assault. The bitter cold of the winter morning clung to them like a blanket. The Rangers faced a daunting task, assault across the open snow-covered field, protected by dug in German positions, and then climb the steep slopes of Hill 400. The “Castle Hill” seemed impossible; several other units had already tried and failed. It was 7 December 1944 and the 2nd Ranger Battalion, like the 5th Rangers, had been fighting in Europe since 6 June 1944.¹

The exploits of the Rangers at Pointe du Hoc and Omaha Beach at Normandy are well known. Few people realize that the 2nd and 5th Ranger Battalions fought in Europe until May 1945 (“V-E Day”). While their combat history began on D-Day, the two battalions fought across France, in the Hürtgen Forest, and then through Germany, and were part of the Army of Occupation after May 1945. Although separate and distinct, the histories of the 2nd and 5th Rangers were linked together for most of World War II.

Both battalions were created for one mission, to lead the invasion of Europe. Both trained in England for specific D-Day objectives. The successes at Normandy led to their retention in theater to serve as “fire brigades.” They were usually attached to a Corps and then attached to fight with a division.

The six Ranger battalions that fought in World War II were not a homogeneous unit with a senior command and control structure. The six Ranger Infantry battalions fell into three separate operational “spheres” – William O. Darby (the Mediterranean), James E. Rudder (Europe), and Henry Mucci (the Southwest Pacific). While all were organized in a similar fashion, each “sphere” had its own history.² Two previous articles in *Veritas* covered the Rangers in the Mediterranean Theater (North Africa, Sicily, and Italy).³ This article explains the origins and combat operations of the 2nd Ranger Battalion in Europe, particularly after D-Day. A future article will explain the origins and combat operations of the 5th Ranger Battalion.

The 2nd Ranger Battalion was activated on 1 April 1943 at Camp Nathan Bedford Forrest, outside of Tullahoma, Tennessee. During the spring of 1943 volunteers from

During World War II Camp Nathan Bedford Forrest, located near Tullahoma, Tennessee, grew from a small National Guard training site to one of the Army's largest training bases. The camp was a major training area for infantry, artillery, engineer, and signal units. It also became a temporary camp for troops during maneuvers, including Major General George S. Patton's 2nd Armored Division, "Hell on Wheels," and the Tennessee Maneuvers in 1944. Camp Forrest was also the birthplace of the 2nd and 5th Ranger Battalions.

units throughout the United States assembled there to form the new unit. The well-publicized exploits of Lieutenant Colonel William O. Darby's Rangers in North Africa increased the number of volunteers. Many of them had attended the popular two-week “Ranger” courses conducted by the Armies in the United States after the invasion of North Africa. Others saw it as a way to get overseas sooner.

One such Ranger volunteer was Sergeant Herman Stein. After finishing training with the 76th Infantry Division, he had been assigned to Fort Meade, Maryland as a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) and machinegun instructor to train replacements, while the rest of the unit went to England. After a few months he was ready to get into the war, “My first attempt to get out [of Meade] was to join the ParaTroopers [sic]. This failed, so when the call came in March [1943] for a brand new spangled outfit called the Rangers – that was it.” SGT Stein was accepted.⁴

Another 76th Infantry man, First Sergeant (1SG) Leonard Lomell had completed the Second Army two-week Ranger course. While eager to join the Rangers, he did not want to lose his rank by transferring to the new unit. Only 60 of 200 had graduated from his Ranger class. Coincidentally this was roughly the size of a Ranger company. The 20-year-old First Sergeant boldly proposed to bring an entire company of Ranger-trained soldiers from the 76th Infantry Division.⁵ His gamble worked, “On or about April 1st, 1943, I took with me, from the 76th Division, one whole Ranger Company,” said Leonard

At Fort Dix the 2nd Ranger Battalion received its own distinctive shoulder patch. At Camp Forrest they had worn the Second Army patch. The new insignia was a horizontal blue diamond, bordered in gold with the word “RANGERS” in gold, inside. As Colonel Robert Black notes, no one had bothered to ask the 1st Ranger Battalion about its insignia. The 2nd and the 5th Rangers would wear the blue diamond Ranger Patch until September 1944. Then the Rangers adopted the scroll, based on Darby's Rangers.¹⁹



The 2nd Army SSI with early version of the Ranger Tab worn below the Army patch.



The Blue Ranger Diamond SSI



The 2nd Ranger Battalion Scroll

“Darby’s Rangers”

Major William Orlando Darby formed the 1st Ranger Infantry Battalion on 19 June 1942, at Carrickfergus, Northern Ireland, twenty miles north of Belfast.¹ After spending three months at the British Commando Center in Scotland, the 1st Ranger Battalion boarded ships to lead the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942 – Operation TORCH. The 1st Rangers seized the Algerian port of Arzew on the night of 8 November 1942.²

From November 1942 to March 1943 the 1st Ranger Battalion, attached to the II Corps conducted several highly successful operations. They raided Italian and German positions throughout Tunisia.³ Perhaps the most successful was to seize the pass at Djebel el Ank and the high ground at El Guettar.

Darby wrote that “with El Guettar in hand, General [Terry de la Mesa] Allen [the 1st Infantry Division commander] could develop his plan of attack against the heights to the east and southeast. The pass at Djebel el Ank had to be taken first in order to anchor the division’s left flank.”⁴ On 20 March 1943, the 1st Ranger Battalion, with mortars and engineers attached, force-marched ten miles at night across mountains. Just before dawn, the Rangers swarmed down into the enemy defensive positions from the rear completely surprising the Italians. The capture of Djebel el Ank and El Guettar enabled Lieutenant General George S. Patton’s II Corps to attack Tunisia. The 1st Ranger Battalion received its first Presidential Unit Citation for these battles and Lieutenant Colonel Darby was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.⁵

Based on the successes of the 1st Ranger Battalion in North Africa, LTC Darby was directed to form two additional Ranger battalions. With 1st Battalion cadre, the 3rd and 4th Ranger Battalions were activated at Nemours, Algeria, in April 1943.⁶ The new units received hundreds of combat-tested soldiers from Seventh Army units. Major Herman Dammer assumed command of the 3rd Battalion, Major Roy Murray the 4th Battalion, and Darby remained as the 1st Battalion

commander. Darby was, in effect, the commander of what became known as the “Darby Ranger Force.”

The Rangers took part in the invasion of Sicily and in three major campaigns in Italy. They led the amphibious landing near Salerno, on 9 September 1943, and then captured and defended the Chiunzi Pass. After spearheading the Allied drive on Naples, the Rangers fought as line infantry on the mountainous German Winter Line. The battered Ranger battalions were pulled off the line to prepare for the amphibious landing at Anzio on 22 January 1944.

The provisional Darby Ranger Force was decimated eight days later at Cisterna di Littoria (Cisterna). While ordered to lead a breakout attack from the Anzio beachhead, the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions ran headlong into a major enemy counterattack. In the ensuing combat only eight Rangers made their way back to American lines. The two battalions suffered 12 killed, 36 wounded, and 743 captured.⁷ Among those killed in action (KIA) was the 3rd Battalion commander, Major Alvah Miller and the 1st Battalion commander, Major John Dobson, was badly wounded. The 4th Battalion suffered 30 killed and 58 wounded as they attempted to fight their way to the trapped battalions.⁸ Intelligence afterwards revealed that the Ranger attack at Cisterna thwarted the planned German counterattack. The cost was extremely high for the Rangers. The battle of Cisterna was the death knell for the Ranger units in the Mediterranean Theater.⁹ Many of the surviving Rangers were transferred to the First Special Service Force.

