

The Battle at Schillersdorf

A member of the 2nd Battalion described the terrain the 410th occupied following the withdrawal as "a lot like [a] golf course, rolling and open with patches of woods, and deep snow."¹ In the days preceding the attack at Schillersdorf, the Germans reconnoitering and patrolling boldly. Sgt. Ray Millek, who led a machinegun squad for Company E [Easy], remembers holding the line: "Before things heated up, we were in two houses straddling a road to block infiltrators. Along comes this real pretty girl, and she asked to go through our roadblock to the next town. Oh, God, she was making these eyes at me, and she spoke English. I told her the Germans were holding the town she wanted to go to, but she said, 'That's my home. I want to go back.' I let her through. I've often thought about that. When she got to the next village, she probably told the Germans there were only three or four of us on a roadblock."² Indeed, the precision of the coming German strike would demonstrate how well-informed the enemy had been.

At the time, Easy Company endured poor leadership, likely the most dangerous threat to any combat unit. In the Army, a unit's movement, material and information was determined by the immutable chain of command. Officers at every level could be held directly responsible for his subordinates' actions because they were executing orders. A well-trained, physically fit and well-supplied company of war-hardened veterans, can be squandered in a hopeless battle, wasted in pursuit of insignificant objectives, or can empower an inferior enemy by injudicious inaction. Soldiers relied on their officers to lead them into battle and to monitor their progress; as such commanders' decisions and actions significantly impacted troop morale and effectiveness. The effects of a corrupted chain of command rippled throughout the ranks; Hitler sacrificed often-superior weaponry, defensive advantages and a generation of experienced soldiers at key points to the elimination of a reliable chain of command by which he sought to consolidate his power. Millek painted an unfavorable picture of his Company's captain: "The captain we had at the time was a son of a bitch. Scared to death. He'd whimper and lay in bed and ask me to do this, do that, do everything for him. 'Go to Battalion. See what's what,' things that he as a captain should have been doing, and he'd be laying in bed drunker than hell. It was easy to get booze up there. I think he had a couple of runners who scrounged for him. A pack of cigarettes would get you anything that you wanted. When the krauts hit us, he was worthless."³

The men who dealt with the Easy's CO on a more regular basis prized their captain similarly. "[He was] a strange man to be in the infantry," 1st Lt. Martin E. Shelley recalled, "He'd only been an administrator. He told me to find him an orderly who could speak German because his job was going to be to keep him in schnapps. He didn't interfere, just stayed in his little room at the CP. When we got our whisky allowance, you wouldn't see him until the whisky was gone."⁴

2nd Lieutenant Hugh Chance, who commanded Easy's 3rd Platoon, confirmed this view of Easy's CO in his recollection of the orders he received following the company's arrival at Offwiler: "It was snowing like everything. The CO told the Second and Third Platoons to set up outposts a mile and a half or two miles ahead of the MLR.... The 36th

¹ Stannard, 21.

² Stannard, 21.

³ Stannard, 21.

⁴ Stannard, 30.

Engineers [of the 40th ID] were supposed to be on the line to our left, but I walked all along their sector and couldn't find anybody. When I told company headquarters that our left flank was wide open, we were ordered to stay anyway." At no point during the several days that Chance's platoon kept the outpost did Easy Company's CO take steps to guard the 2nd battalion's flank.⁵

At 2100 on Jan 22, the Germans exploited the gap between the left flank of the 410th and the right flank of the 45th ID. Disguised as friendlies, the Germans attacked the forward units of the 2nd Bn from behind, taking Rothbach (the seat of Company G's [George] outpost) and Easy's Outpost at Offwiller.

Captain Alfred J. Torrance commanded G Company from Rothbach. In contrast to his counterpart in Easy Company, Torrance was an effective commander who was well-liked by his men. "He was a hell of a good man, a man everybody felt they could trust," commented Clyde Rucker. "He was concerned about the guys' welfare. I don't know if all the officers were."⁶ John Woodside, a machine gunner in the Fourth Platoon, described Torrance as, "a good leader, but not a glory hound. He always told us he didn't want a bunch of heroes; he wanted a bunch of live soldiers. In training, we thought that he was too hard on us, but we found out he was right when we got overseas."⁷

