

World War II, Korea, Viet-Nam & Today

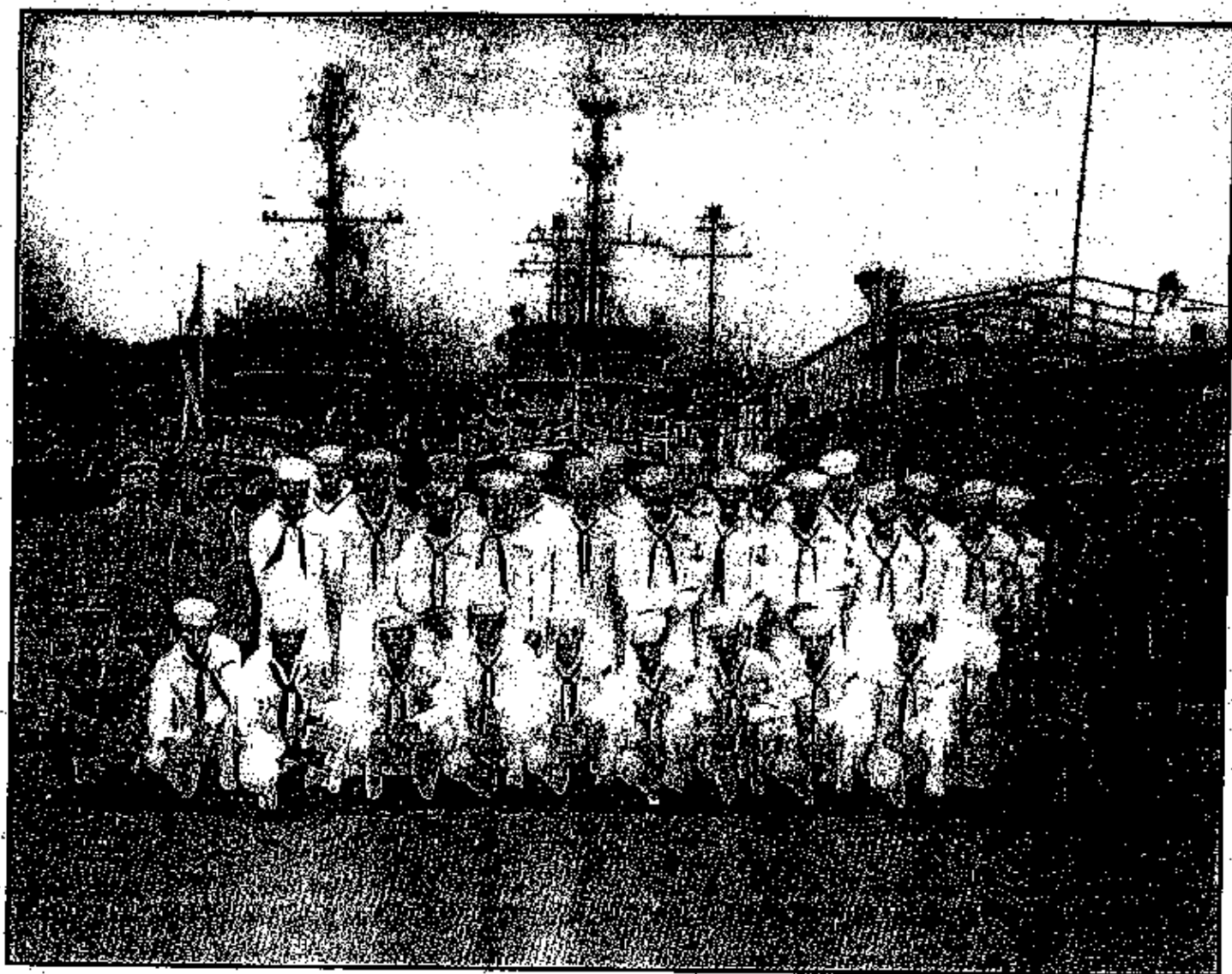
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After 51 years this zigzag trench is barely visible.

Battlefield revisited

Herndon Inge, Jr.