Endnotes

- 1 William O. Darby and William H. Baumer, *Darby’s Rangers: We Led the Way* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1980), 24-25; General Orders 7, United States Army Northern Ireland Force, 19 June 1942, USAJFKSWCS Archives, Fort Bragg, NC; Robert W. Black, *Rangers in World War II* (New York: Presidio Press, 1992), 3; Lucian K. Truscott Jr., *Command Missions: A Personal Story* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 22-23, 37-38.
- 2 Darby and Baumer, *Darby’s Rangers*, 17-18; David W. Hogan Jr., *U.S. Army Special Operations in World War II* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1992), 24; Black, *Rangers in World War II*, 52.
- 3 Darby and Baumer, *Darby’s Rangers*, 55-60; Black, *Rangers in World War II*, 64-65; Hogan, *U.S. Army Special Operations in World War II*, 24; Murray interview; David W. Hogan, *Raiders or Elite Infantry: The Changing Role of the U.S. Army Rangers from Dieppe to Grenada*, (Westport CT, Greenwood Press, 1992), 24.
- 4 Darby and Baumer, *Darby’s Rangers*, 69.
- 5 James J. Altieri, *The Spearheaders* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), 242; Hogan, *Raiders or Elite Infantry*, 26; Darby and Baumer, *Darby’s Rangers*, 70-72; Michael J. King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1985), 18-20.
- 6 James J. Altieri, 1st and 4th Ranger Battalions, interview by Linda Thompson and Sergeant Martello, 18 May 1993, Fort Bragg, NC, interview transcript, ARSOF Archives, Fort Bragg, NC; Colonel (Retired) Roy Murray, 1st and 4th Ranger Battalions, interview by William Steele, 23 January 1997, El Paso, TX, interview transcript, ARSOF Archives, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 Black, *Rangers in World War II*, 165.
- 8 Black, *Rangers in World War II*, 165.
- 9 Hogan, *Raiders or Elite Infantry*, 60; Truscott, *Command Missions*, 252.





James Earl Rudder

James Earl Rudder, born in Eden, Texas, on 6 May 1910, was one of six sons. His father was a prosperous farmer and cattle broker. Rudder graduated from Texas A&M College in 1932 where he had been center on the football team. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant of Infantry in the Army Reserves. In 1933, Rudder began teaching and coaching football at Brady High School. He married Margaret Williamson, a 1936 University of Texas graduate, in 1937. A year later, Rudder became the football coach and taught at John Tarleton Agricultural College.

In the summer of 1941, First Lieutenant Rudder was ordered to active duty and assigned to command a company at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. In the next two years Rudder attended the Infantry School and the Command and General Staff School and served as a Battalion Executive Officer and Assistant Division G-3 in the 83rd Infantry Division at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. On 30 June 1943 he took command of the 2nd Ranger Battalion. He led the 2nd Rangers until 7 December 1944 when he assumed command of the 109th Infantry Regiment, 28th Infantry Division.

After the war Rudder stayed in the Army Reserves and became active in Texas politics. He retired as a Major General after commanding the 90th Infantry Division ("Texas' Own"). After serving as the Mayor of Brady and Texas Land Commissioner, Rudder was appointed vice president of Texas A&M in 1958. He became president of Texas A&M the next year and served until his death in 1970.¹

Endnotes

- 1 JoAnna M. MacDonald, *The Liberation of Pointe du Hoc: The 2d Rangers at Normandy: June 6-8, 1944* (Redondo Beach, CA: Rank and File Publications, 2000), 19; Robert W. Black, *The Battalion. The Dramatic Story of the 2nd Ranger Battalion in World War II* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), 20.

(Photo courtesy of the Texas A&M Archives.)

Lomell. "I was the First Sergeant of Dog Company of the 2nd Ranger Battalion from Day One."⁶ Ranger selection was not as unambiguous.

Long road marches, log-lifting drills, and obstacle courses weeded out candidates who lacked stamina and strength. A stringent physical examination eliminated others who were returned to their former units. Those with disciplinary problem histories were likewise rejected, although some found Ranger training to their liking. Physical conditioning was combined with basic infantry tactics. Officers and men arrived at intervals to join the unit.

Combat veterans from the 1st Ranger Battalion became a small training cadre for the new battalion. Most were wounded Rangers who had been evacuated to the States to recover and assigned as instructors. Some still had physical limitations, like Captain Dean H. Knudson, the training officer. He was on a limited duty status because of foot injuries suffered in North Africa. As one would expect, Captain Knudson and his veterans based their training program on that of the 1st Ranger Battalion and the experiences gained in Scotland and North Africa.⁷

Command of the 2nd Rangers proved problematic. Between April to June 1943 the battalion had several commanders and numerous acting ones. The former commandant of the Second Army Ranger School at Camp Forrest, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) William C. Saffarans, was the first commander. He soon transferred to Hawaii.⁸

Major Charles Meyer, a former West Point football player, took another assignment within weeks. Major Lionel E. McDonald, a newly mobilized Indiana National Guard officer at Camp Forrest, followed Meyer. McDonald raised the indignation of the soldiers when he rode along in his jeep during road marches encouraging the men to keep pace.⁹ Morale sagged and the future of the unit floundered. That changed when Major James Earl Rudder took over on 30 June 1943.

The former Texas high school and college football coach demanded nothing less than excellence from his men. Soon after arriving he seated the battalion in a circle. "I've been sent down here to restore order and get going with realistic training. Now let me tell you, I am going to work your asses off and before you know it, you're going to be the best trained fighting men in this man's army. Now with your cooperation, there will be passes from time to time . . . I'll grant as many leaves and passes as I can. If I don't get your cooperation, we'll still get the job done, but it will be a lot tougher on you. Now if such a program does not appeal to you, come up to the office, and we will transfer you out. So much the better for you and us. Any questions?"¹⁰ The battalion finally had a leader who was intent on preparing them for combat.

Major Rudder insisted on high standards in the unit and intensified the training. As it grew harder Rudder led by example and earned the respect of his Rangers. He instituted monthly "gripe" sessions with his men. As a result the cooks were sent to school to improve their

skills. The battalion was moved from tents into wooden buildings.¹¹

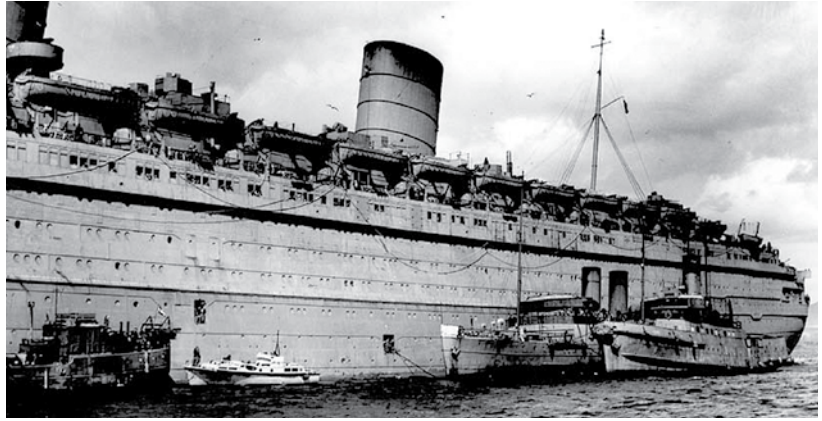
As soldiers were weeded out, new volunteers were recruited. At training camps throughout the United States notices were posted advertising the new Ranger Battalion, the first to be stateside. "On the day of interviews, the line was over a block long, and I was in the middle just before noon . . . at least a dozen men interviewed us, including a doctor and a dentist. The last man was Major James Earl Rudder," said Sergeant Owen L. Brown, who was accepted and assigned to the communications section.¹² Private William "L-Rod" Petty had broken both legs at parachute school. He disliked his subsequent assignment and new chain of command. Looking for a better unit he volunteered for the Rangers. The dentist rejected him because he had two false teeth. Petty demanded to see the commanding officer. He told his story to Major Rudder concluding with, "Hell, Sir, I don't want to eat'em. I want to fight'em." Impressed, Rudder kept the irrepressible Petty, who rose to platoon sergeant in Fox Company.¹³

Strong physical prowess, stamina, and good intellect were critical to accomplish Ranger missions. A private may have to take over a squad. The leaders had to be able to follow as well. Everyone was trained in all weapons, hand-to-hand combat, and infantry tactics. Unknown to most, this new outfit would be spearheading the amphibious invasion of Europe.