Paradoxically, Torrance's effectiveness was reflected in the fact that he touted the highest casualty rate in the Regiment at 128 percent (as opposed to Easy Company, who had the lowest at 50 percent). Torrance remembered launching George Company's final assault on Germany at 75% full strength.⁸ The effectiveness of his command drew him more hazardous assignments, which in turned opened holes in the ranks that would be filled with green replacements. Robert Loyd, one of Torrance's riflemen rationalized the situation: "They asked us to do a lot of things they wanted done right, and they figured Al Torrance was the guy to do it. A price had to be paid."⁹ "We were told to set up new defenses along a line between Rothbach and Schillersdorf in Alsace," Torrance remembered. "We hardly had time to get set when SS troops came in screaming like banshees and hit E Company."¹⁰

Ray Millek, who was a sergeant in charge of a machinegun squad in the forward units of Easy's Outpost recalls: "...[W]e heard firing to our rear. I called...[1st Sgt. Orland Woodbeck of Easy's first platoon] at the CP in Offwiller. 'There's a few civilians coming into town,' he says. 'We'll handle them.' What he didn't know was that krauts on skis in civilian clothes had gotten into Offwiller by coming over the mountain from behind."¹¹ Chance made note of the route the Germans followed that allowed them to attack the 2nd Bn from behind: "They'd come over the mountain through that unprotected left flank."¹²

⁵ Stannard, 21

⁶ Stannard, 154.

⁷ Stannard, 154.

⁸ Stannard, 85.

⁹ Stannard, 85.

¹⁰ Stannard, 156.

¹¹ Stannard, 22.

¹² Stannard, 21.

Not long thereafter, Lt. Chance got a call from 1st Sgt. Woodbeck. "The town's full o' them," [he said,] "Battalion said to tell you fellas to get out of there the best way you can."¹³

Capt. Torrence, at George Company's CP in Rothbach, remembered, "I considered sending some men to counterattack, but I wasn't allowed to. Our job was to hold. We followed the prearranged plan. My rifle platoons pulled out of Rothbach and went into holes above the town."¹⁴

First Lt. Shelley was at the Easy's stranded CP when it was abandoned: "[T]here was gunfire all around the CP. We decided it was time to get out of there and back to the MLR. Our line of retreat was supposed to be through G Company in the next town, but when we got to be where they were supposed to be, there were Germans there instead.

"Our captain was in a drunken stupor, but I got him awake and told him the Germans were right across the street. 'Call my jeep driver,' he said, and he took off.

The rest of us ran for our prearranged retreat route up an old German antitank ditch the Germans had dug. It was dark by then, 10 degrees below zero and lots of snow. Pfc. Joseph Kennedy was in the lead. I was right behind him when he saw these figures and called out the password. The answer brrrrrrp from a German burp gun. He just did a flip-flop, hit right in the forehead. I'm sure he never knew what happened."¹⁵

Leaderless, the men of Easy's CP knew they were trapped and outgunned. First Lt. Shelly and the others abandoned the escape plan and retreated—away from American lines. One soldier in the group, desperate to escape, stripped down to the skin and put his light gray thermals over his uniform. He sneaked off, hoping that he had adequately camouflaged himself. The men who stayed back shortly heard machinegun fire and assumed the worst.¹⁶

"We... laid there in our little ditch real quiet," Lt. Shelley recalled. "I told the men not open fire till I gave the command. We didn't have to wait long, probably about midnigh, when here come the Germans wearing white snow capes. We picked up one, then another one. Oh, oh, there's a whole line coming, very slowly. When they were about 50 or 60 feet away, we opened fire and shot every round we had. The next thing that we knew, they came yelling like Comanche Indians and jumped into the ditch."¹⁷

"Of course, the Germans didn't know that we were disarmed when they jumped in that ditch," First Sgt. Orland Woodbeck remembered. "It's a wonder nobody was hurt. Would the Germans have survived if the circumstances had been reversed? We-l-l-l-l, I don't know. They probably wouldn't have."¹⁸

First Lt. Shelley described surrendering his last arms. "All I had left was a hand grenade. I pulled the pin and thought about dropping it and being one of those kamikazes, but I also thought, 'What is this gonna do in the winning of the war?' I'm standing there with this armed grenade in my hand when this big tall German guy comes up behind me and says, 'Raus mit!' I took my watch off, tightened the band around the grenade and let it drop in the snow. The time comes when you have to realize the jig is up....