My desire to retrace my footsteps back to Germany and WWII got the best of me when my son, George, was invited to a deer hunt in December 1996 near Heidelberg. He went with some Germans whom he had befriended when he was stationed there as a U.S. Army doctor in the 1980s. George invited me to go on the hunt with him and, although I am not an avid hunter, I consented to go. The hunt was a great success and proved the Germans' ability to plan and execute large operations. The men were mostly affluent Germans who did not realize that their fathers were our deadly enemies during the war, had done their best to kill me and had ended up as my hosts for three months while

I was a POW. The Battle of the Bulge, Hitler's last great offensive into the frozen, snow covered Eifel, found me, an infantry lieutenant, in the woods with two feet of snow on the ground. When our battalion attacked the town of Orscholz, 1,000 yards in front of our lines, my unit was cut off and I was captured.

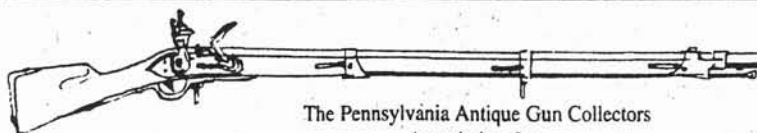
After the deer hunt concluded, George and I drove about 60 miles to Orscholz. It was a freezing, overcast day when we

crossed the Moselle River and entered what was known during the war as the Saar-Moselle Triangle, formed by the confluence of the Moselle and Saar rivers with the ancient city of Trier at its apex. More than 50 years ago, about 10 miles below Trier, the 301st and 376th Regiments of the 94th Infantry Division had dug in over a 10-mile stretch across the base of the triangle that faced a section of the Siegfried Line.

Gen. George S. Patton Jr., the commander of the famous Third Army, of which our division was a part, had ordered each battalion in the front lines to attack a town a day to keep pressure on the Germans and to break through the Siegfried Line and race to the Rhine through the Palatinate, the open country inside Germany. The German army had reached its zenith in its push to Antwerp, and it was the subject of attacks by the American Army troops designed to annihilate it and push on to the Rhine.

The battlefield

The frigid wind chilled George and me as we walked over the area that I remembered so well from those freezing few days in January 1945. I stood at the edge of the woods from which our



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*This German bunker
was destroyed by U.S.
Forces after the war.*

column had emerged at daybreak for the attack. Our battalion had trudged with full combat equipment, weapons and ammunition through 1,000 yards of thick, snow-covered woods until the point of the column reached the edge of the woods, as yet undetected by the Germans dug in across the open minefield.

As a forward observer for the six 81mm mortars of Company D, the

heavy weapons company of the 1st Battalion of the 301st Regimerit, I was attached to Company B, the rifle company commanded by Capt. Herman C. Straub and chosen to lead the attack on Orscholz. The point of the column had stopped at the wood's edge, and we looked across several hundred yards of open, snow-covered field. On the far side we could see in the poor daylight concrete dragons' teeth stretched across

the front. Capt. Straub talked to the two privates who were the scouts about to venture out into no-man's-land before the woods.

Lt. Tony Unrein, Company B's 1st Platoon leader, was checking his map and closely observing the open field. My duties as the forward observer required me to be with the point of the column and radio back to the mortars with firing instructions.

Capt. Straub told the scouts to move out on the double across the field, and they took off without hesitation. We were not far behind them and made sure that we stepped in their deep footprints since we were certain the area was covered with Schu mines, neatly laid out by the Germans and hidden by the snow.

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I remember the popping of the machine-gun bullets in the cold, gray dawn as the Germans discovered us and sprayed the area. Behind me, Schu mines exploded as the men stepped on them. As they fell and lay in the snow, they cried for medics above the sound of gunfire. We ran straight ahead, occasionally hitting the snow as we had learned in training for combat, and machine-gun bullets popped and crackled among us. Glancing behind me, I saw the column moving slowly and the men disabled by the mines and hit by machine-gun bullets lying in the red-stained snow. The Germans' 88mm antipersonnel artillery weapons opened up on us as they had discovered us moving across the vast field. These notorious guns made three distinct sounds: the blast of the gun as it fired, the shriek when the air was disturbed as the 3,600-feet-per-second projectile raced toward us and the shell's deafening explosion on impact. The three sounds were almost simultaneously forged into one terrifying blast.