"The training at Bude was centered on cliff climbing. I'd had mountain climbing training but nothing like this. The first time I stood on the beach and looked up at those 90 foot high cliffs it just scared the crap out of me," — Bob Edlin.

After completing advanced combat training the 2nd Battalion moved south to the U.S. Navy Scouts and Raiders School at Fort Pierce, Florida, for amphibious training. Living in tents on insect-infested Hutcheson Island, the Rangers practiced squad, platoon, and company amphibious raids using rubber boats and U.S. Navy landing craft. Since time was critical the Rangers completed the two-week course in eight days. The battalion then moved by train to Fort Dix, New Jersey on 16 September 1943.¹⁴

While the 2nd Ranger Battalion trained in the United States, Allied planners in England came to the conclusion that another battalion of assault troops was needed for the invasion of France. This prompted the formation of an additional Ranger Infantry Battalion, the 5th, on 1 September 1943 at Camp Forrest, Tennessee.¹⁵ Major Owen H. Carter, the battalion commander, and Captain Richard P. Sullivan, the executive officer, presided over



The 2nd Rangers sailed across the Atlantic on the SS *Queen Elizabeth*. The fast luxury liner sailed without escorts. It carried 14 to 15,000 soldiers each trip.

the selection of officers and men. In just three days, thirty-four officers and 563 enlisted men were selected and training began. In the meantime, the 2nd Rangers were at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

Physical fitness was still paramount as MAJ Rudder pushed for excellence using daily long runs and road marches to toughen his men. On 21 October 1943 the battalion relocated to Camp Ritchie, Maryland, for training by the Army Intelligence School in German and Japanese weapons and tactics. The newly promoted Lieutenant Colonel Rudder and his staff made the final cuts in the battalion at Fort Dix before loading 25 officers and 488 soldiers aboard the *SS Queen Elizabeth*, a luxury liner turned troopship, in New York on 22 November 1943.¹⁶ Since its beginning at Camp Forrest 37 officers and 536 enlisted men had been eliminated from the battalion.¹⁷ To keep his men busy Rudder volunteered the entire battalion to police the 15,000 soldiers crammed on board for the journey across the Atlantic.¹⁸

Arrival in England meant more training. The 2nd Rangers went by train to Scotland in early December 1943, just as the 1st Ranger Battalion did, to go to the British Commando School. After a short Christmas celebration in Scotland, the unit moved to Bude, on the west coast of England. "The training at Bude was centered on cliff climbing. I'd had mountain climbing training but nothing like this. The first time I stood on the beach and looked up at those 90 foot high cliffs it just scared the crap out of me," said Bob Edlin.²⁰ Each day the battalion ran the five miles from town to the cliffs, climbed the 90-foot cliffs three to five times and ran back for lunch. The afternoon was a repeat of the morning. Later, the 2nd Ranger Battalion moved to Swanage to practice cliff climbing with ladders. "The amphibious duck [DUKW] had an automatic ladder attached. We used to make beach landings in this vehicle, press the button and watch as the ladder shot skyward 100 feet. We then placed it against the cliff and clambered up," said Morris Prince.²¹

While training progressed, Rudder and his staff officers worked with Combined Operations Headquarters to develop plans for two raids against German installations on the French coast. However, rough weather cancelled

both missions. Some individual Rangers accompanied British commandos on raids to gain combat experience.²²

As the unit continued training LTC Rudder added firepower to the battalion. Based on LTC William O. Darby's experience in North Africa and Sicily he acquired four M-3 half-tracks mounted with 75 mm cannons in March 1944. For extra firepower and close-in protection, .30 caliber machine guns were attached. Experienced crewmen were recruited from the 3rd and 5th Armored Divisions for the new Ranger "Cannon Platoon."²³ The newly minted Rangers had to be proficient as infantrymen on the ground as well as with the heavy weapons. The crews had to put rounds through the slit of a pillbox.

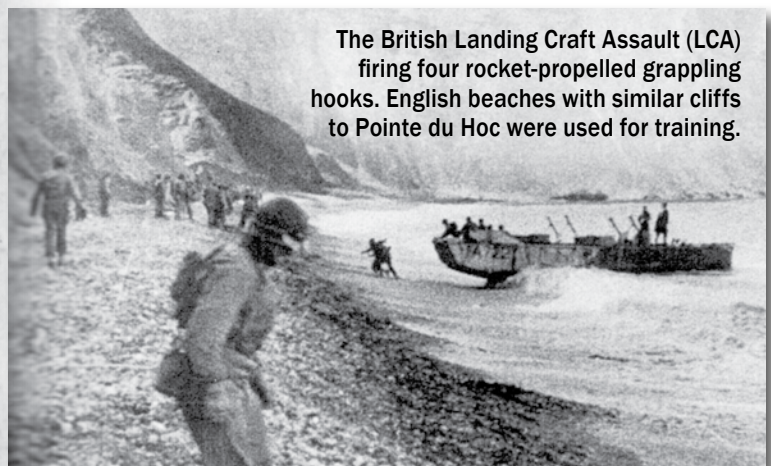
Back in the United States the 5th Ranger Battalion continued its training. Major Carter and his staff followed the same training program as the 2nd Rangers at Camp Forrest, Fort Pierce, Camp Ritchie, and Fort Dix. After four months of demanding training, the battalion departed Camp Kilmer, New Jersey for New York. At the port of embarkation they boarded the HMS *Mauritania* on 8 January 1944, and arrived in Liverpool, England, ten days later. Months of training followed in England and Scotland. On 2 April 1944 the 5th Rangers moved from Scotland to the Assault Training Center in Braunton, England, where they practiced with both British and American landing craft.²⁴ On 17 April Major Max Schneider (formerly a company commander and battalion executive officer in Darby's Rangers and the former executive officer of 2nd Ranger Battalion) became the battalion commander.²⁵ The unit



The M-3 half-track was intended to serve as a mobile anti-tank weapon (tank destroyer). The concept was abandoned after North Africa for larger vehicles with heavier guns. The Rangers used the vehicle for direct fire support.

moved to Swanage for cliff climbing to complete its preparation for combat. Time was of the essence as the two battalions joined to plan for the invasion.

On 9 May 1944 the 2nd and 5th Ranger Battalions were united to form the "Provisional Ranger Group" for Operation OVERLORD planning. Previously the European Theater G-3 section controlled the two battalions. There was no overarching "Ranger" headquarters. As the senior battalion commander, LTC Rudder was designated group commander. Based on the plan the two battalions were further divided into three Ranger task forces.²⁶ Task Force A was made up of Dog, Easy, Fox Companies, and elements of Headquarters Company, 2nd Ranger Battalion. Task Force A had the daunting task of destroying the six 155 mm guns at Pointe du Hoc. This mission was critical because the guns could fire on both Omaha and Utah beaches, as well as ships supporting the landings. Led by LTC Rudder, the force would land and then use rocket fired grapnels with ropes to climb the 90-foot cliffs. Four specially equipped DUKWs would cross the beach and place their fire ladders on the cliff. Once on top of the cliff the Rangers would destroy the guns.²⁷



The British Landing Craft Assault (LCA) firing four rocket-propelled grappling hooks. English beaches with similar cliffs to Pointe du Hoc were used for training.

One of the four DUKWs equipped with ladders from the London Fire Dept. The 100-foot ladders were to be used on the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc. Machinegun mounts on the top of the ladder were used for fire support.