¹³ Stannard, 13.

¹⁴ Stannard, 156.

¹⁵ Stannard, 30.

¹⁶ Stannard, 30.

¹⁷ Stannard, 30.

¹⁸ Stannard, 31.

"I've often wondered what happened to the grenade. I hope some poor cuss didn't find it after the snow melted and say "Wow, there's a wristwatch."¹⁹

"They made us clasp our hands behind our heads," Lt. Woodbeck recalled. "The Germans, when they surrendered, had a tradition of throwing their helmets away and putting on field caps. We didn't do anything like that. How to surrender was not part of our training."²⁰

Back at Easy's Outpost, Sgt. Millek held his position, not knowing what was happening at Easy's CP. "The firing back there kept on for maybe an hour. When I called Woodbeck again, the line was dead. Woodbeck and the captain and the whole company headquarters had been captured. I told my guys, 'There's something wrong back there. We're getting out of here, but don't go back by the road.'²¹

Chance's group had bypassed Offwiller in their retreat. He described the encounter: "[T]here on the other side of town was a whole group waiting, Rhye's and Millek's men and my platoon. Sixty or seventy men in that bright moonlight on the snow, standing there in the open. There was no panic, but it panicked me to find everybody waiting for me. Well, I didn't do anything but run a head of them and beg them to get some distance between us and the town."²²

Lieutenant Chance took command of the group and headed the retreat. "Lieutenant Chance took us over fences, through back alleys, and what have you to get us back to the main line," mortar sergeant Sam Natta remembered.²² Even though the entire CP had been captured, thanks to Lt. Chance's decisiveness not a single man on the Outpost line was killed. "All our people made it back safely to the MLR. Chance's boys and John Rhye's and mine. How Chance made the decision to take that route I don't know, but he saved us. He must have done it on instinct."²³

At Offwiller, deficient command certainly did not hinder the German cause. 2nd Lt. John Crow of H Company recalled: "The most serious charge of dereliction, against the commander of E Company, was never proven. The company commander was accused by his men of abandoning them on 22 January 1945."²⁴ The discipline and efficiency displayed by the SS as they seized Easy Company's Offwiller Outpost impressed Crow: "Attacking E Company's Outpost in pitch-darkness, they leaped into the defenders' ditch and took them all prisoner without shooting a man."²⁵ Twenty-nine men had been captured, which accounted for all POWs and MIAs that Easy suffered in ETO.²⁶

When the Germans attacked George Company the CP was in the process of retracting to higher ground. According to Woodside, the machine gunner, Torrance had "called his sergeants and platoon leaders back to a meeting to give 'em a little information about what was going on. While he was talking about what was going to

¹⁹ Stannard, 30.

²⁰ Stannard, 31.

²¹ Stannard, 22.

²² Stannard, 14.

²³ Stannard, 13.

²⁴ Stannard, 260.

²⁵ Stannard, 258.

²⁶ Stannard, 87.

happen, it started happening. Loren Becker [Woodside's sergeant] never could get back to us. Those storm troopers come off that mountain like a bat out of hallelujah."²⁷

Captain Torrance's reconnaissance sergeant, Robert Schroeder, was at George Company's CP during the opening valley of the German attack at Rothbach. "We didn't expect anybody, 'cause we hadn't heard any firing from Easy. First thing I knew was when a guard outside our CP shouted a challenge. The guy answered in American, so I didn't get suspicious, but our guard said, 'You kraut son of a bitch,' and opened fire. Then all hell broke loose."²⁸

Torrance ordered an evacuation of the CP, ordering Sgt. Schroeder to hold until no more equipment could be evacuated. Schroeder lingered until the house across the street was stormed by enemy troopers, and then followed Torrance up the hill. One machine gun crew, however, was stranded in a house at the edge of town. Both Torrance and Schroeder wondered how the machine gunners were left behind.²⁹ The fact that they were cut off from their sergeant who was receiving his group's orders as the fight opened was likely the cause.