Orscholz barrier

The head of the column had successfully crossed the vulnerable, snow-covered, mined, machine-gunned and artillery-impacted field, and we raced toward the thin line of pine trees up ahead. I stayed with Capt. Straub and Lt. Unrein, and Company B followed as we moved into the German-held woods up the road toward Orscholz. We met some resistance by dug-in Germans, whom we silenced with rifle fire and hand grenades, and continued running toward the town. We came to a large log antitank barricade that my map indicated was the Orscholz Barrier. We grouped around the barrier, keeping well back from the surrounding mined area. Capt. Straub received word over his radio from battalion headquarters back in the woods that after Company B, two platoons from Company A and a platoon of heavy machine guns from Company D got across the field, the



Herndon Inge, Jr., in 1945.

heavy artillery and full-defensive might of the Germans closed in. Company C was pinned down in the snow, and the two platoons of Company A and the remainder of Company D were in the woods, unable to continue the assault march. Our group of about 250 men was isolated within the enemy lines, several hundred yards in front of the American troops. Since the mortar platoon of Company D was stranded back in the woods, my SCR 536 radio could not reach the guns to call for mortar fire. I became an extra officer in Company B.

The Germans, completely alerted, closed in around us as we paused out-

side Orscholz. Had the remainder of the battalion made it across the open area, we could have attacked the town immediately.

Those of us who had survived the long march through the woods and crossed the deadly field moved to our objective's outskirts. We took shelter in some deep zigzag trenches near two concrete bunkers.

The Germans began machine-gunning the area with grazing fire and dropping mortar rounds down through the trees that exploded upon striking the tree limbs or the ground. The deadly 88s began to blast timed fire at us, exploding their rounds in the air over our heads and raining down razor-sharp shrapnel.

We spent the night of 20 Jan 45 in the trench. All night long the shelling continued on the small area that we occupied, and there were many casualties in the cold, narrow trench.

During the night, we continually fired our rifles and carbines out into the darkness, threw all of our hand grenades and were soon out of ammunition. Capt. Straub radioed for our artillery, which exploded all around us and kept the Germans from overrunning us. The men who were wounded during the night were passed along the trench to one of the bunkers, where several medics worked in the dark to keep them alive with sulfa, tourniquets and other measures.

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Cut off

At daybreak, Capt. Straub called the six officers together to say that we would try to make our way back down the road and across the open field to the woods where the remainder of the battalion had dug in. We passed the word to the men and started out of the trench as the Germans increased their firing and began to attack through the woods. We moved 200 yards back toward the field. I was at the end of the trench near the bunkers and, as we headed out, a blast from an 88 caused a large limb to fall into the trench, cutting off about 15 of us from the others. An 88 shell shrieked in and exploded on a tree trunk over my head with a deafening blast. My runner, PFC Harley Terrell, and I crowded down to the bottom of the trench, our helmets touching. After the blast I said, "Let's get out of here, Terrell." He did not move and I saw a jagged hole in the top of his steel helmet. I lifted it up and saw that his face was bloody, and there was a big hole in his forehead. I was too shocked to cry or speak, and my stomach cramped with nausea. My comrade and faithful runner of the past 48 hours lay dead beside me. I laid him out the best I could along with several other dead GIs, bloody and frozen in the trench.

I called to the remaining men in the trench and said, "Follow me," in the best tradition of OCS at Fort Benning, GA. Using all the strength I could muster, I climbed out of the trench followed by the remaining men. Bullets were popping everywhere and the 88s were exploding in the snow and in the trees. We ran up the hill, over the crest and to one of the concrete bunkers. The steel door was pushed open, and I saw in the faint light that the wet floor was crowded with wounded and dead GIs. A couple of medics had been up all night taking care of the wounded in the freezing, dark bunker.