(Left and above photos from the U.S. Army Military History Institute)

Rangers on D-Day

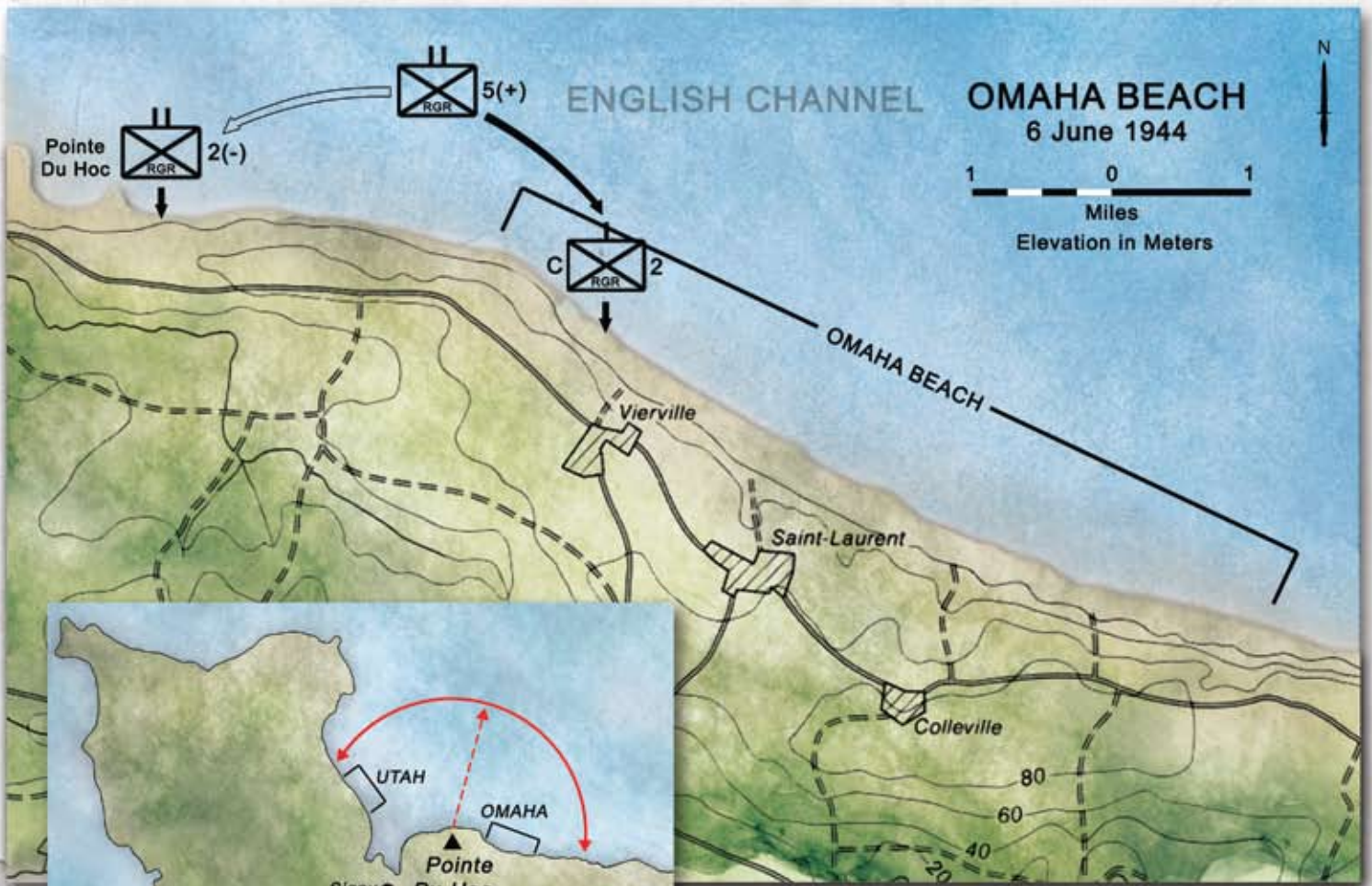
At Pointe du Hoc supplies are hauled up one of the routes used by the Rangers on 6 June. The combination of naval gunfire and aerial bombardment brought down a large section of the cliff face, shortening the distance the Rangers had to climb. The inset is the often seen photo of Rangers climbing the same cliff, using ropes, ladders, and toggle ropes, but does not give the true scale of the task at hand.



LTC Rudder



At D-2 relief forces had reached the Rangers at Pointe du Hoc. The American flag had been spread out after some American P-47s erroneously attempted to strafe the cliff top. In the upper left some German prisoners are being brought to the right is LTC Earl Rudder. (The "point" of Pointe du Hoc is in the upper right).



Map insert showing the range of the 155 mm guns on Pointe du Hoc that could have disrupted the invasion. As it turns out the guns had not been installed and were still in secondary positions.



Rangers move along the beach carrying supplies and weapons for Force "A" at Pointe du Hoc. Ammunition became a major concern following repeated German counterattacks.



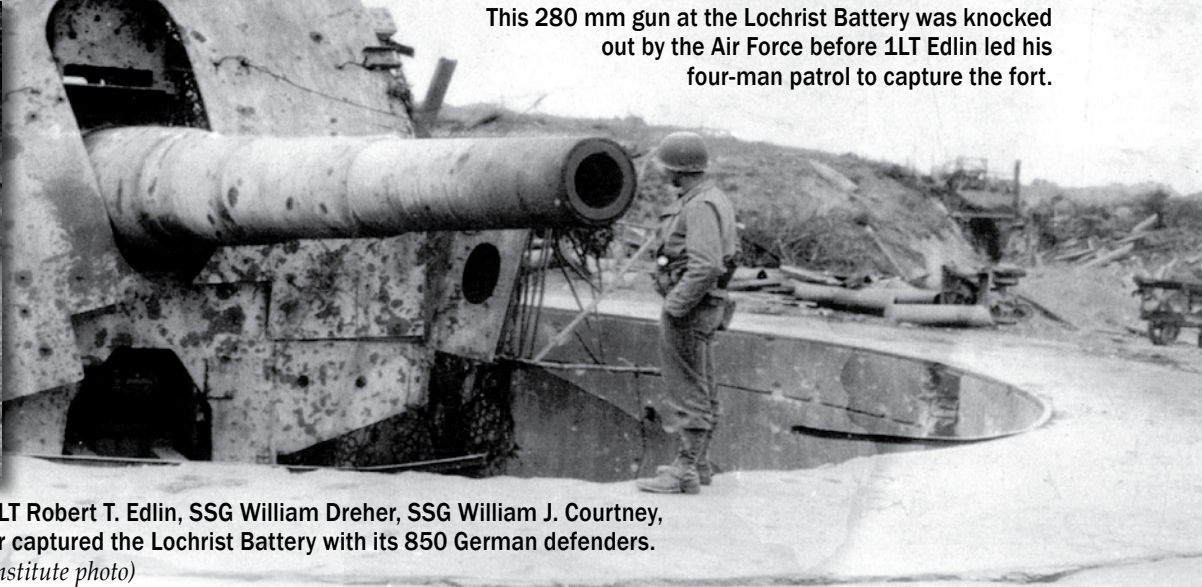
Landing Ship Tank (LST) offloading vehicles, troops and cargo on Omaha Beach a few days after the invasion. Barrage balloons were deployed to deter low flying German aircraft.

(Photos courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the Texas A&M Archives. Map by D. Telles.)

This 280 mm gun at the Lochrist Battery was knocked out by the Air Force before 1LT Edlin led his four-man patrol to capture the fort.