Woodside and his crewmates caught hell in the town. "I was firing out the window when a bazooka round hit right below me," he remembered. "The next one come over the window sill and exploded. It knocked out three of my men, blew my leg almost off, and set me afire. I got the brunt of it. The other three men was all right when they woke up. One of 'em was Bert Irwin. I don't remember the others."³⁰

Not knowing that he'd been on fire, the other soldiers wrapped Woodside in blankets. He remained conscious, but in was shock. The burns were excruciating: "I thought my guts was blown out. I finally asked someone to see what kind of shape my guts was in. [Another soldier] took the blanket off; I was burning down there. All the clothes in my middle was burned off."³¹

On the hill, GIs were distributed white camouflage. According to Sergeant Duns, a rifleman in G's Second Platoon, "Sergeant Huskey [walked] along the parapet in front of our holes telling everyone what the situations was, to stay awake, and keep our eyes and ears open."³² The next morning, from his position above Rothbach, Lt. Torrance noticed a head that appeared above a windowsill in a house below. He squeezed off a shot with his rifle, the head disappeared, and American swearing was heard below—the missing machine gunners. A group made its way down to the edge of town to evacuate the group. Luckily, Torrance's bullet had grazed Elmer Brawe's head, knocking him down and stunning him. Brawe, Woodside, Irwin and the other soldier were evacuated.³³ Woodside needed special help being evacuated as Schroeder remembered: "There wasn't much bleeding but he was in terrible pain. To get him out of there, we had to carry him up an icy 45-degree slope that was covered with snow. Once or twice we lost him off the litter."³⁴ In the wake of the night's casualties, forward units at the left of the Regimental

²⁷ Stannard, 166.

²⁸ Stannard, 156.

²⁹ Stannard, 156.

³⁰ Stannard, 166.

³¹ Stannard, 166-167.

³² Stannard, 181.

³³ Stannard, 156-157.

³⁴ Stannard, 167.

line were retracted to the MLR, and the Regimental CO, sensing a possible attack, moved the 1st Bn Outpost to Ingwiller at 2215, Jan 22.³⁵

Back on the hill, Torrance got a call from his colonel: "Some of your mortarmen were so confused in this night fight they lost their lines," he said. Mortarmen in the Fourth Platoon had fled to the First Battalion reserve unobserved.

"Well, get their asses back up here," Torrance responded, "I'll get them back in position." And I did.³⁶

On the 23rd, the forward units of the 2nd Battalion absorbed machinegun fire from enemy units at Offwiller. That afternoon German artillery fired at F [Fox] Company while Easy was mortared. A prisoner revealed that 2 battalions of SS troopers occupied Rothbach. They were members of Hitler's elite 6th SS "Gebirgs" (Mountain) Division "Nord". This well-equipped, veteran Division had been formed in Finland in 1942, had since campaigned in both Finland and Norway and only been transferred to the western front since Christmas.³⁷ The Americans strengthened their defenses.

The morning of Jan 24 brought heavy shelling in Co. G's sector and the withdrawal of the 3rd Bn Outpost, which was driven back through Bischoitz and through Muhlhausen. The 3rd Bn reserve, Co. L, was moved into position at Zutzendorf at 0918 as the Battalion's forward units retreated to the MLR. That afternoon, the 410th's anti-tank company knocked out two tanks that had been spotted in Rothbach, and at 1710, 2nd Battalion again was shelled.³⁸

At 0443 on January 25th the Germans laid down an artillery barrage against Co. K on the 3rd Battalion's left flank. When the artillery lifted, SS infantry, supported by two tanks, attacked and overran Company K. Companies F and G who were on the line were not attacked, though F's right flank was exposed as K fell back.³⁹ Spilman Gibbs, Fox Company CO, recalled, "[T]he company commander panicked and pulled out, leaving my flank wide open. He was asleep in a house; wasn't even on the line."⁴⁰ Within twelve minutes of the initial barrage the Germans punctured the Cactus Division's Main Line of Resistance. Co. K's support was committed at 0455, as was 3rd Battalion's reserve.⁴¹

During the first wave of the attack, machine gun three flank guards, Pfc M. L. Jacobs, Cpl. J. W. Pike and Pvt. Richard C. Hawn, oblivious to the fact that they were facing an SS battalion, decided to hit their attackers from behind. They set out from behind the house that they defended against the first wave and encountered a Nazi. Jacobs fired, the German dropped and the three ducked into an adjacent courtyard. Jacobs tried to enter one of the buildings on the plaza, but his tugs at the door were met by those of a soldier on the other side. Not knowing whether the occupant was friend or foe, Jacobs dove under a wagon in the courtyard while Pike and Hawn took shelter in an outhouse. From under the wagon, Jacobs watched a group of Germans emerge from the

³⁵ Branton, 48-49.