After a while, German soldiers came up to the bunker firing at the shut steel door. The bullets thudded against it. We were ordered in English to come out and put up our hands. We were shocked that we had been captured in combat after more than 60 hours without sleep.

What lay ahead was unknown. Being the only officer in the group, I was told in English by a German NCO to take my men through the woods; we were escorted by a couple of German soldiers carrying burp guns, so called

because of the sound they made on firing.

The Germans had closed in around us during the night and completely blocked our way back to our lines. Capt. Straub and the rest of the men were soon overrun by the Germans and ended up as prisoners; they joined us the next day as we were moved back toward the rear.

Remembering

On that freezing Sunday morning

in 1996 as George and I stood in the field with the cold wind blowing in our faces, I thought of the men with whom I had trained, come overseas and shared five months of combat and who had not made it across the field. Many had lain in the snow for hours, some had frozen to death and others were able to crawl or limp back through the minefield to our battalion aid station inside the woods. I remembered the shock and fatigue that we had all experienced.

I could recall the names, the faces



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During the fighting, we came out of the woods into this clearing. The Germans had taken cover in woods in the background.

and the comradeship that had existed between all of us in our outfit. I thought of PFC Terrell, my runner and faithful companion for the few days at Orscholz. PFC James Crawford also came to my mind. When we were standing together a few yards outside Orscholz, a sniper's bullet hit him just under his helmet, killing him instantly. He had been the only man in Company D who could not read or write and had said that he was going to school after the war. I thought of PFC James Hartness, a former Army specialized training program student who had been sent from the discontinued college training program to the infantry and who had a big hole in his back. The last time I saw him was after

we had pulled him on a child's sled about 10 miles toward the rear.

I thought about the two badly wounded men from Company B whom we loaded into a horse-drawn wagon to be taken to the rear by the Germans. One of them had just about lost his right arm, the other's left arm was barely hanging on, and both were bloody and in shock. One had joked that together they could make it with a good right arm and a good left arm.

As I looked up the road into Orscholz, I thought of the two German soldiers whom we had seen walking out of the town, oblivious of the Americans in the woods waiting to attack the town. When they were about 100 yards from

us, a Browning automatic rifleman from Company B hollered, "Halt."

Surprised, they turned and ran back toward Orscholz as the rifleman squeezed off a few bursts of ammunition, and they sprawled in the snow and lay still.

I remembered that later in the day one of the men in Company B, whom I had known since Camp McCain in Mississippi, saw a soldier in the woods in a white snowsuit and walked toward him. He saw too late that he was a German. The German aimed his rifle at him and killed him on the spot. The German was taken care of by other Company B men standing nearby.

The thoughts going through my mind were somewhat somber and sad as George and I stood in the trench, now nearly made invisible by erosion and leaves. The remains of the two concrete bunkers were there.

Not only did my heart ache for all those whom I had watched suffer and who gave their lives for their country, but also for their loved ones who would never know exactly how they died and who were left with a void in their lives. I thought of PFC Terrell's mother, whom I contacted after the war, of Crawford's mother back in South Carolina and of the parents of Jimmy Hartness, who took his life after he had returned home. I thought of the two badly injured privates whom we helped into the wagon and whom I saw disappear into the falling snow headed to the rear and a German aid station. I always wondered if they made it safely. I thought of the families of the two German soldiers who were cut down as they strolled out into the enemy's sights and whose loved ones waited for them in vain.

It was a sad day for me because these memories were vivid in my mind. When I was in the trench those many years ago with my comrades facing certain death, I had constantly prayed that I would survive and repeated a verse from the 91st Psalm, my mother's favorite:

*"A thousand shall fall at thy side,
and ten thousand at thy right hand;
but it shall not come nigh thee."
A sad day, indeed.*

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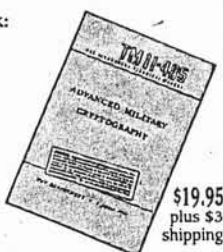
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