The “Fabulous Four” Patrol. 1LT Robert T. Edlin, SSG William Dreher, SSG William J. Courtney, and SGT Warren D. Burmaster captured the Lochrist Battery with its 850 German defenders. (U.S. Army Military History Institute photo)



The smallest of the units, Task Force B consisted of CPT Ralph Goranson’s Charlie Company, 2nd Ranger Battalion. Landing on “Charlie Sector” of Omaha Beach, Task Force B had two contingencies. The first was to follow Able Company, 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Infantry Division on their assault on Vierville and then on to a German strongpoint at Pointe et Raz de la Percee. The Ranger force had the fire support from a platoon of amphibious tanks from Baker Company, 743rd Tank Battalion. The second contingency was for the company to attack Pointe et Raz de la Percee by climbing the cliffs, if the Vierville route was blocked. After clearing Pointe et Raz de la Percee, CPT Goranson would move his unit east to link up with Task Force A at Pointe du Hoc.²⁸

Commanded by LTC Max Schneider, Task Force C was an exploitation force, made up of the 5th Ranger Battalion and Able and Baker Companies, 2nd Rangers. The eight company force would wait offshore for a prearranged signal from LTC Rudder. At 0700 Task Force C would either land at Pointe du Hoc to support Task Force A, or land at Omaha Beach, to fight its way through the Vierville draw and then east to Pointe du Hoc.²⁹



The Brittany Campaign

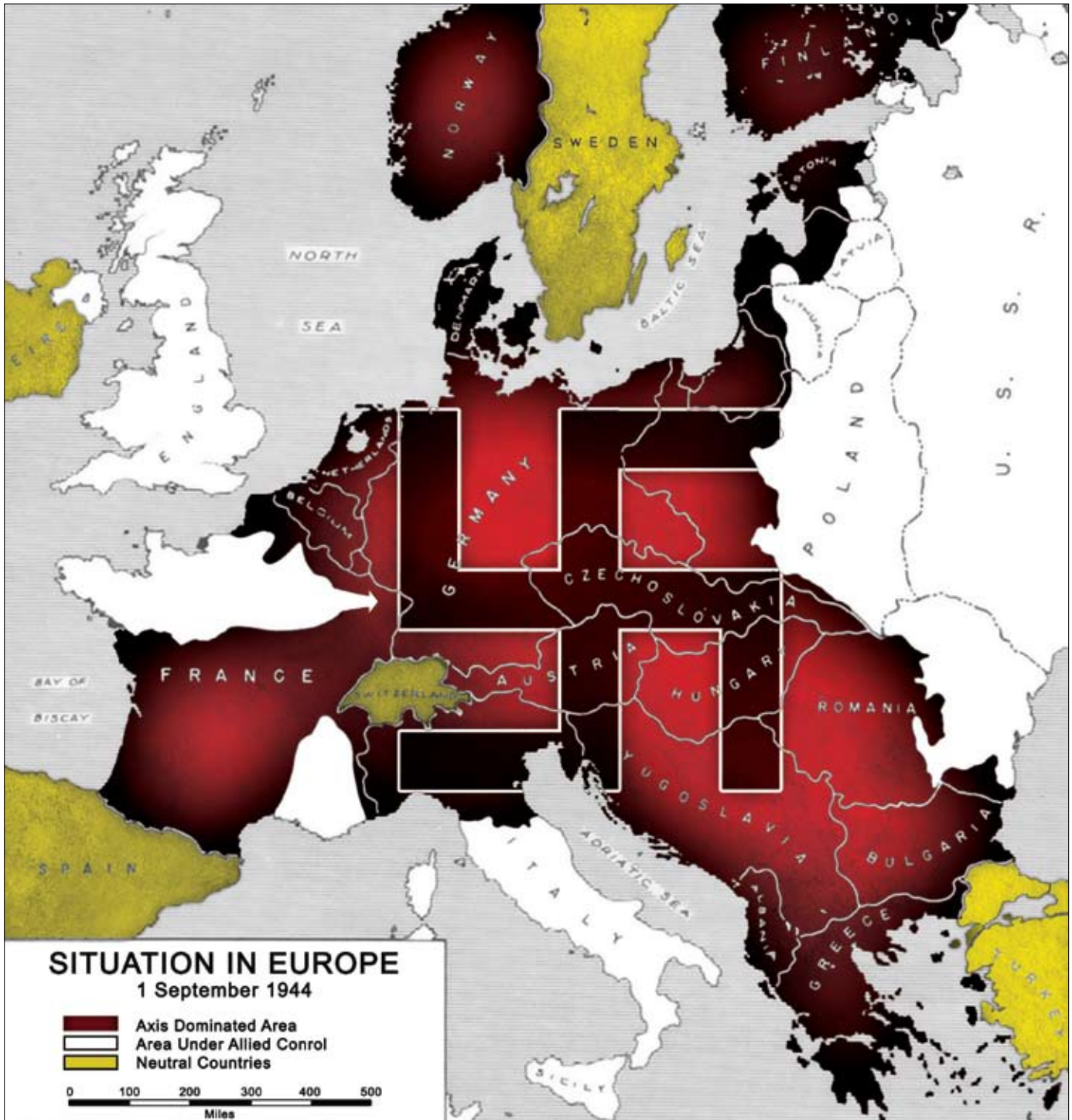
Following the successful seaborne and airborne invasion Allied forces had pushed inland from the beachhead. Surviving enemy forces withdrew to secondary defensive positions and regrouped. As the majority of Allied forces pushed eastward, other forces swung southwest, along the French coast into the Brittany Peninsula. The Germans had fortified several of the major French ports and garrisoned them with five divisions. The German garrisons had to be eliminated to open more ports to flow supplies from England.³⁰

As the Allies moved east they fought against three enemies, the Germans, weather, and lack of supplies. One

of the two “Mulberry” floating docks had been ripped apart by a summer storm. The Allies could no longer be supplied en masse over the invasion beaches, especially with the stormy weather of fall and winter approaching. The Allied army needed thousands of tons of supplies daily to fight their way through German-occupied Europe. The port cities of Cherbourg, Le Havre, and Brest had to be taken to expand the supply flow.³¹ In Brittany both Ranger battalions were employed as “fire brigades” to push into hot spots. When they weren’t “fighting fires” they guarded German prisoners and trained replacements to fill the casualty attrited ranks. During July 1944, the 2nd Ranger Battalion was clearing pockets of enemy resistance along the Cherbourg Peninsula coast. In August they were assaulting Brest with the 29th Infantry Division.

In a bold, audacious effort First Lieutenant Robert Edlin and three men managed to capture the Lochrist Battery (*Graf Spee* Battery) outside of Brest. The battery’s four 280 mm guns could fire their 600 lb shells up to ten miles away. Surrounding the battery were pillboxes and anti-aircraft positions.³² “The firing of the huge coastal guns from the Lochrist Batteries caused us loss of sleep . . . Every time those giant 280 mm opened up, the muzzle blast would actually lift us out of our holes, although we were several hundred yards away from these giant weapons,” said Ranger Morris Prince, of Able Company.³³ The company prepared to take the position.

In the early morning of 9 September 1LT Robert T. Edlin, Staff Sergeant (SSG) William Dreher, SSG William J. Courtney, and Sergeant Warren D. Burmaster were conducting a leader’s reconnaissance before the battalion assaulted the battery. Artillery and bombers had spent three days preparing the area for the ground attack. “We were [tasked] to spot pillboxes, snipers, [and] whatever we could identify and chart [mark] a way through the mine field. If we had the opportunity, we were to capture some prisoners,” said Edlin.³⁴ The four men had worked their way through pillboxes to the edge of the mine field.



In the three months following the successful invasions at Normandy and southern France, the Allied armies were pushing their way through France to the German border.