³⁶ Stannard, 262.

³⁷ Jason Pipes, webpage.

³⁸ Branton, 49.

³⁹ Branton, 49.

⁴⁰ Stannard, 260.

⁴¹ Branton, 49.

building. A friendly dog threatened to reveal Jacobs' hiding spot as the Germans searched the premises. The three carefully made their way to a nearby barn where they spent the next two days in a hayloft awaiting rescue.⁴²

Within 10 minutes of the Nazi breakthrough, the enemy was poised to strike at the 2nd Battalion CP in Schillersdorf. Men from E's withdrawn Outpost manned foxholes in the field outside of the town, although some of the men had been rotated into town for the night.⁴³ Frank Kania was a jeep driver for H Company who was attached to Easy and running supplies to Schillersdorf for several days. His group was billeting in one of the houses. "There were three jeeps in the courtyard," he recalled. "That morning, the woman of the house came running and yelled, 'Boche come, boche come.' That was our only warning. We grabbed our belongings, and the sergeant says, 'We'll all start the jeeps at once. Then follow me.' He smashed through the barnyard door with the rest of us behind him. Here came the krauts up the street from the right. Luckily, he turned left."⁴⁴

Sgt. Millek, the machine gunner from Easy's Outpost, had been rotated into town the night the attack came: "There was about six of us in a house, all asleep, when we heard firing outside. We ran outside. There was this one fellow, I won't mention his name [likely Cecil Shaw], I put him up in a barn where he could see real good and told him, 'You see anything out there shoot it.'⁴⁵

Sgt. Sam Natta, who commanded one of Easy's mortar platoons, remembered: "We were in reserve when word came down that the Germans had taken the town. The whole mortar section [two squads] was thrown in to reinforce the riflemen. We didn't know what to expect."⁴⁶ Natta saw the supply sergeant's jeep burst out of the barn. It had been mounted with a .50 caliber machine gun. "I jumped on," he remembered, "and tried to fire it, but it froze after one shot, so I joined up with a machine gun sergeant who had a brand-new light machine gun. Whoever was supposed to have cleaned off the Cosmoline (a thick protective grease) hadn't, and that gun jammed too." A concussion grenade knocked the machine gunner and Sgt. Natta down and they took cover between two buildings.⁴⁷

Sgt. Millek described the scene at the CP outside his billet: "The battalion medics were set up right across the street, and this doctor captain comes running over and grabs me and says, 'Don't let them get me. I'm Jewish,' and I said, 'Don't worry. None of us is gonna get captured.'"⁴⁸ Lt. Chance, who had led the evacuation of Easy's outposts on the 22nd, was also in Schillersdorf when it was raided. "I was in the supply room. Some of the men and I ran into the street and blocked [the SS] for awhile, but there were too many. Capt. Bruno Lambert, the battalion surgeon, hollered over at us, 'Help me get these vehicles and the wounded out of town. You know what they'll do to me if they can.' He was a German Jew."⁴⁹

⁴² See Branton, 55.

⁴³ Stannard, 22.

⁴⁴ Stannard, 44.

⁴⁵ Stannard, 22.

⁴⁶ Stannard, 54.

⁴⁷ Stannard, 54.

⁴⁸ Stannard, 22.

⁴⁹ Stannard, 14.

First Lt. Leonard B. Dogget, who lead Easy's 1st Platoon, assembled a group of soldiers from his company to counterattack and delay the Germans long enough to evacuate the Battalion medics and Chaplain Capt. William C. Kleffman. Staff Sargent Melvin Seiler, who led a rifle squad in Dogget's platoon, remembered: "It was early one morning when Doggett came around and said, 'They broke through the line up front, and they're headed this way.' Next thing I knew, SS troops wearing white camouflage parkas and all schnapped up were shooting at anything in their sites."⁵⁰

Once the SS attacked, Sgt. Seiler recalled: "My squad made for the woods. 'Spread out,' I told my people, 'and hold them off as long as you can. If they keep coming, fall back a little.' Pretty soon, we were back in town, and the Germans were too. We held them there until almost everybody escaped. Then we piled into trucks and jeeps and got out of there."⁵¹

At 0515, the German troopers stormed the 2nd Battalion CP. Richard Branton describes the German assault: "Apparently the Germans knew exactly where important installations were located as they struck first the message center and then the building that housed the Command Post Proper."⁵² The ensuing firefight was desperate. Reverend Kleffman was at the Battalion aid station: "The gunfire got closer and closer, and then their tanks came in. My first thought was to evacuate anybody that was wounded. Our doctor had already fed for his life."⁵³ Machine gunner Cecil W. Shaw, who was defending the town from the rafters of a barn, managed to knock out one enemy machine gun before another forced him from his position.⁵⁴ Reverend Kleffman, still at the aid station, reported that Shaw "held them off until we got the jeep loaded. I picked him up as we left."⁵⁵ Shaw threw a few grenades and they sped out of town.⁵⁶ "We were the last ones out of Schillersdorf," Reverend Kleffman recalled. "Then the Germans came in and blew up the hospital unit."⁵⁷ Sgt. Milek apparently had a different view of Shaw's actions: "I was getting them started out of town when somebody ran by me like a bullet. It was that son of a bitch I'd put up in the barn.

"I asked him about it later. 'I wasn't going to stay out there alone,' he says. I don't blame him now, but it wasn't funny at the time."⁵⁸

Despite Company E's efforts, which had slowed the German assault, the evacuation of Schillersdorf, however, remained outpaced by the SS advance. 60 mm mortar gunner Pfc. Dennis Bellmore was a member of the group covering the Battalion staffs' retreat. Wounded and aware that the staff needed more time to delay, Bellmore decided to make a stand at an intersection. Sgt. Ray Mysliwiec described what happened next: "I was alongside Dennis Bellmore, brave soul that he was. He was the gunner in my mortar squad. He stood and opened fire with his .45. We didn't know they had a tank with them. That's what blew the building apart and killed Dennis. Or maybe it was a bazooka. You hear different stories. We wall collapsed, and he was trapped under the

⁵⁰ Stannard, 49.

⁵¹ Stannard, 49.

⁵² Branton, 55.

⁵³ Stannard, 55.

⁵⁴ Branton, 55.

⁵⁵ Stannard, 55.

⁵⁶ Branton, 55.

⁵⁷ Stannard, 55.

⁵⁸ Stannard, 22.

bricks." As the staffers and soldiers fell back, the reports of Bellmore's .45 pistol answered bursts of Nazi submachine gun fire for five minutes before falling silent.⁵⁹ "Somebody yelled, 'Everybody out!'" Sgt. Natta recalled, "Dennis must have been hit by that time, but we didn't know it until we were 100 yards away. We tried to get back to him, but there was no way. It was a bad thing for us, feeling like there was someone we couldn't help. They recovered his body when the town was retaken. He was badly burned."⁶⁰ Pfc. Bellman had purchased his comrades' safety with his life.⁶¹

Sgt. Millek described the retreat from Schillersdorf. "The medics had at least one wounded man across a stretcher across the back of a jeep. They got out okay. Then the rest of us dropped out of the town. As we moved back in, we could hear firing, but my own group didn't fire a shot until we got to the high ground and set up our machine guns. By that time, the krauts had Schillersdorf and came on through the town in some of our captured jeeps. We opened up and turned a couple of them over.

"I remember this kid, a rifleman that I'd converted to a machine gunner. I don't think that he'd ever fired a machine gun except in training. It was colder than hell, but here he was laying in the snow smiling and shooting. The cold made his nose run and the snot was froze on his face. He was all smiles when he hit those jeeps, but all I could think of was that frozen snot."⁶²

Sgt. Mysliwicz remembered evacuating the town: "Two of our guys grabbed a machine gun and took off. I was all by myself. What the hell, we all ran like scared rabbits. The Germans just kept pouring in. I think I was one of the last ones to get out. I ran from one side of the road to the other till I got to the edge of town and saw they'd stopped firing at me. As I lay in the snow, catching my breath, I could hear a lot of German singing. They had captured Schillersdorf."⁶³