"I was turning to say, 'Let's turn around and pull back,' when I heard [SSG William] Courtney say in a real quiet voice, 'I see a way through the damn mine field!' And he took off at a dead run," said Edlin. The others followed him with the confidence that came from many combat patrols together over the past two months.³⁵

Seizing the moment, the four Rangers surprised twenty German paratroopers in a pillbox and captured it without firing a shot. Edlin sent SGT Burmaster back to the company to stop any further artillery fire and to

radio LTC Rudder to bring up the rest of the battalion. Leaving SSG Dreher to guard the 19 prisoners 1LT Edlin and Courtney forced an English-speaking German officer to take them to the commander's office. They moved through the massive fort's defenses as German soldiers watched. Then, 1LT Edlin charged inside. "I shoved the door open and dove in. I was across the desk and shoved my Tommy gun at the commander's throat. [When] I said 'Hande hoch!' He put his hands up," said Edlin. Colonel Fuerst, the commandant, initially refused



VII Corps infantrymen fighting through one of the villages near Brest. This was the urban warfare that the 2nd Rangers entered after assaulting the coastal fortresses. (CMH photo)

to surrender, calling the young lieutenant's bluff. Edlin pulled a pin from a hand grenade and thrust it against the Colonel's chest, "I said, 'One, two . . .' I started to say three. Then he said, 'OK.' I very gingerly stuck the pin back into the [grenade] hammer," said Edlin.³⁶ Colonel Fuerst broadcast a surrender notice to the garrison

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over a loudspeaker system. By then the rest of the 2nd Ranger Battalion were at the outer defenses. LTC Rudder accepted the surrender. In an extremely bold and lucky move, the Able Company patrol captured 850 German prisoners and negated the threat from the strongest and largest fortress around Brest.³⁷ The capture of the Lochrist Battery triggered the fall of Brest.

For the remainder of September the 2nd Ranger Battalion helped the 8th Infantry Division eliminate German resistance on the Crozon Peninsula, south of Brest. The 2nd Rangers rescued 400 American and Allied prisoners from a temporary POW camp. Among them was PFC Wallace W. Young from Headquarters Company who had been captured in late August. Afterwards the battalion went into reserve at Landerneau, France.³⁸ After a short break, the 2nd

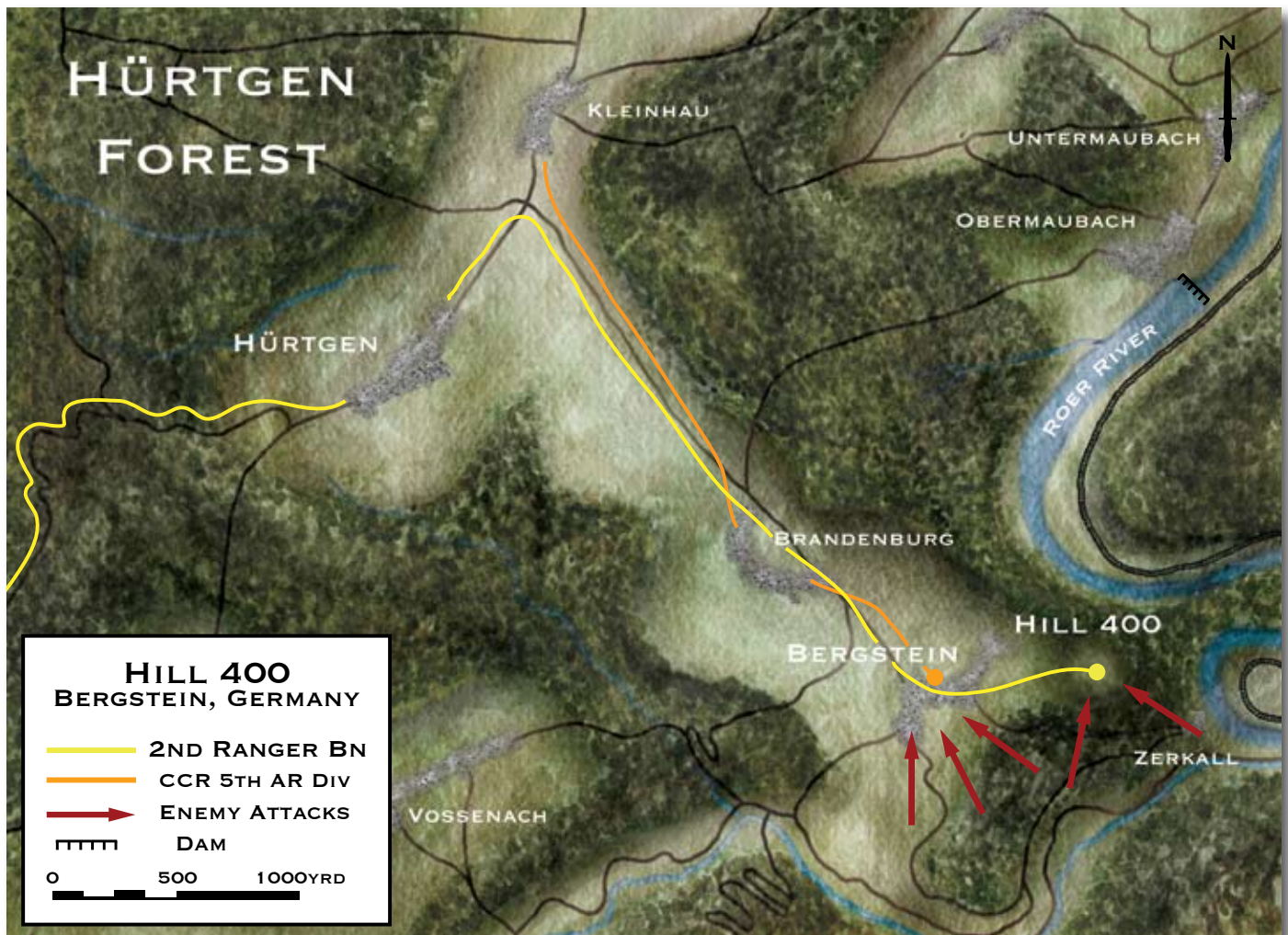
Ranger Battalion boarded ancient French "40 and 8" (40 men or 8 horses) box cars headed for Belgium. After stopping in Arlon on 3 October, they proceeded to Esch, Luxembourg for attachment to the First Army.

Conventional units fought the remainder of the campaign in Brittany. The two Ranger battalions were pulled off the line and allowed to recuperate. Following their efforts in the Brittany campaign the two Ranger battalions did not work together again. The Brittany Campaign is often neglected in history because at the same time the Allied Armies were racing across France. Field Marshall Bernard L. Montgomery's Operation MARKET-GARDEN, the ground and airborne invasion into the Netherlands, was the Allied priority.



Across France and into Germany

The Allied forces rapidly progressed from a toehold on the Normandy beaches to many fronts along the German border. The U.S. Seventh Army had landed in Southern France on 15 August 1944 — Operation DRAGOON — and begun pushing northeast. By September 1944 the Allied forces, in three army groups (totaling seven armies), were stretched in a ragged line from the Mediterranean to the North Sea.³⁹ They were preparing for the assault into Germany as Adolf Hitler and the Nazi High Command prepared to counterattack to defend the Fatherland. The offensive tested the mettle of both Ranger battalions.



The 2nd Rangers passed through the 5th Armored Division's Combat Command Reserve (CCR) in Bergstein to attack Hill 400. The battalion then held off repeated German counterattacks from the south and southeast. (D. Telles)



Infantrymen move cautiously through the densely wooded terrain of the Hürtgen Forest. The soldiers were forced to fight without accurate artillery or air support. (CMH photo)

During their two week standdown in Arlon, Belgium, the 2nd Rangers rested and received replacements. Rangers wounded in Normandy and Brest returned to the unit. Eight officers and 49 soldiers came to the 2nd Rangers as replacements. When the battalion moved to Belgium, the Ranger "Cannon Platoon" was disbanded and the crews transferred to the rifle companies.⁴⁰ On 20 October 1944 the 2nd Rangers were transferred from LTG

Simpson's Ninth Army to the First Army's VIII Corps, and eventually attached to the 28th Infantry Division.⁴¹ By 14 November the battalion had assumed defensive positions outside Vossenach, Germany. LTC Rudder was alerted to recapture the town of Schmidt that had just been lost by the 28th Division.⁴² The Rangers were about to be introduced to fighting in the meat grinder called the Hürtgen Forest. It would be their toughest trial by fire.

The Hürtgen Forest in Germany is roughly fifty square miles. It is densely wooded with fir trees as tall as one hundred feet. Interlocking branches block sunlight making the forest floor damp and dank, devoid of underbrush. Lower limbs of the trees, two to three meters above the ground create green caves. In the open areas there are dense tangles of underbrush. Numerous streams and rivers have created gorges with steep sides. They break up movement and make the forest a great defensive position.⁴³ It was something out of a German fairy tale. One expected to see Hansel and Gretel appear at any time dropping a breadcrumb trail through the dense forest.⁴⁴ This was the terrain in which the 2nd Rangers had to fight.

The First Army launched an offensive into the Hürtgen Forest to seize a series of dams on the Roer River. If the German Army could destroy the dams, the flooding would complicate and slow the Allied advance. The XIX Corps engineer warned: "If one or all dams are blown a flood would occur in the channel of the Roer River that would spread approximately 1,500 feet in depth and 3 feet or more deep across the entire corps front . . . The flood would probably last from one to three weeks."⁴⁵ The Rangers would lead the attack on the northern flank to secure the town of Bergstein and the critical Hill 400 to help prevent this disaster.



Hill 400

In the bitter cold night of 6 December 1944, the 2nd Ranger Battalion moved to an assembly area near Brandenburg in the Hürtgen Forest. They were to assault the icy, slippery Hill 400 (called Castle Hill by the Germans) overlooking Schmidt to the southwest and the Roer River valley to the east. The hill had formidable, steep, tree-covered slopes. It was covered with pillboxes and fighting positions. At 400 meters (approximately 1,322 feet) it was the highest point in this section of the Roer Valley. "Hill 400 jutted out from

"In the pale light of dawn I saw Hill 400 starkly enshrouded in the misty fog,"—PFC Melvin "Bud" Potratz

the ground like the Grand Tetons, flat land and then all of a sudden there loomed a big hill. If I recall right there were trees all the way to the top," said Robert Edlin.⁴⁶ At the base of the hill was the town of Bergstein that controlled the western and northern approaches to the hill. The Rangers were to hold the hill and the town for 24 hours, when the 8th Infantry Division would relieve them. Rudder divided his battalion into three task forces. Dog and Fox Companies would attack Hill 400. Able, Baker, and Charlie Companies would attack and secure the town of Bergstein, Germany, at the base of the hill. One platoon from Charlie Company would man 81 mm mortars for organic fire support. Easy Company was the battalion reserve. While patrols from Dog and Fox Companies were reconnoitering the best routes up the hill at 0300 the Rangers got an unexpected shock.⁴⁷

Lieutenant Colonel Rudder announced that he was leaving that morning to take command of the 109th Infantry Regiment, in the 28th Infantry Division. "It was something of a low blow to George [Major George Williams, the battalion executive officer] because he knew it was going to be a bad fight and you don't always change command in the middle of an operation," said Captain Edward Arnold, the new battalion executive officer. Nonplussed, Major George S. Williams took command and launched the attack.⁴⁸



M-10 Tank Destroyers moving on a narrow trail through the Hürtgen Forest. The 3 inch gun provided direct fire support against dug in German positions. The few roads and trails became ambush zones for the defending Germans. (CMH photo)

Assisted by the light of burning houses and American vehicles, Dog and Fox Companies moved through Bergstein to their attack position. Taking cover in a sunken road near the Catholic Church of Moorish Martyrdom Cemetery the Rangers waited. Before them lay an open snow covered field, about 75 to 100 meters wide, that ended at the base of the heavily forested Hill 400. The bitter cold of the winter morning gnawed on the Rangers as they waited to begin the assault. "In the pale light of dawn I saw Hill 400 starkly enshrouded in the misty fog," recalled PFC Melvin "Bud" Potratz a rifleman in Dog Company.⁴⁹ The Ranger mission was to capture the German-held "Castle Hill." It seemed impossible since several other units had already attempted and failed.⁵⁰

Fox Company 2nd Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant William "L-Rod" Petty, waited for the assault with his friend, the 1st section leader, SGT William McHugh. Their new platoon leader, 1LT Thomas Rowland approached the two sergeants. "Incongruously, . . . [he] squatted beside me and yelled, 'Send out a scout.' My response was, 'F*** y**, no way!' After repeating the order to me a couple of times and getting the same response, he switched to [SGT] McHugh with the same order and received the same response. He then yelled the same order to Private [Gerald] Bouchard, screaming 'That is an order!'" Despite the two experienced sergeants telling him not to go, Bouchard stood up and started walking into the open field. After three or four steps a single shot rang out and Bouchard collapsed hit in the stomach. "This shot was the fuse that ignited the explosion of the Ranger charge," said SSG Petty.⁵¹

Nearby SGT Herman Stein, another section leader waited. "We were to kick off at 7:30 am under a walking artillery [barrage] and it was landing at the edge of the woods now. The German artillery and mortars were creeping in back of us and we were in one hell of a squeeze play," said SGT Stein.⁵² "Suddenly ten minutes before kick off time, SGT Bill McHugh stood up and with his gun held high and gesturing with his right arm [said], 'OK you guys, let's go get the bastards!'"⁵³



SGT Herman Stein and SSG "L-Rod" Petty. The two friends fought with Fox Company, 2nd Rangers from Normandy to the Hill 400 battles. (MHI photos)

On their right CPT Morton "Big Mac" McBride ordered Dog Company forward. The Rangers began running across the field, firing from the hip as they went. "Yelling and shooting randomly, we were at a dead run, facing small arms fire with creeping artillery to our rear," said Lieutenant Leonard Lomell.⁵⁴ While turning sideways to encourage his men forward, CPT McBride was shot in the buttocks.⁵⁵ 2nd Lieutenant (2LT) Lomell took charge and pressed the attack. The Rangers scrambled up the steep, wooded hillside as fast as they could. Germans died in their positions, surrendered, or ran. "Using the butt of my rifle, I began to climb the steep, treacherous hill. Machine gun bullets pelted the ground all around me. I believed I must be the only survivor because I didn't see anyone else," said Bud Potratz.⁵⁶ Luckily others were also making their way up the hill. "I reached the top of the hill first with Sam O'Neal and several others of the first platoon, quickly followed by the second platoon. Sergeant Harvey Koenig and his patrol chased the Germans over the crest, almost to the Roer River, before returning to deploy along the forward

crest," remembered 2LT Lomell.⁵⁷ Of the sixty-five Dog Company soldiers who began the attack that morning, 55 made it to the top.⁵⁸ By 0830 the objective had been secured. That was when the real fight began.

Before the Rangers could dig in, a hail of artillery fell on the hill. They scrambled for cover in the German positions. Because the hill was heavily wooded, airbursts in the trees heightened the effect, adding wood splinters to the deadly rain of shrapnel. "A barrage of shells hit the hill on three sides. I could hear the hacking and vigorous digging of shovels as my comrades on top of the hill tried to dig themselves into the frozen slate ground," said Bud Potratz.⁵⁹ All morning the enemy kept pounding the hill with mortar and artillery. By noon the two 65-man Ranger companies were down to thirty-two effectives.

After sending a situation report (SITREP) to battalion with a request for ammunition and reinforcements, CPT Otto Masny (Fox Company Commander) was wounded. His radioman was killed. In desperation the wounded Masny started down the hill towards Bergstein to inform Major Williams of the desperate situation. En route he was captured.⁶⁰ The senior Fox Company NCO on the hill, SSG L-Rod Petty, had already taken charge.