Colonel Harding, 410th Regimental Commander, made plans to retake contain the breakthrough and retake Schillersdorf. Co. C blocked from Menchhoffen and by 0530 Companies A and B were in position to counterattack. At 0630, Company I was dispatched to Schillersdorf.⁶⁴ When L Company reached the town, they realized that they were engaging a different type of unit. The SS was Hitler's legion of Nazi fanatics, an elite fighting force that would not surrender. On this occasion, they were whipped into a drunken frenzy and charged through the snow-covered streets in white camouflage, howling at the top of their lungs. Robert Briggs of L Company's weapons platoon described the SS troopers as "screaming demons" who "just kept coming."⁶⁵ John C. Calhoun, a 3rd Battalion medic assigned to Company L described them as "drugged, drunk and crazy. They screamed as they ran into our machine guns, rifles and mortars."⁶⁶ John P. White, a weapons platoon messenger for Co. L, specifically remembered an SS trooper who, armed only with a rifle, charged a larger group of GIs and was instantly shot dead. One of the GIs in the group, however, in a despondent rage over recent news that

⁵⁹ Branton, 55.

⁶⁰ Branton, 55.

⁶¹ Branton, 55.

⁶² Stannard, 22.

⁶³ Stannard, 55.

⁶⁴ See Branton, 49.

⁶⁵ Briggs, interview with the authors.

⁶⁶ Calhoun, letter to the authors dated 24 April, 1999.

his brother had been killed elsewhere in ETO, emptied an extra clip into the corpse's head.⁶⁷

The SS used psychological tactics to frighten, confuse and demoralize the troops they fought. Almost every account of the 410th's dealings with the SS mentions their screaming. Years later, John Blaskiewicz, who seldom spoke of the war, revealed to his family that the only time that he was truly afraid during the war was listening to the night-piercing shrieks and swears of the invisible German troopers as they raced through Schillersdorf. Elmer Unnerstall, an infantryman who was out of action with an abscessed tooth at the time of his unit's counterattack, recalled that when he reentered the line he found that the SS had nailed the dogtags of fallen GIs to the doors in Schillersdorf.⁶⁸

The SS also infiltrated enemy lines and fought in disguise, a daring and dangerous practice, as those who were captured would be summarily shot as spies. On Jan 22, a guard at the bridge in Bousbach had been shot by someone disguised in an FFI uniform, the same night that men evacuated from Company E's overrun Outpost reported that the assault had been carried out by soldiers dressed as GIs.⁶⁹ At Schillersdorf, John White encountered the remains of a German machine gunner donning a Red Cross armband.

The sheer force and speed with which the Germans punched through the Division's line and the efficiency with which they carried out their objectives at the Battalion CP contributed to the chaos in the ranks. The extent of German reconnoitering prior to the attack at Schillersdorf will perhaps never be known, but the fact that during these days, troops only attacked, and in every case took, command posts, is testament to the quality of intelligence that the Germans enjoyed. They exploited every advantage the Americans gave them. They made full use and effective use of Company E's ineffective leadership and his tactical blundering, and while the SS may not have known the caliber of leadership, they may have surmised it after he knowingly kept the regiment's flank exposed for several days.

Despite the enemy's furious efforts, however, although the MLR had not been restored, the Americans stanch the Germans' penetration at Schillersdorf by 0730. The German assault on the Battalion communications center meant to isolate as many units as possible from the coordinating chain of command, forcing companies and commanders to make uninformed, independent decisions. When the advance was stopped, Company L was sent to the edge of the town. Medic John Calhoun described what happened next, "They walked in the dark 1½ kilometers and got into an apple orchard as the SS were digging foxholes and setting machine guns. L Co crossed the road to higher ground. [Company I] (as light came) fired mortars into the vineyard where [L Company] was digging foxholes. Finally, [L Company] got the attention of [I Company], and they stopped the mortars. Twenty men in [L Company] were lost, God rest their souls."⁷⁰ Confusion, it seems, was likely the Nazis' most effective weapon at Schillersdorf.

Having contained the German penetration, Harding's troops positioned themselves to restore the Main Line of Resistance. By 0800, Company E was dispatched to the town to secure the right flank, and at 0900 the 1st Battalion launched the assault

⁶⁷ White, interview with author.

⁶⁸ Unnerstall, interview with author.

⁶⁹ See Branton, 48.

⁷⁰ Calhoun, letter to the author; Branton 97.

that would clear Schillersdorf of the enemy. Company A (later to be joined by Company C) and two attached tanks assaulted enemy strong points in the town while Bravo Company would pass through the town and restore the gap in the line that the SS had forced. Col. Harding ordered the bruised Company L to eliminate any pockets of resistance that the 1st Battalion had missed.⁷¹

Soldiers resented having to retake ground. It was difficult to be satisfied with yielding territory friends had already died fighting for, but it was harder to be content with the prospects of the additional casualties the reoccupation of the territory would entail. Towns posed special hazards to advancing GIs. Advancing through a town's open streets violated one of the most fundamental rules of soldiering: remain as inconspicuous as possible. The less visible the soldier, the less likely someone who wanted to kill him and his buddies would know where to find him. Attacking through open streets between houses occupied by the concealed enemy was tantamount to suicide. In order to advance through villages under cover, infantrymen relied on coordinated efforts of tank and bazooka crews. Branton tells how the 1st Battalion worked its way through Schillersdorf: "House-to-house fighting continued fiercely during the day. The Infantry and tank teams did their work. The tanks blasted one house ahead of the foot troops who then used bazookas and rifle grenades to blow open the side walls of houses. The Cactus men went from one house to another covered all the way."⁷² After the town was retaken, Reverend Kleffman reportedly encountered the corpse of an American dough in the snow. The position of the frozen body suggested that the man had been begging for his life when he was executed.⁷³

With the assistance of the 411th Infantry's 2nd Battalion, the main line of resistance was restored by the next morning, although afterwards the Cactus Division patrolled the enemy much more aggressively.⁷⁴ At day's end, The 410th held a line composed of, from left to right, Companies E, G, F, B, the 2nd Bn (411th ID), and L.⁷⁵ Even though the 410th had recovered Schillersdorf at high cost, they inflicted staggering losses on their attackers. On 1 Feb, the interrogation of a German deserter revealed him to be a member of the 3rd Battalion of the 12th SS Mountain Division (Regiment?), the group that had occupied Schillersdorf. Of the 360 men that participated in the attack, he reported, the Germans had lost all but 60.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Branton, 49.

⁷² Branton, 49.

⁷³ Stannard, 258.

⁷⁴ Branton, 49.

⁷⁵ Quinn, 37.

⁷⁶ Quinn, 38.

This is my first reunion. One funny incident during my war experience was when I was AWOL. I was out on a pass and I was supposed to come back with the mailman. I missed him and I got back late. They made me dig a hole 6 feet x 6 feet x 6 feet. They had to put a pail down to get the dirt out because I could not lift it over my head to get it out of there. After I dug it they had me fill the hole up! It wasn't funny at the time. It is funny to look back at it.

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THE STARS AND STRIPES

MEDITERRANEAN

Vol. 1, No. 246, Tuesday, May 8, 1945

Printed in Italy

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Victory in Europe is ours. After more than five and a half years of the bitterest and bloodiest fighting that this continent has ever known, the armed might of Germany, the Wehrmacht and the Nazi party has been defeated—finally and utterly.

Today will be treated officially as VE-Day. It was officially announced last night. There will be broadcasts from the chiefs of state of the Big Three this afternoon at 3 PM, according to Reuter's. King George VI is expected to broadcast to the British and Commonwealth Peoples at 9 PM.

As the entire world waited anxiously all day yesterday for the VE-Day proclamation, there were reports, unconfirmed officially by SHAEF, that the Germans had signed an unconditional surrender agreement at 2:41 AM yesterday.

While SHAEF declined to confirm the report of unconditional surrender, the Associated Press carried a report from Rheims, France, where General Dwight D. Eisenhower's headquarters is located, giving details of the signing of the surrender documents.

According to this report, Nazi Germany surrendered unconditionally to the United States, Britain and Russia. The signing took place in the red schoolhouse which has been SHAEF headquarters. General Eisenhower was not present at the signing but immediately afterward met the German delegates.

The report of the signing of the surrender documents at Rheims, however, spread throughout the United Nations and everywhere there were spontaneous celebrations. In New York ticker tape and torn telephone books were hung from skyscraper windows; traffic stopped on Times Square. In Washington news reporters crowded the White House where President Truman was conferring with high military and diplomatic aides.

In London where there was an air of great expectancy, headquarters were set up. (Continued on page 2)

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