*"Using the butt of my rifle, I began to climb the steep, treacherous hill. Machine gun bullets pelted the ground all around me. I believed I must be the only survivor because I didn't see anyone else."
— PFC Melvin "Bud" Potratz*

The fighting for the key terrain intensified. The Germans counterattacked twice in the afternoon, with about 100 to 150 men, but were driven back. By 1600 only twenty-five Rangers remained from the two companies. As the medics evacuated the wounded, the defenders collected weapons and ammunition. "I had two BARs, an M-1, a pistol, and grenades," said SGT Herman Stein.⁶¹ Help would soon be arriving.

The rest of the 2nd Rangers in Bergstein were decisively engaged as well. Artillery and mortar fire preceded German counterattacks. Major Williams sent an urgent message to General Weaver (8th ID) for help, but he realized that it would be a strictly Ranger fight on the Hill and in Bergstein. The 2nd Platoon of Easy Company was sent up the hill with ammunition. The Fox Company executive officer 1LT Richard Wintz, arrived with a new radio and assumed command from SSG Petty.⁶² The reinforcements arrived just in time to drive the Germans back. As night fell, the Rangers prepared for night attacks that never came.

At 0930 an artillery preparation preceded the German ground assault. It would be the first of five counterattacks in the next two days. Using the dense woods to cover their approach German infantrymen rushed the American positions. "They used machine guns, burp guns, rifles, and threw potato masher grenades. Hand-to-hand fights



Infantrymen struggle up a wooded hillside, working their way over fallen trees and slick ground to fight the Germans. This was typical in the Hürtgen Forest. (CMH photo)

developed on top of the hill in which some use was made of bayonets," said CPT Arnold.⁶³ Timely artillery support saved the day for the Rangers. 1LT Howard K. Kettlehut, a forward observer from the 56th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (5th Armored Division), worked tirelessly to get priority of fires from all Corps artillery units. There were "18 battalions in all. 155's, 75 self-propelled, 8 inch and 240 mm guns were used," said CPT Arnold. Kettlehut was untiring and Major Williams praised him as "the best man we ever worked with."⁶⁴

It was a bloody battle with heavy casualties on both sides. The Germans repeatedly counterattacked to recover the key terrain. The heavy artillery barrages that preceded each counterattack were horrendous. On 8 December the Battalion Aid Station was hit and Captain Walter E. Block, MD, the battalion surgeon, was killed. The hill was held until the 8th Infantry Division relieved the Rangers on 9 December 1944. On the hill, twenty-three were killed in action or died of wounds, 86 wounded, and 4 missing in action, effectively decimating the two companies.⁶⁵ The Rangers had captured the most vital piece of terrain in the area.

"Dec. 7, 1944, was the worst day of my life. People say D-Day was the longest day, but I was there, too, and it was much easier on me than Hill 400 in the Hürtgen Forest. Five thousand men had already tried to capture the hill and the town below. We passed their bodies and burnt-out tanks on the way in. At 7:30 a.m., 130 men in D and F companies assaulted across flat table land as German machine gunners sprayed fire at us. It was icy cold, artillery was raining down and we couldn't even dig in. But we took the 400-meter-high hill. In 1989, I went back with some of my men and we met a group of young German officers. They showed us a textbook that claimed the Germans were outnumbered that day. I said, "That's ridiculous!" We were the ones who were outnumbered, by 10 to one. Only 15 or 16 men in each company made it back on their own power."

2LT Len Lomell, 2nd Ranger Battalion
(13 July 1998 Newsweek)

The surviving Rangers from the Hill 400 and Bergstein fights went to a bivouac area in the Hürtgen Forest to rest and be refitted again.

By December 1944 the 2nd Rangers were fighting again with the First Army. On 16 December 1944 when the Battle of the Bulge began, the Rangers were put on the line with the 78th Infantry Division. They saw considerable action, but the fight at Hill 400 and Bergstein were the last major combat actions of the 2nd Rangers in Europe.

Occupation and the end of the Rangers

The 2nd and 5th Ranger Battalions, although seriously depleted from combat, continued to fight. A manpower shortage hit the entire European Theater making replacements scarce in March and April 1945. But, the end was near for the Nazi regime. In April 1945 elements of the First Army met Soviet forces on the Elbe River. On 30 April, Adolf Hitler committed suicide. The Allies accepted the unconditional German surrender on 8 May 1945 – V-E Day. While the war in Europe was over, both Ranger battalions were committed to the postwar occupation.

On V-E Day the 2nd Ranger Battalion was near Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. There they helped Military Government units (today's Civil Affairs) by guarding supplies and ferreting out German soldiers in hiding. Sports were used to keep the troops out of trouble; softball, basketball, and boxing teams were formed.⁶⁶ Many of the Rangers believed that this was the "calm before the storm" because they anticipated shipment to the Pacific. However, when Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945, the 2nd Ranger Battalion returned to the United States as an organic unit despite an Army policy of redeploying soldiers as individuals based on accrued time in combat and awards. On 16 October 1945 the battalion sailed from Le Havre, France aboard the USS *West Point* (formerly the luxury ocean liner, *SS America*). At Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia (Newport News), the 2nd Ranger Battalion was ordered to deactivate. On 23 October 1945, the colors were furled without fanfare and the Rangers began to head for home.⁶⁷

The two Ranger Battalions were created for one mission; the seizure of key terrain and the defenses that threatened the cross channel invasion beachhead for Operation OVERLORD. While the U.S. Army fought a continental war of mass and firepower, these small, specialized units that had proven themselves on D-Day became critical assets. The two Ranger battalions were the "fire brigades" in an ocean of units fighting in Europe. There was no doctrine or formal "brigade" headquarters to advise senior field commanders how to use the Rangers. However, the battalions were given the toughest missions and always excelled.

Epilogue

The World War II Rangers simply faded away during demobilization. For the next five years the Army was preoccupied with the occupation and defense of Germany, Japan, and Austria from Communism. Constabulary and military government units assumed the post-conflict missions.⁶⁸ By the beginning of 1950 the Army, faced with budget cuts, eliminated more units, delayed purchasing new equipment, and deferred maintenance on old gear.⁶⁹ That changed in late June 1950 when North Korea invaded the South.

Realizing the need for Ranger type units in Korea, the Army Chief of Staff General J. Lawton Collins ordered the



CPT Walter E. Block, a pediatrician in civilian life, volunteered for the 2nd Ranger Battalion at Fort Dix in 1943 after his wife begged him not to join the paratroops because it was "too dangerous." CPT Block was killed at Hill 400 on 8 Dec 1944 when artillery hit the aid station where he was tending wounded. The veteran of Normandy and Brest received the Silver Star, Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart.



Displaced Persons and Germans loot a grocery. With combat over the Rangers became part of the Army of Occupation, dealing with problems like this. (CMH photo)

formation of a Ranger Training Center at Fort Benning, Georgia.⁷⁰ In October 1950 “Airborne Ranger” Infantry Companies began training at Fort Benning, Georgia. Several of these companies went to Korea to carry the Ranger legacy forward. Surprisingly the Army decided to deactivate the units in August 1951 leaving the way open to create Special Forces.⁷¹ The legacy of the conflict was the establishment of the Ranger Training Center, which eventually became the Ranger Department of the Infantry School, as a small unit leadership training course.

The historical legacy of the 2nd Ranger Battalion came back when the Army Chief of Staff, General Creighton W. Abrams, directed the formation of two Ranger battalions. The 1st Battalion (Ranger), 75th Infantry was activated at Fort Benning, Georgia on 31 January 1974 and the 2nd Battalion (Ranger), 75th Infantry at Fort Lewis, Washington on 1 October 1974.⁷² Both Ranger battalions spearheaded the invasion of Grenada on 25 October 1983. Following the success of the Rangers in Grenada the Army created the Ranger Regiment headquarters under the command of Colonel Wayne A. Downing in July 1984. The 3rd Ranger Battalion was activated at Fort Benning, Georgia in October 1984.⁷³ ▲

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1st Ranger Battalion Scroll



2nd Ranger Battalion Scroll

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